

## Chapter Three

### Schooling and the Aboriginal Child

#### 3.1 Introduction

This research project concerns itself with the attitudes of high school students towards sustained silent reading (SSR). An important aspect of the research is a comparison between the attitudes of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in the study school towards SSR and towards reading in general. This chapter focuses on Aboriginal students and their schooling, in order to provide a context for findings which result from the research project.

The National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987) claims that Aboriginal and Islander children are a seriously disadvantaged group in education. The reasons for this are complex and in this chapter, the place of Aboriginal children in the school system is examined to explore some of the factors leading to comparative disadvantage and lack of achievement at school. To begin with, the history of Aboriginal education since colonisation is briefly outlined in order to provide a background to the current participation rate of Aboriginal children in education. This section covers the important milestones in Aboriginal Affairs which may be characterised as 'civilising' 'assimilating' and 'integrating' through to modern 'involvement'.

The chapter examines changes in government policies and major funding arrangements for Aboriginal education since the 1970s. These

changes appear to have not resulted in the big gains that educators would have liked but in mainstream schools being blamed for failing to adequately educate many Aboriginal students. This fact remains an embarrassment and a challenge to both governments and educators.

In Chapter one, Christie (1990) was cited as claiming that people in Australia need to have a high standard of literacy, otherwise they will be disempowered and disadvantaged at every level of society. The inference here appears to be that Aboriginal students need to focus on improving their literacy skills if they wish to rise above current levels of disadvantage. As sustained silent reading is a basic literacy skill, therefore positive Aboriginal student attitudes to silent reading should indicate positive attitudes towards school, an improvement in academic achievement and a move away from relative disadvantage.

But the matter may not be as simple as that. Other factors may influence Aboriginal students in a negative way, preventing them from making the most of their schooling and these are examined in this chapter. They range from personal relationships to parental involvement and include learning styles, low expectations, cultural literacy, attendance and suspensions, gender issues, peer group pressure and unemployment. As well as these factors, historical events have played an important part in Aboriginal education. These will be examined first in this chapter.

## **3.2 A Brief History of Aboriginal Education**

### **3.2.1 'Civilising' Policies**

The history of Aboriginal education in Australia conjures up more negative than positive images. Woolmington (1973) states that one of the earliest attempts to educate Aboriginal children was made by Governor Macquarie (Governor of the colony of New South Wales during the years

1809-1821), who realised that the government policy of 'civilising' the natives was not going to be an easy task. He was encouraged by William Shelley's success at educating several Aboriginal children at the Native Institution in Parramatta which had been set up three years earlier.

McConnochie (1982) reports that, as a result, children were targeted for any 'civilising' programs, an attitude which prevailed until quite recent times, even though it soon became clear that such programs were failing due to a lack of both non-Aboriginal settler and Aboriginal support. However, Aboriginal people were always seen as a future workforce, a part of the servant class, who would be exploited and cruelly treated for more than a century (Woolfington 1973).

They were segregated into institutions and expected to be converted to Christianity by the Christian missionaries who were appointed by the government and given an allowance. According to Carmody (1990), the missionaries' quest to 'Christianise and civilise' was really a veneer for control and subjugation, often with violence.

### **3.2.2 Assimilation Through Language Conversion**

As Aboriginal languages had no script, one of the early tasks of missionaries whose intention was to assimilate Aboriginal people in remote places, was to convert spoken language into written form. Some of this work has been documented by Gale (1994). It began with Lancelot Threlkeld in 1824 in the Lake Macquarie district of NSW, who translated the Gospel of St. Luke into Awabakal. In South Australia, the Lutheran missionaries Teichelmann and Schirmann conducted lessons about the Gospels in the Kurna language around 1840.

They influenced similar work to be done in other parts of South Australia and the Northern Territory. By 1848 Fr. Confalonieri, a Catholic priest whose mission was in the Port Essington area of the Northern Territory, had created vocabulary lists of seven Aboriginal languages. He produced several prayers and a catechism in an Aboriginal language related to Iwaidja (Gale 1994).

Gale (1994) states that the object of such translation work was to instruct the various Aboriginal tribes in their own native languages, albeit with a heavy emphasis on Christian religion. This work was interrupted after the Federal Government introduced a policy which required mission schools to adopt English as the medium of instruction.

### **3.2.3 Other Assimilationist Policies and the ‘Stolen Children’**

McLeod (1987) takes the above concept of assimilationism one step further by arguing that non-Aboriginal settlers (including Missionaries) used violence and education to dispossess Aborigines from their land and their culture. He recalls government policies of the 19th and early 20th centuries which aimed at assimilation into non-Aboriginal communities. Rowley (1969) suggests that the fiction of ‘Terra Nullius’ allowed successive non-Aboriginal governments to control land use and deny Aborigines any right to traditional land ownership. Government, supported by missionaries, outlawed many aspects of Aboriginal culture and encouraged a denial of Aboriginality, destroying Aboriginal decision-making processes and forcing people to become institutionalised.

The purpose was to break the links between Aboriginal children and their cultural heritage, to westernise them so that they could take their place in the working class. Use of Aboriginal languages was discouraged, many

teachers were untrained and abusive, children left school as early as possible with few or no skills and the whole process resulted in parental mistrust of schooling as a whole (Fletcher 1989; Jenkin 1979; Duncan 1974).

It was not only land of which Aboriginal people were deprived. Colonial governments also took away Aboriginal children from their parents to be schooled in literacy and numeracy and trained in domestic and manual skills. Read (1988) states that the NSW Aborigines Protection Act allowed for the removal of children, and expelled 'mixed-blood' Aborigines from stations in the hope that they would assimilate. In NSW today, 8.1 percent of the Aboriginal population claim to have been taken away from their natural parents (ABS 1997).

In 1913 a South Australian Royal Commission advocated schooling for Aboriginal children up to Primary standard and then further occupational training with powers to take control of children from the age of 10 (Stone 1974). Roach (1990) argued that this policy led to a major problem of identity for such children, torn between two cultures and unsure of where they fitted into Australian society. The children were sent far away from their families and denied any contact with them. After being trained as domestic servants, the children were dispersed into private homes and it was rare for any to return to their communities unless they were pregnant or addicted to alcohol.

Groome (1995) reports that, in some instances, Aboriginal children were deprived of any schooling at all as the powerful non-Aboriginal education system determined rules of access, banning their attendance at local schools if non-Aboriginal parents protested their presence. If they were admitted to a school, they were segregated to the 'dark' side of the room, where they were largely ignored.

### 3.2.4 Changes in Education Policies

In 1940, a new Education Act in NSW sought to correct some of these wrongs. Following William Ferguson's manifesto of 1937 which sought to have equality of educational opportunities for Indigenous students (NAC 1994), trained teachers were employed by the NSW Department of Education. McConnochie (1982) states that Aboriginal students were encouraged to attend State schools, although the change was resisted strongly by many non-Aboriginal parents who hindered the process to such an extent, that it was not until 1968, that the majority of Aboriginal students attended state schools. Around that time, only 5 percent of Aboriginal children progressed to secondary schooling.

Frawley (1992) comments that, to Aboriginal children, western-style schooling was culturally limiting with no inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge or Aboriginal children's preferred learning styles. In such an educational system, Aboriginal children were not allowed to learn within the context of their own culture and were not able to come to grips with the demands of this alien education process which was designed to overtly assimilate them into a non-Aboriginal culture (NAC 1994).

McConnochie (1982) claims that, in finding solutions to the 'Aboriginal problem', educational psychologists began to use terms such as 'cultural deprivation' and 'language deficit'. This in turn led to compensatory programs which targeted preschool children and which were similar to ones being used in the U.S. One such program, conducted by the Save the Children Fund, was set up in the rural town concerned in this study. The researcher has visited this preschool which is operating very successfully and which is now managed by an Aboriginal director with a strong level of Aboriginal parent involvement.

Following the 1967 Referendum and with a change of government in the 1970's, a new Department of Aboriginal Affairs was set up. It allocated \$10 million to the States over the next five years and set aside \$20 million to be used in Special Student Assistance schemes (NAC 1994). With this extra funding came a change in the way Aboriginal leaders began to view the role of Western education. Rather than being an unwanted means of forcing assimilation and dependency, certain Aboriginal leaders saw Western education and English literacy skills as a means of empowerment and cultural survival (Frawley 1976), as a path to custodianship of their own culture and as a means to taking responsibility for their own futures (NAC 1994).

Funding was increased to over \$9 million to the States in 1978/79 and more than \$18 million for Aboriginal Student assistance. Despite this financial assistance, the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students do not appear to have improved much (NAC 1994). Aboriginal students remain in the minority in terms of school retention and tertiary enrolments. McInerney (1989) states that in general Aboriginal students do not have high expectations of their academic capabilities, they believe that education has little to offer them and they feel that they, themselves, can do little to alleviate the situation.

These attitudes may lead to a complete rejection by young Aboriginal students of any form of schooling. Willmot (1981) comments that such rejection is not the result fought for by early Aboriginal activists, who desperately wanted their children to be allowed to attend non-Aboriginal schools and thus achieve some empowerment. Currently, with schooling free and compulsory for all Australian students, regardless of race or background, and even with many Government assistance programs, young Aboriginal children still appear to be resisting education. Significantly lower post-compulsory schooling retention rates for Indigenous students

(33 percent) in comparison to non-Indigenous students (78 percent) have been reported in the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (DEET 1995). One solution to improve retention rates put forward by the National Aboriginal Council (1994) was to involve Aboriginal people in the education of their children.

### **3.2.5 Aboriginal Involvement in Education**

In order to involve more Aboriginal people in education, funding was increased in the tertiary sector. A major focus of Aboriginal Education in the 1970s was in teacher education. It resulted in new Aboriginal studies courses being set up in universities, to educate non-Aboriginal teacher trainees and influence attitudes towards Aboriginal people and their culture. Between 1974 and 1980, the numbers of Aboriginal students in tertiary education multiplied eightfold (NAC 1994). Sherwood (1982) states that Aboriginal Education Assistants were subsequently trained to take their places in schools and innovative programs, such as bilingual programs in remote areas, were encouraged.

McInerney's (1989) survey indicated that many Aboriginal parents thought that more Aboriginal teachers in schools would help their children do better. By the 1994 survey (ABS 1997), 46.9 percent of urban Aboriginal students in NSW said that they were taught about indigenous culture at school, while 10.9 percent were taught by an Aboriginal teacher and 20.1 percent had access to an Aboriginal Education Assistant to help them.

The importance of bilingual schooling, in which Aboriginal knowledge is included in the school curriculum has been popularly accepted in remote communities today (Rabunjta in Bunbury & Bowden 1990). Napaljarri Ross (Warrlukurlangu Artists 1987) supports the dual-



learning process, hoping that Aboriginal students will leave school bilingual and bicultural. The role of Aboriginal teachers was highlighted by Yunupingu (1991) who felt that Aboriginal elders have an important traditional role in teaching Aboriginal children. This is supported by Miller (1990a) who argues that Aboriginal teachers should have a dual role in Aboriginal communities as teachers and as leaders. Some Aboriginal teachers have now progressed to senior positions in Federal and State Education Departments (NAC 1994).

Despite these advances in Aboriginal education and the large amount of funding, the history of dispossession has left Aboriginal people with a deep mistrust of non-Aboriginal Australians and massive psychological scars which continue to affect Aboriginal communities today and their interpersonal relationships with non-Aboriginal Australians (Eckermann 1980a). There are many barriers to interaction, most of which are not visible, and which are based on past history of discrimination and rejection. Such barriers preclude many Aboriginal Australians from participating in community or educational affairs for fear of being slighted or rejected anew (Eckermann 1980a).

Aboriginal adolescents are aware of their past and the tragic history of their peoples. Many take great pride in identifying with the strong emerging generic 'Aboriginal' culture, its flag, colours and sporting heroes. This 'diaspora identity' which Hall (1990) describes as recognising 'heterogeneity and diversity' is a constructed identity which has drawn on aspects of past history but continues to reinvent itself.

From the researcher's point of view, this can impact on school achievement, by causing the Aboriginal students to reject non-Aboriginal teachers and the entire schooling process, resulting in low achievement and the likelihood of dropping out at the end of the compulsory stage. Some of

the factors which influence positive or negative Aboriginal student attitudes towards schooling are outlined below.

### **3.3 Factors Affecting School Achievement for Aboriginal Children.**

#### **3.3.1 Personal Relationships and Early Socialisation**

There are several factors affecting school achievement for Aboriginal students. Black Gutman (1992) believes that the majority of Aboriginal parents want their children to do better at school but few children succeed once they have entered High school. There are a number of reasons given for this. The first of these is the importance of personal relationships in Aboriginal children's learning. Aboriginal children need to feel comfortable and wanted, so that the relationship with the teacher is especially important (Dept. of Ed. Qld 1983).

Malin (1989) suggests that young Aboriginal children, who are encouraged at home to be independent rather than dependent, have a different relationship with adults than non-Aboriginal children and this may be misconstrued by non-Aboriginal teachers. Aboriginal students are quick to pick up any negative attitudes in teachers and will respond accordingly. Since students bring with them cultural values and perspectives, which are different to non-Aboriginal students, teaching practice must take these into account (Kalantzis & Cope 1988; Dunn, 1986; Lasorsa 1990).

In Black Gutman's (1992) survey, Aboriginal children nominated fair management, rewards, kindness and courtesy as being factors that they most liked in a teacher. They did not mind doing 'school work' as long as it was not too hard and they received help when needed. They also recommended being given free time as a reward if they worked well.

Another factor which may hinder the educational progress of Aboriginal students is their early socialisation (Malin 1990). Eckermann (1980b) and Malin (1990) claim that socialisation practices in early childhood between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are significantly different. Culture shock may therefore be experienced when young Aboriginal children enter mainstream schools which reflect the values, traditions and communication patterns of a different and dominant culture. The provision of Aboriginal Education Assistants in schools has been a positive first step in providing a bridge between Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal teachers.

Christie (1987) confirms that there is a distinctively Aboriginal English dialect and that Aboriginal people maintain a distinctive Aboriginal lifestyle, even though the pressure to conform to a non-Aboriginal lifestyle is strong. This is also reflected in Aboriginal attitudes toward the workplace. Christie (1987) further suggests that non-Aboriginal distinctions between life and work do not exist in traditional Aboriginal society. As this study concerns itself with students in a rural urban environment, attitudes toward the workplace would be influenced by a diverse range of factors, apart from Aboriginality and generalisations are not possible to make.

One solution put forward to address problems with Aboriginal education was to set up independent schools for Aboriginal students (NAC 1994). This has already been done in Townsville (Qld), at Strelley (WA) and at Alice Springs (NT). These schools are designed to cater for the specific needs and learning styles of Aboriginal students. The learning styles referred to are discussed in more depth in the next section.

### 3.3.2 Preferred Learning Styles

Harris (1982) claims that what has been called 'Aboriginal learning styles' is actually an informal learning style and is not peculiar to Aboriginal children, but is present in many cultures. The main difference is that for non-Aboriginal Australians there is far more verbal instruction, and a process of question and answer in informal learning situations that is not present among Aboriginal Australians. Although Harris' (1982) experiences focus more on Aboriginal students living in remote communities, some of his findings could possibly be applied to rural urban Aboriginal students who live within a dominant non-Aboriginal culture.

Christie (1989) and Eckermann (1987) caution that generalisations can not be made for such children, whose backgrounds are very diverse. Such children may not fit the stereotypical view of Aboriginal children which is that Aboriginal children are group oriented. The children may in fact display individualistic attitudes. However, in the main, rural urban Aboriginal students do appear to require some different teaching strategies.

Harris (1982) suggests that the preferred learning styles of many Aboriginal children include much trial and error or learning by doing. They need to see the relevance of a skill in their present lives rather than for some future usage. Any approach will require much persistence and repetition until they achieve their goals. As reading does not figure very strongly in many Aboriginal homes, he advocates that classrooms be turned into 'reading homes'. There should be many books available in the classroom rather than just in the library. The library, in Harris' (1982) view further isolates the reading experience from normal life.

Harris (1985), supported by Christie (1982), also advocates the use of Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading periods, following the Hunt

(1970) recommendations in which teacher modelling could be observed and imitated. He suggests that students should be allowed to self-select books (including comics) because this will result in their choice according to interest level, as well as support the growth of independence.

Although Harris (1935) and Christie (1982) both strongly support the inclusion of an SSR program into the school timetable, it does not necessarily follow that all students will welcome such a scheme. This study aims to examine the attitudes of a group of Aboriginal students, who have been exposed to SSR for some years, and to compare their attitudes with those of non-Aboriginal students.

There is little information available on which teaching techniques work best for Aboriginal students. It is up to teachers to 'experiment' with a variety of methods (Eckermann 1987). Because of the diversity of Aboriginal student family backgrounds in rural urban areas, it would be hard to single out any one method. Harris (1984) lists a range of some preferred learning styles which include informal settings, co-operative group work, observing, modelling and imitation rather than verbal instruction and personal trial and error.

From the researcher's experience, the typical Australian High school belongs to what has been commonly termed the 'mainstream'. 'Mainstream' schools are open to students of any ability range, from the highly intelligent and talented to those, who are classified with mild intellectual disabilities. Classes within those schools are also mostly 'unstreamed' which means that students are not tested and grouped according to their abilities. It is normal to have students with a wide range of abilities in each class. The lessons tend to be structured in a formal manner. Students are expected to work individually on tasks, after receiving verbal instructions.

Often there is little time for slower students to practise skills and the competitive nature of the unstreamed classroom encourages a 'sink or swim' approach. Those who don't understand get left behind. If students are absent for any reason, they are expected to 'catch up'. There is little provision for tutorials or remedial work. This creates a large amount of frustration for some students, who genuinely want to learn but need more time or assistance. Some students simply give up. Their expectations of achieving at a higher level plummet and they may begin to display behavioural disorders in the classroom. If these students also have low levels of literacy, the problem is compounded, because they need to be able to read and write competently in almost every subject area.

### **3.3.3 Low Expectations and Poor Literacy Skills**

The fact that Aboriginal students are under-achieving in the Australian school system, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, has been documented in various government reports. The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1995) reports that only 33 percent of Indigenous students continue to Year 12, compared with a national retention rate of 78 percent. Many Aboriginal students find the school system frustrating and discriminating, due to a lack of cultural understanding, racism or relevance to their special needs. They tend to leave as soon as they can, gain few skills while at school and are often not eligible to enter tertiary training (RCADIC 1991; Commonwealth of Australia 1985). Nationally, only 5.4 percent of Indigenous students continue studying after they leave school (ABS 1997), compared with more than 50 percent of non-Indigenous students.

Statistics released in the discussion paper of the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (1994) reveal that 45% of Aboriginal students have significantly lower literacy and

numeracy levels than other students. This has been confirmed recently in the National Schools English Literacy Survey (Raethel 1997b) which showed that Aboriginal students are among the poorest performers in both reading and writing. The 1997 Report on the Basic Skills Test in NSW (DSE 1997b) stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are the lowest achieving group in both Literacy and Numeracy at Year 3 and Year 5. Willmot (1981) states that the low level of literacy and numeracy among Aboriginal children is puzzling and debilitating and is a key influence on low school achievement in High school.

An emphasis on literacy as a priority was supported by Noonuccal (1990) a well-known writer and poet, who had succeeded in the literary world as Kath Walker and reverted to her Aboriginal name in order to display her identification with Aboriginal society.

One area which is cited as a cause of reading difficulties among Aboriginal children is the prevalence of hearing disabilities. Lowell, Budukulawuy, Gurimangu, Maypilama & Nyomba (1995) claim that Otitis media (OM) affects large numbers of Aboriginal children and this can lead to some hearing loss. Even a mild hearing loss in early childhood can seriously affect later learning. Aboriginal children may find it hard to focus and maintain attention, or to follow instructions. Skills which require an aural component, such as phonics, may not develop properly and this impacts on the student's literacy development. Schools need to be aware of students with OM and develop strategies to help them.

When it comes to literacy, there is little or no support in NSW High Schools for students after Year 7. Since literacy is the basis of so much learning in High school, if children are having problems with reading and writing, they will be severely disadvantaged in the more senior classes, where it is expected that all students have a similar level of competency in

literacy.

Harrison (1992) acknowledges that, to succeed in our society, one needs many language-based skills, such as the ability to communicate and read well. A good working knowledge of the English language is a prerequisite for almost any career and English is a compulsory component of both the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate in NSW. Nicholls (1994) suggests that Aboriginal students who do not succeed at school often have literacy problems. Lawrie (1994) confirms that literacy is one of the stumbling blocks in the education and growth of Aboriginal children and suggests that low literacy skills may lead to negative self-image and low self-esteem in students.

Such literacy problems are often evident early in a child's school career and need to be corrected at that stage for the child to progress satisfactorily to the next stage. Harrison (1992) states that children need a strong language and concrete activity base very early in their development. Basic skills need continual reinforcement before proceeding to the next stage. Aboriginal students need to be competent in literacy skills at the primary level before proceeding to high school, where there is less opportunity for instruction designed to ameliorate learning difficulties. Unfortunately, in the NSW system, children are allowed to progress regardless of competency.

Dasen (1973) believes that many Aboriginal children fall behind early on, not reaching a 'concrete operational stage' and therefore do not handle the Primary curriculum well. As a result they then do not reach the formal operations stage which is necessary for secondary education. The thinking behind this theory has changed somewhat since the 1970s, when deficit models influenced educational writing. Current research focuses on phonological awareness which Stanovich (1989) claims is one of the basic



precursors of literacy development. This aspect of the learning to read process was discussed in Chapter one. Children with phonological awareness know that speech is made up of individual sounds and are able to manipulate them. Early pre-school experimentation with rhyme and alliteration leads naturally to phonological awareness in young children (Layton & Upton 1992). Intervention programs have been trialled in both Denmark (Lundberg, Frost & Petersen 1988) and in South Australia (O'Brien 1994). The Danish results showed that teaching phonological awareness had a positive effect on early reading achievement. O'Brien (1994) stresses that such methods do not replace the phonics or complete reading program, but are designed to add to the child's prereading skills. He recommends early assessment of each child's ability to hear sounds in sequence and the provision of intervention methods.

O'Brien (1994) suggests that Aboriginal children who have limited experience in being read to or who have missed out on rhyming and chanting games may not develop an awareness of these sound segments. Specific teaching may be required for these students to understand the relationship between sound and print and the spelling differences that occur in the English language between spoken and written words. McEvoy (1985) reports that reading may not have a high priority in many urban Aboriginal households, compared with other visual forms of communication. Therefore the opportunities for some Aboriginal children to be read to may be limited. Another factor which is sometimes overlooked in reading programs is the concept of 'cultural literacy'.

### **3.3.4 Cultural Literacy**

Willmot (1981) makes a distinction between technical literacy and cultural literacy. Technical literacy is the mechanics of reading and writing in a basic form but Willmot (1981) suggests that it may not be enough for

success at high school and in the modern adult world. Willmot (1981) believes that the broader concept of literacy involves not only the method of coding language into symbols, but also a form of communication, an aid to thinking and a basis for behaviour. To understand what is required in even filling out a form, one needs to be culturally literate, to understand the hidden meanings behind the words in order to make the correct responses, to have the 'power' of literacy. Willmot (1981) believes that Aboriginal families are generally not culturally literate and this disadvantages them in the school system. They may have the tools but not the power of literacy.

This could explain why some children appear literate in Year 7 but become comparatively illiterate by Year 10. Willmot (1981) suggests that their degree of technical literacy is no different, but they have not acquired literate culture. Cultural literacy exists in technical subjects, such as science and maths as well as in the humanities.

So how does one become culturally literate? From the researcher's experience, cultural literacy for Australians whose mother tongue is English is usually achieved through immersion and family customs. Immigrants and Aboriginal Australians who do not immerse themselves in the dominant culture need to acquire cultural literacy. Willmot (1981) suggests that they can acquire cultural literacy through wide reading of materials which reflect the dominant Australian culture. The more they read, the higher their level of cultural literacy.

Fesl (1981) claims that this aspect of literacy is not understood by many teachers, who regard Aboriginal people as deprived Australians rather than people from another culture. They do not understand that for many Aboriginal children, school belongs to a foreign culture with different values, interests, obligations and goals than their own (Ingram 1981, McEvoy 1985). An example of this form of thinking lies in the type

of literacy support provided in NSW State high schools. Migrant children with Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) are acknowledged to come from another culture and are assisted in their schooling by a trained English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher to help them attain some cultural literacy as well as to improve their general literacy skills. While the amount of assistance is regarded by many teachers as inadequate, at least there is some recognition by authorities that assistance is required.

Aboriginal students on the other hand are classified by the NSW Department of School Education in the same group as non-Aboriginal students and are only provided with specialist literacy support in Year 7. Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) do provide a bridge between cultures for Aboriginal students at school and they do endeavour to assist students with literacy problems. However, in the study school, the AEA is not trained as a literacy specialist (Green 1996).

Coker (1981) stresses that Australian teachers need to be sensitive to Aboriginal cultural differences and realise that English lessons may need cultural explanations for Aboriginal and immigrant children to understand implied meanings. Tripcony (1993) states that the use of Aboriginal English is often taken by teachers as an 'incorrect' use of the English language. It is this denial (or even ignorance) of Aboriginal language differences which adds to feelings of low self-esteem among Aboriginal schoolchildren. They know they are different from the mainstream and that such difference is not valued. A similar situation occurs with immigrant children. Fesl (1981) suggests that the reason for being undervalued in society may be the mask of poverty which places Aboriginal children in the same category as disadvantaged non-Aboriginal children so that all their problems are explained as being due to low socio-economic circumstances.

It should be stressed however, that there is no one Aboriginal

culture being discussed here. In a personal communication, Green (1996) states that the rural urban Aboriginal students in the study school come from a diverse range of backgrounds, some more closely linked with distinct Aboriginal communities than others. In fact, 47.9 percent of Aboriginal people over 13 years of age in NSW identified with a clan in the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey (ABS 1997a). The degree to which they identify with Aboriginal communities usually determines the degree of their personal cultural difference at school which in turn may affect their level of academic achievement and social acceptance. Gibson (1993) comments that rural urban Aboriginal students, such as those surveyed in this study, sometimes suffer the added stress of straddling two cultures and perhaps of not being accepted by either.

In the worst case scenario, Aboriginal children may be defined as intellectually disabled or delayed on the basis of western cognitive assessments. McConnochie (1981) suggests that the home environment may be used as a cause. Historically, Aboriginal students were seen as having a lower IQ than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (due to the bias of the tests) which explained their poor school performance. Such preconceptions remain embedded in our society leading to an expectation of failure (Gibson 1993). Such expectations, combined with resistance on the part of Aboriginal students to education in rural urban schools, may lead to conflict situations and frequent absenteeism which further compound the problems. The issue of chronic absenteeism and disciplinary actions, such as suspensions are discussed in the next section.

### **3.3.5 Attendance and Suspensions**

Dunn & Tatz (1969) report on a survey of Aboriginal children in secondary schools, conducted by the NSW Teachers Federation in 1964. Teachers were asked about factors relating to Aboriginal students' lack of

success. At the time, the deficit model of education was accepted as a rationale for compensatory programs. Irregular attendance and age-grade retardation were mentioned as two important factors which held Aboriginal students back. Economic factors, such as irregular employment or unemployment and large families on low incomes were also mentioned. The latter often resulted in Aboriginal students leaving school early to begin earning, or in a situation where there was no money for schooling needs, such as books. Dunn & Taz (1969) state that, along with these factors, sub-standard housing and poor living conditions all contributed to an atmosphere which did not encourage study and school success.

Absenteeism is still a bone of contention in schools. In the researcher's experience, many teachers at the study school blame frequent absenteeism for a student's failure at school. In Australian high schools, students are expected to 'catch up' on work missed. There is no provision for tutorial assistance and many teachers are unsympathetic towards students who are frequently absent without a genuine excuse, for example, a serious illness or overseas trip. In such cases, the year adviser asks teachers for work packages to ensure that students do not miss vital parts of their courses.

Duncan (1974) states that Aboriginal students are especially vulnerable because, if they have a history of absenteeism, particularly in the early stages of reading acquisition, the concepts and drills missed at crucial stages of learning would not be reinforced at home as in some non-Aboriginal middle-class households. This puts the students behind and may label them as 'slow-learners'.

Watts (1976, cited in Groome 1995) claims that many Aboriginal parents fail to realise the impact frequent absenteeism has on their children's learning and socialisation. Because of the nature of Aboriginal

parent-adolescent relationships, they may not wish to force their children to attend school, if they don't want to go, especially if their children are not coping and would prefer to avoid the classroom.

Gallacher (1969), who wrote about traditional Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, feels that there are three main differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. The first is the concept of time. Non-Aboriginal Australians are concerned with punctuality so our work and schoolday is organised around time-blocks while lateness and absenteeism is frowned upon by teachers. This concept is not so important for traditional Aboriginal Australians whose view of work may be different to ours. Eckermann (1988) states that care should be taken in generalising when discussing rural/urban Aboriginal children. In the researcher's opinion, family circumstances, such as one or both parents working, studying or active in community affairs often determine attitudes towards time management, rather than ethnicity.

Aboriginal students also often display 'shame' behaviour when confronted by new and threatening situations or if they are singled out in the classroom. This may cause them to either become withdrawn and silent or respond by attacking others. These behaviours can be misinterpreted as sulkiness, defiance or cheekiness (Groome 1995). A reluctance to take academic risks, such as volunteering answers, in order to avoid 'shame' or failure, could lead to misunderstanding on the part of teachers who demand co-operation and involvement from every student. Teachers need to be sensitive to cultural differences and provide supportive classroom environments if aboriginal students are to overcome this fear of failure.

Malin (1991), in ethnographic research within urban primary classrooms, demonstrates that even competent teachers may re-create failure for Aboriginal students by maintaining structural inequality and

differential treatment. Students who have low self-esteem and who are frustrated often display anti-social behaviour which brings them into conflict with school authorities.

In a survey of suspension and exclusion rates for Aboriginal students in Western Australia, it was found that although Aboriginal students made up only 4.75% of the total student population, they represented 9.62% of all suspensions and 10.82% of total days suspended. It appears that Aboriginal students are suspended at almost twice the expected rate and the number of days involved was over twice that expected (Gardiner, Evans & Howell 1995).

In 1992, 26% of all students recommended for exclusion in South Australia were Aboriginal students, almost six times their representation in the student population (S.A. Dept of Ed. 1993). The following year, the proportion increased to 35%. Suspensions and exclusions among Aboriginal students in South Australia were disproportionate to the average.

Such figures are alarming and the question needs to be asked, whether or not there is inherent bias in the system (Gardiner, Evans & Howell 1995). Perhaps the figures also represent the result of a 'sink or swim' approach which does not allow for the particular needs of Aboriginal students within Western school systems.

One school which developed a novel way of retaining Aboriginal students and improving attendance rates was Doomadgee State School in far north Queensland. They set up a 'village school' which held classes in parks, on the river bank and on bush tucker expeditions as well as in the school grounds (Muir & Williams 1995). The aim of the program was to make erratic and non-attending students feel welcome at school and to counteract any cultural barriers that discouraged these students from

attending school.

The numbers of students attending 'village school' exceeded all expectations. Many of the students involved considered themselves non-achievers in mainstream classes because they were behind their peers in literacy and numeracy skills and lacked self-esteem. Their academic difficulties led to disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Considered a 'half-way house', the 'village school' may eventually provide a way to include these students in regular classrooms in the future, coupled with daily literacy support and community involvement in cultural activities (Muir & Williams 1995).

In 1988, the Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force which looked at Year 12 retention rates found the only 17 percent of Aboriginal students were enrolled in Year 12 courses compared with 49 percent of non-Aboriginal students (DEET 1988). By 1994, the figure for Aboriginal students had almost doubled but it still remained short of the national average retention rate (78 percent) (DEET 1995). These figures are possibly not surprising when one looks at the overall literacy rate among Aboriginal adults, where there is an estimate of half being illiterate or functionally illiterate (ABS 1997d). In one Queensland rural high School, only one student in the whole Aboriginal community had completed Year 12 (Eibeck 1994) and the 1991 Census showed that there is a marked drop off rate for Aboriginal students after age 16 in Queensland, from 59 percent to 31 percent in one year (Andrews 1993). Figures for other states are comparable.

In isolated communities where the opportunity to progress beyond Year 10 is not available, Aboriginal students are particularly disadvantaged. If they leave their communities they face alienation and homesickness (Commonwealth of Australia 1985). Many question the value of



continuing education into senior years, if the jobs market is restricted anyway. Local employment opportunities are often a deciding factor in school retention rates. Russell (1992) states that many Aboriginal students tailor their aspirations to what is already available in the community and for most, earning money is more important than a career.

### **3.3.6 Unemployment**

The employment market is a particularly sensitive issue which has a marked influence on Aboriginal student achievement in school.

In the Australian post-industrial economy there are few jobs for unskilled workers and many find themselves as long-term unemployed. Duncan (1974) claimed that the vast majority of Aboriginal adults were classified as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in 1974. In the 1996 Census, the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians in NSW was 45.6 percent which is more than five times the national unemployment rate for all adults (ABS 1997). This may be because a large proportion of Aboriginal people today may be still classified as unskilled or semi-skilled and therefore competing in a shrinking job market.

Where there is a high level of Aboriginal unemployment, especially among Aboriginal males in a community, and in the absence of positive role models, there is little incentive for Aboriginal students to succeed at school (Choo 1990). There appears to be a lack of career education expressly for Aboriginal students. Such career education should involve parents (Commonwealth of Australia 1985). Finn (1991) reiterates that even when the students do succeed in high school or in tertiary education, employment opportunities in many rural communities may be limited for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and they may find themselves unemployed, despite their education.

*The Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs* (Commonwealth of Australia 1985) states that the lack of employment opportunities in rural towns is mostly due to a small industrial base and the demise of the rural sector, a traditional area of employment for Aboriginal young men. Often the only employment opportunities for Aboriginal students are in the government sector under equity programs. These are open to fluctuations and changes in policy, leading to a lack of long-term security. The needs of Aboriginal people in rural towns have almost completely been ignored by the National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals.

Equal Opportunity programs are helping Aboriginal people to gain employment in rural areas, but such programs are often criticised by non-Aboriginal Australians as advancing 'favouritism' to minority groups. This is particularly noticeable in times of general high unemployment. The no-win situation must impact on the way Aboriginal students perceive their futures. Another factor which influences the decisions that Aboriginal students make about their futures is to be found in peer group relationships and issues of gender.

### **3.3.7 Gender Issues and Peer Group Pressure**

Although racism may be the single most important issue affecting Aboriginal students in mainstream Australian schools, other important factors in determining school success are those of peer group pressure and gender. Gender has a marked impact on student achievement.

Herbert (1995) reports on several findings obtained during a national consultation on gender and violence which took place in ten school communities, both government and non-government in rural, remote and urban locations in Queensland, New South Wales, the Northern Territory

and Western Australia. Responses from Aboriginal girls indicated that they felt that they were not given the same recognition for their efforts as received by Aboriginal boys. This was particularly obvious in the field of sport, where football received far more recognition than netball. Another item which concerned the girls was their preference for separation from boys in the class, because they were afraid that they would be teased. This finding has led to a statement in the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (DEET 1994) which suggests a separation of male and female students for certain subjects.

An important finding in the *Review* (DEET 1994) was the considerable diversity in lifestyle demonstrated by the girls, and the importance of flexibility in schools to cater for these differences. Herbert (1995) argues that most teachers do not appreciate the support Indigenous girls provide for one another and the considerable influence and pressure they bring to bear on others to leave school or select courses. Aboriginal boys who drop out of high school may also go out of their way to tease those who stay and question their Aboriginality. If such pressure is coupled with racist experiences at school and a feeling of failure, the desire to drop out becomes very strong.

Groome (1995) claims that girls are less likely to drop out because they are more willing to please their parents and because they are better able to make friends with other non-Aboriginal students. They are also more likely to be influenced by successful older Aboriginal women, who have achieved a degree of status and power in their communities.

On the downside, Aboriginal girls have to work harder to succeed in the workplace. Herbert (1995) reports that employment statistics reveal that few Indigenous women enjoy permanent employment or can be seen in visible service jobs in the community. The lack of such visible role models

must impact on attitudes towards schooling and retention rates among Indigenous girls.

Mander-Ross (1995) conducted an investigation of absenteeism in an inner city High School in Sydney. Some of the girls surveyed claimed that social pressure from both boys and girls caused them to under-achieve in order to be accepted by their peers. Coupled with a lack of parental support, the girls held themselves back. Absenteeism among girls at this school was quite high. Boredom was the main reason given rather than family problems.

When the girls in the survey were asked how they would improve attendance rates if they were Principal, the majority wanted the program to include more excursions, sport, TAFE courses and practical subjects. They felt the need for more Aboriginal people in the school and some preferred the option of a single teacher, rather than the multiple specialist teachers that is standard practice in high schools today.

O'Shane & Bickford (1991) comment that interest is hard to maintain if there is a lack of understanding of what is going on. Frequent absenteeism means that students are out of touch with events in the school. Once a cycle of poor attendance has been created it becomes a major barrier to school achievement and further reinforces racial stereotypes, which makes the school an even less comfortable environment than before.

For Indigenous boys, the issues are somewhat different. A brief look back at contact history in Australia between non-Aboriginal settlers and Indigenous people reveals a tale of great tragedy which has resulted in dispossession of not only land, but also culture, languages and identity. Herbert (1995) claims that males have been hit particularly hard and the result for many has been the destruction of their traditional male role. This

confusion in identity has led to observations by some Indigenous girls that Aboriginal boys are heavily influenced by the media and try to emulate the characters they observe on television and in film. Football stars who earn large salaries become their role models and the boys dream of also becoming football stars. It should be noted that there are also female Aboriginal sporting stars, such as Evonne Goolagong and Kathy Freeman, who may have influenced some Aboriginal girls into pursuing a sporting career.

Fashion is another issue. Schwab (1988) claims that boys are keen to be seen in the 'right' type of designer casual or sport clothing and accessories. The Aboriginal boys may also emulate movements and speech patterns of their role models. While some styles currently being adopted by Aboriginal youth reflect an international youth culture, the scene changes all the time and it is important for Aboriginal youths to belong to the 'in' group. From the researcher's observations of Aboriginal male students at the study school, designer motifs, such as Nike, are certainly popular. Aboriginal males are not alone in this preference for name brands. Many non-Aboriginal male students also wear clothes which identify with famous sporting identities or football clubs.

Belonging to a group based on race may lead to racial tension in a school. Groome (1995) states that this can be amplified by having an 'Aboriginal Room' and some obvious support mechanisms for Aboriginal students only. In the researcher's experience, most criticism towards Aboriginal students in the study school seems to come from disadvantaged non-Aboriginal students who occasionally resort to racist remarks. If left unchecked, such behaviour leads to fights in the playground and a climate of suspicion which sustains racial prejudice.

In a personal communication, Green (1996) comments that

Aboriginal boys in the study school tend to have more behavioural problems than Aboriginal girls, who blend in better and are quieter and more co-operative. Aboriginal boys are also more likely to group together socially, than Aboriginal girls who seem to mix freely with other non-Aboriginal girls. Ionn (1995) suggests that Aboriginal boys are also more prone to 'resist' the school system, as a countermeasure to being regarded as failures. As a result they tend to drop out earlier than girls.

The role of Aboriginal parents is particularly significant in ensuring that their children attend school regularly and feel comfortable and intellectually challenged, within the school environment. For Aboriginal parents, however, there may be hidden barriers that hinder their involvement in the education process.

### **3.4 Parental Involvement in Education**

It has already been stated at the beginning of this chapter, that many Aboriginal people are mistrustful of the school system as a result of their own tragic experiences. This must have a flow-on effect to their own children and would influence their involvement at Parent and Citizens meetings and attendance at Parent/Teacher interviews. From the researcher's own experience as a teacher, Aboriginal parents rarely attend such events, despite numerous invitations. They are also very shy to come to the school and only do so when requested by the Principal after their child has committed a major offence. This further reinforces the view that schools are uncomfortable places for both Aboriginal parents and children.

Grey (1974) believes that many Aboriginal people see schooling as a 'white' process. A majority of Aboriginal parents see themselves as having failed school and know little about how one attains success or how one can take advantage of learning opportunities. Their aspirations for their

children remain fairly vague. They want their children to succeed but do not know what that really means in a non-Aboriginal man's world, apart from having greater financial reward. Feeling powerless and ignorant of the process, they prefer to leave education in the hands of teachers.

The Federal Government has recognised the problem and one of the major aims of its Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (DEET 1988), was to allow for the participation of Aboriginal parents and communities in the decision-making process. However, this policy appears to be interpreted inconsistently and expediently by different governments, as can be shown in the example of the closing of Traeger Park School in Alice Springs. The argument given was that the policy did not apply to urban schools (Walton, 1995).

The decision created a furore among Aboriginal parents who felt that their children would achieve better outcomes in an Aboriginal school with programs specifically designed for Aboriginal children (Franey 1991). They were supported by Isaac Brown (1991), Director of the Centre for Aboriginal and Islander Education (CAIS) at Northern Territory University, who argued that Aboriginal groups were better able to compete in our society when they worked together in groups.

The decision to 'mainstream' these students (that is, to put them into normal schools, despite their special educational needs, was upheld in several court battles and the students were dispersed to other schools. As a result a significant number did not re-enrol at school and were possibly lost to the system. This concept of 'mainstreaming' or as Walton (1995) puts it, the 'sink or swim' approach, has a long history in Australian education and not just for Aboriginal students, but for anyone from a Non English Speaking Background (NESB). The 'sink or swim' approach is a term used to explain what happens in a mixed-ability class. The teacher tends to

teach to the middle group in the class, so that disadvantaged students 'sink' if they have difficulty understanding new concepts which may be taught faster than they are able to follow. Walton (1995) adds that this approach has a long history of failure. The researcher notes that steps are currently being taken to ensure that student teachers are equipped to handle individual differences in students. Many teachers have also developed strategies to assist slow learners or students who have missed basic work.

One success story involving Aboriginal parental involvement has been the 'Literacy Nest' at Minimbah Preschool in Armidale, NSW (Watson & Roberts 1996). As few Aboriginal families in the area speak a traditional language, the preschool focuses on developing English language skills, as these skills are considered a foundation for learning. Watson & Roberts (1996) report that the preschool encourages parent participation in children's early literacy skill development by urging them to buy books for their children. Parents are also encouraged to use the town library, set an example by reading books, magazines or newspapers at home, take part in Literacy Nest activities and show children that reading can be fun as well as being useful.

One of the early problems, as reported by Watson & Roberts (1996) was the stereotypical view in the community among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal detractors, that Aboriginal parents would not want to be involved in the schooling of their children. The fostering of parental involvement required a long process of building trust and confidence. Parents were involved in the running of the school and gradually the responsibility for children's learning was placed into the hands of the Aboriginal community.

As an experienced primary and secondary teacher, the researcher has observed that it seems easier to involve parents at the early stages of



schooling, when they are more closely involved with their children. As children grow older and become more independent, parental involvement in education seems to decline for many families. It is still fairly strong at the primary school level but falls off quite sharply after children enter high school. High school teachers regularly claim that the majority of parents, either aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, who attend parent-teacher interviews are the ones whose children are well-behaved and high-achievers. Whether this is because the other parents are ashamed to attend if their children are doing poorly or whether they are too busy or genuinely not interested in their children's progress is not known.

Groome (1995) feels that cultural factors may play a part in the lack of Aboriginal parental involvement. Many Aboriginal families differ in structure from the non-Aboriginal nuclear family concept in that they are often extended groups with multiple relationships, similar to extended families in some other cultures. Green (1996) comments that it is normal for some Aboriginal children at the study school to visit other family members and stay overnight or for extended periods with grandparents or aunts. This shared responsibility results in less parental monitoring of the child. From the researcher's experience as a teacher in the study school, it is common for Aboriginal students to leave schoolbooks, pens, sport uniforms and other belongings behind at different houses. This can sometimes cause friction in the classroom.

Poverty also plays an important part in childrens' low school achievement. The 1996 Western Australia Child Health Survey (Arndt 1997) found that twice as many children from one-parent homes as a result of marriage breakdown have low academic performances compared to children from two-parent households. Many of these children live in poverty because they are dependent on a sole-parent pension. Almost a third of Aboriginal families have the mother as sole parent (ABS 1997).

Groome (1995) states that this often places a strain on students and can impact on their attendance if they have to care for younger siblings. Such families are quite poor and children may not have enough food, shelter or comfort required for good physical, mental or emotional growth. Carter (1988) reports that some programmes are in place to counteract these disadvantages, such as Abstudy allowances, paid to students by the Commonwealth to assist them while at school and ASSPA money which is paid to the school to support Aboriginal programs and help offset the costs of excursions and other major expenses of an educational nature.

In a time of great social change, Aboriginal parents have similar fears about their children's future as do other Australians. Relationships with adolescent children can be strained. Fears about anti-social behaviour, involvement in crime and substance abuse are shared across the whole community. Carter (1988) suggests that problems may arise when Aboriginal adolescents display a negative attitude to non-Aboriginal society, because of the frustration due to racism and harassment. This may lead to a readiness to challenge authority figures, particularly the police, and escalate into a situation where the adolescent ends up before the courts. It may also lead to suspension or expulsion from school, further reinforcing negative attitudes in the community towards Aboriginal students.

In a survey reported by McInerney (1989), both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents claimed that a lack of parental encouragement, difficult homelife and poor understanding of the importance of schooling were the major factors affecting a student's school achievement. These factors were more important than the influence of peers or bias in the curriculum. They resulted in students dropping out early. A lack of teacher and school support was also mentioned. Aboriginal parents thought that the situation could be improved with encouragement and

frequent rewards.

McInerney (1989) suggests that economic factors, such as parents wanting their children to go out to work to help with household finances are of major significance. Peers who are already in employment and financially independent, may put pressure on their friends to quit school. The value of the Higher School Certificate in helping gain future employment also appeared to be questionable and parents needed to be convinced of the value of schooling, if any significant change in retention rates are to occur.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter the researcher has attempted to briefly outline the history of Aboriginal education from contact to the present day. The chapter focuses on the provision of educational opportunities for Aboriginal people which are attempting to lead to an improvement in the numbers of Aboriginal students now continuing secondary education. Government funding and support programs, such as the provision of Aboriginal Education Assistants have all been introduced to encourage Aboriginal students to complete secondary schooling.

However, Aboriginal students are still finding it difficult to progress beyond the compulsory years of schooling. The reasons for this are complex, but several factors have been outlined in the chapter. Parental involvement, Aboriginal studies courses both in schools and in tertiary institutions, and bilingual schooling in remote areas are all having positive effects. Many Aboriginal parents, however, remain suspicious of government bodies and education authorities and these negative feelings are easily passed on to children.

Other factors include personal relationships, culturally insensitive teaching methods and the lack of tutoring or remedial assistance.

'Mainstream' schools, with a 'sink or swim' approach are often not the best option for Aboriginal students who may fall behind because of high absenteeism and therefore fail to develop the level of literacy required to succeed at high school and in future employment. Cultural literacy, peer group pressure and gender issues have also been discussed, and it has been stated that Aboriginal boys are more likely to drop out of school than Aboriginal girls. The chapter also looked at male role-models, such as sportsmen, who influence Aboriginal boys.

The next chapter deals with the methodology used in conducting this research project which seeks to examine the DEAR scheme as it is currently conducted in a rural urban high school. The study also seeks to compare attitudes towards this sustained silent reading program between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and between male and female students and to ascertain if those attitudes are generally positive or negative.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of students attending a NSW rural High School towards the Drop Everything and Read program. It involved students aged from 12 years to 18 years in Years 7 to 12. As such it focused on adolescents and their attitudes towards sustained silent reading both at school and as a leisure time pursuit. A major area of interest within the study was the comparison of attitudes towards sustained silent reading between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in the school. It was therefore important to ensure that all students who identified as Aboriginal were provided with the opportunity to participate.

The design of the study was a survey within a case study. The case study involved was the DEAR program in one comprehensive State high school in inland NSW. The study design utilised methods from both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Specifically, two anonymous questionnaires, one aimed at students and the other targeting teachers were administered. In order to ensure that the questionnaires yielded useful data which eliminated ambiguities, the questionnaires were first trialled in a pilot survey with students and teachers at another rural high school in the same town. It was important to survey teachers as well as students to assess if there were differences in perceptions of the value of the program between the teaching faculty and the students. Random observations of a sample number of DEAR sessions were also included to assess if the program was being conducted according to the original guidelines set by the school and if it followed the original format of sessions suggested by Hunt (1970).

Methodological triangulation (Cohen & Manion 1994) of data was provided by the co-ordination of a pilot survey, the administration of the questionnaires and observation sessions. Questions on both student and teacher questionnaires followed a consistent style to ensure clarity and ease of response. Several questions on both student and teacher questionnaires were replicated in order to allow useful comparisons.

A number of administrative tasks needed to be carried out at the start of the project. The Principal of the study school was formally approached to approve the study. The school executive were very keen to see a formal evaluation of the DEAR program and requested that results might be made available as they came to hand, so that the school could make any necessary adjustments to the DEAR scheme. Following approval, the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Committee (ASSPA) and Aboriginal Education Assistant at the school were subsequently approached in writing for assistance with the study and to ensure that the correct ethical procedures, for dealing with the Aboriginal students in the study, were followed. The Principal of the pilot school was then contacted for permission to trial both student and teacher pilot questionnaires.

Provision was made on the student questionnaires for Non-English-Background-Students (NEBSB) to voluntarily identify themselves, in order to assess, during initial data analysis, if there were any real differences or similarities in attitudes between this group and the Aboriginal students in this study. In order to maintain a sense of anonymity and respect for minority groups involved in the study, a whole school approach was important. This whole school approach was also perceived as useful in yielding a large amount of data which could be statistically analysed.

The following discussion describes in more detail the research design, the sample, the methods used and explores issues of reliability, validity and ethics.

## 4.2 Research Design

This study used methods from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. The basic design of the research project is a survey within a case study. The case study examined is the DEAR program as it is currently conducted in the study school. Cohen & Manion (1994) state that case study research generally involves the study of an individual unit or environment. It is a way to observe the complexities and subtleties of social environments and is particularly suited to educational research.

Qualitative methods such as classroom observations were used to provide descriptive information about how the program is currently conducted. As well, open ended questions on both teacher and student questionnaires provided qualitative information about the conduct of the program and both teacher and student perceptions of aspects of DEAR. This descriptive information was used to further illuminate observational data and questionnaire responses from students and teachers. Results were also compared with school records to answer one of the major research questions.

Two questionnaires, one for students and the other for teachers, were used to collect quantitative data (Lin 1976). Questionnaire data was statistically analysed, using a Chi Square procedure for a contingency table, to determine if there were significant differences in responses between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants and between male and female student respondents. Alpha level for significance for the purpose of this study was set at  $p = 0.05$ . When 'No Response' answers were eliminated from the data, the degree of freedom was 1. Yates Correction for continuity was applied and a new Chi Square was calculated to determine if there was any difference in significance. Quantitative data, arising from the questionnaires, such as graphs and tables, were used to compare responses between categories of respondents. Records of observations included some quantitative data such as the number of students with books. These

frequencies were used to compare responses from specific questions on both student and teacher questionnaires.

Some preparation was required before data collection began. This involved writing permission letters to the Principal of the study school (Appendix A1), the ASSPA Committee and Aboriginal Education Assistant at the study school (Appendix A2) and the Principal of the Pilot school (Appendix A3). The student questionnaire (Appendix B1), teacher questionnaire (Appendix C1) and observation record sheet (Appendix D) were prepared and copied.

The researcher selected a questionnaire supplemented with observations for this study as this appeared to be the best method available to assess the manner in which the DEAR program was actually being conducted across the school. During observations, the researcher became 'one of the group', ostensibly sitting in and silently reading along with students and teacher. Research has shown that observation techniques and questionnaires have both advantages and disadvantages. Cohen & Manion (1994) claim that observations are a suitable method for educational studies which deal with people and their behaviours. For example, the subjects are observed in their natural environments and results are often less reactive than those obtained using other methodologies. The observations used in this study were planned to take place over a period of four weeks which resulted in a more accurate assessment of the day-to-day conduct of the program than would have been apparent in a single session.

However, there are acknowledged disadvantages to observations and it is important to supplement this method with others in order to validate results. Cohen & Manion (1994, 110) use terms such as, 'subjective, biased, impressionistic and idiosyncratic' to describe the negative aspects of this method which may affect both internal and external validity. The query also remains as to how best to record the observations. In order to maintain as much consistency as possible, the



researcher used a standard record sheet (Appendix D) and recorded observations in the same manner during each session.

A limitation to this particular method, however, is that the observation itself and the presence of another teacher in the room, could have created an artificial situation in which the students and DEAR teacher acted differently to their usual pattern. For example, most teachers observed were aware that they needed to model reading behaviour. It was essential, therefore, to complement these observations with other research methods in order to ensure meaningful results.

A self-completion questionnaire survey method with both open-ended and closed questions was selected to assess students and teachers' attitudes to DEAR in this study for several reasons.

- a. The objectives of the enquiry were clear cut. To meet them the questionnaires sought specific responses to questions relating to the DEAR sessions and sustained silent reading as well as responses to other closed questions about the students' leisure-time activities through closed questions. Some questions allowed for additional open responses, to elicit voluntary information not otherwise available.
- b. The questionnaire structure allowed for questions to be grouped according to a number of issues. These related directly to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1 and grouping facilitated cross-matching of responses within each group of questionnaire items to ensure validity.
- c. The method was perceived to be the most efficient means of gathering the type of data required to evaluate a program in a large school. It caused minimal interruption to the school as only one session was required to conduct the entire survey. It was felt

that teachers would be more sympathetic and cooperative completing a survey scheduled for a single session. The DEAR session was selected as the most appropriate time for the questionnaire administration. As DEAR is a whole school activity, it was considered an appropriate time to conduct a whole school survey.

- d. Because it was necessary to elicit truthful responses from the adolescents surveyed, the questionnaire responses were anonymous. Anonymity was assured for most students by using a large-scale questionnaire which did not single out individual students. Personal information included a birthdate, however, which could be cross-checked to ensure that all Aboriginal students were surveyed. As numbers of Aboriginal students in the school were fairly low, it was considered necessary to survey each one of them.
- e. As a whole school response was important to this study, it was necessary to use as large a sample as possible. Responses could be collected from a greater number of students using the questionnaire method than with any other method such as interviews. Sample size is always an important consideration in collecting data. Cohen & Manion (1994) have suggested 30 as being a minimum sample size for projects where some statistical analysis is to be used. As the entire group of Aboriginal students enrolled in the study school totalled 35, it was important to ensure that each student was included. Matching these students with non-Aboriginal students in a probability sample would have been too difficult as there were no socio-cultural data available on students in the school. It was decided, therefore, to survey the entire school (totaling 837), in order to address the research questions.
- f. The researcher was a teacher in the study school and did not have the resources to conduct a large number of interviews. The

researcher felt that the survey method matched the research questions.

- g. Attitude surveys conducted in schools by other researchers, such as Beck (1990), Snellman (1993), Whittemore (1992) and Schultheis (1990) all used the questionnaire survey method as the best means of gathering comparative data on reading attitudes.
- h. A limitation mentioned by Lin (1976) is the response rate. More than 70 percent is considered very good. Since administration of the survey was to be carefully planned and tightly controlled by the researcher, it was expected that responses would be close to 100 percent of the available students and teachers in the study school.
- i. Another limitation of the questionnaire method is the accuracy of responses and whether the questionnaire truly measures what is required. The use of a pilot can be helpful in assessing whether or not responses to the questionnaire are meaningful.
- j. Similarly, it is difficult to measure attitudes and questionnaires are limited in the amount of information that respondents are able to give within a reasonable time. The use of carefully-worded open-ended questions assist in encouraging respondents to answer freely. Once again, the use of a pilot ensures that the type of information collected in open questions would be useful in assessing attitudes.

#### **4.3 Sample Involved in the Study**

The total number of students enrolled at the study school at the time of the survey in 1996 was 897. Of these, 837 students were surveyed in the student questionnaire. This represented 93 percent of the student body of 897. Included in the students surveyed were 35 students who identify as Aboriginal. This represented 4 percent of the total number of students

surveyed and 100 percent of the Aboriginal group in the school. 51 students identified themselves as belonging to a Non English Speaking Background (NESB). They represented 6 percent of the total surveyed.

Table 4.1 illustrates a breakdown of the students surveyed into three major categories: non-Aboriginal, Aboriginal and NESB.

	Non-Abor.	Abor.	NESB	Total
No. of students	802	35	51	837
% of students	96%	4%	6%	100%

Table 4.1 Number of students surveyed by ethnicity.

The percentage of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal students in this sample is fairly low, compared to other schools in western NSW. The number of Aboriginal students in the study school is affected by the presence of two large State high schools and a Catholic high school in the town, all of which enrol similar numbers of Aboriginal students. The small sample of Aboriginal students is a limitation in this study.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the number of students surveyed divided into groups based on ethnicity and gender.

	Non Ab. Male	Non Ab. Female	Ab. Male	Ab. Female	NESB Male	NESB Female
No. of students	394	408	23	12	26	25
%	49%	51%	66%	34%	51%	49%

Table 4.2 Number of students surveyed by ethnicity and gender.

A breakdown of the number of male and female students showed that there were almost even numbers of males (49 percent) to females (51 percent) in the non-Aboriginal group, (this included the NESB students). When the NESB group was separated out, it also had almost even numbers

of males (50.9 percent) to females (49.1 percent). However, the Aboriginal group had two-thirds (66 percent) males to one third (34 percent) females.

Table 4.3 illustrates the number of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students surveyed by Year groups and the number of students enrolled at the time of the survey.

Ethnicity	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
Non-Abor.	161	82	136	129	121	73
	20%	23%	17%	16%	15%	9%
	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
Abor.	8	9	3	8	6	1
	23%	26%	9%	23%	17%	3%

Table 4.3 Number of students surveyed by ethnicity and Year of enrolment.

When sample student numbers were categorised according to Year groups, there was a peak in numbers in Year 8 and then a gradual decline in the senior years which is to be expected. The Aboriginal group also had a peak in Year 8 but the numbers fluctuated across years because of the small sample. Retention rates for Aboriginal students up to Year 11 in the study school were comparable to those of non-Aboriginal students.

A total of 58 teachers were surveyed. This represented 100% of the teachers in the study school. The summary of data (Appendix H) obtained from the teacher questionnaire indicates the different categories of teachers at the study school. As these categories were not relevant to the analysis of data in this study, the researcher did not consider them further.

## **4.4 The Questionnaires**

### **4.4.1 Compilation of Student Questionnaire**

Several research papers were used as a guide to compiling the questions on the student questionnaire (Appendix B1). They comprised surveys conducted by Halpern (1981), Snellman (1993), Schultheis (1990), Whittemore (1992) and Beck (1990) and focused on attitudes towards sustained silent reading, teacher modelling and reading interests. The questions were modified to relate specifically to the DEAR scheme in the study school and to Australian students living in a rural community. This was especially important when listing leisure-time activities. There was a mix of closed and open questions to allow for statistical analysis of data and a broader overview of attitudes.

Cohen & Manion (1994) suggest avoiding open-ended questions, because they may be demanding of the respondent's time. However, in this situation, it was important to include open questions to add breadth to the survey, to allow students to express their opinions and add information which had not been anticipated. The questions were structured in such a way as to limit students (through single line spaces) to brief responses which would allow for questions to be answered comfortably in the 20 minutes available.

The student questionnaire was designed to be simple to read and easy to fill in. Font size and spacing was considered carefully, the length of questions was kept deliberately short and concise, the check-list for responding was uniform and simple, so that students of all abilities would cope with a minimum of help. Questions were printed on both sides of a single page which made photocopying, handling, distribution, collection and sorting easy. It also prevented problems with pages being lost or sorted incorrectly.

There were 33 questions in the student questionnaire. Students were

asked to circle the correct response in closed questions or to write short answers in open questions. Options for some questions were limited to YES and NO. The questions were arranged in blocks, beginning with personal details. Questions 1 to 5 were closed questions asking for information relating to year group, birthdate, gender, Aboriginal vs non-Aboriginal, country of birth, year of migration (for NESB students) and language spoken at home. Answers to these questions would be used to separate the groups for statistical analysis. The birthdate was necessary to identify Aboriginal students in the absence of names. This information was used later to cross-check with a list of names and birthdates supplied by the Aboriginal Education Assistant to ensure that all Aboriginal students were surveyed.

Questions 6 to 8 were closed questions dealing with reading interest. Question 7 asked what type of materials students preferred to read. Choices given were: Books, magazines, comics and newspapers. In the literature, books were recommended by Hunt (1970) and McCracken & McCracken (1972) as being the most suitable reading materials for an SSR program. Rasinsky (1989) warns that leafing through magazines is not receptive reading. Question 8 related to specific categories of stories that interest students. 10 categories were selected but the word OTHER was included as an open question to allow students to choose their own category, if they felt that the provided ones did not cover all their interests.

Students were told that they could circle as many categories as they liked. The choices given were based on those mentioned by Schultheis (1990), Whittemore (1992), Aranha (1985) and Snellman (1993) in their surveys. They included Adventure, Humour, Science-fiction, Mystery, Sports, Romance and History. In the researcher's experience, Fantasy is a current popular reading choice with many students, so this was included as well as Science and Film/TV Stars. The purpose of the question was to compare data with other researchers, to note any gender differences in preferences and to note major differences in subject interest between

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Results would be useful in selecting books for English classes and in buying new titles for the school library.

Question 9 was an open question allowing for students to fill in names of preferred authors. Whittemore (1992) and Isaacs (1992) mentioned Stephen King as a popular author, Snellman (1993) added Dahl, L'Engle, Blume and Pike. The question was included to determine the strength of sustained silent reading among the student population. The rationale for this question was that only serious readers would remember the names of authors and seek them out when selecting books. Data would be used to assess which categories of students were serious about reading, enough to have favourite authors or titles. Evidence of favourite authors or titles among Aboriginal student responses should indicate reading interest and be seen as a positive attitude.

Question 10 continued the topic of reading interest, to assess the level of priority given by different groups of students to reading as a leisure-time activity. Results would be compared with findings by Wheldall & Entwistle (1988), Beck (1990), Pikulski (1984) and Russikoff & Pilgreen (1994) who report that reading interest among adolescents tends to decline as they become older, when other leisure time activities take a higher priority. The question would be examined across the grades in the analysis.

Several questions relating to parent modelling followed. Question 11 asked if parents read in their spare time. The home environment plays a crucial part in influencing children's interest in reading according to Mork (1972), Campbell et al. (1995), Smith (1989) and Beck (1990). The question was included to triangulate with Q. 6. If parent modelling was strong, theoretically, the level of reading interest in the school should be high. The same categories of reading materials listed in Question 7 were repeated in Question 12 for comparison and to see if there was a



relationship between what students read and what their parents read. If parents are keen book-readers, their children should also be strong book-readers. Question 13 was asked to gauge the importance of books in a household. The response was subject to student interpretation of the word 'MANY'. The question was phrased in this way for simplicity, as only an impression was being asked for, rather than a specific measurement.

The questions that followed were specifically targeted at student attitudes towards the DEAR scheme. Question 14 asked if students liked going to DEAR. Questions 15, 16, 17 had open sections to allow for individual comments. These were designed to give a broader viewpoint of the DEAR scheme. They related to the time when it was held, whether students came late and whether the scheme should be dropped. Questions 15 and 16 had practical value as results would be of interest to the school in planning the timetable. Q.16 would be compared with observations for the purpose of making comparisons.

Questions 18, 19, 20 and 21 centred around reading materials brought to DEAR. The same categories of reading materials were repeated from Questions 7 and 12, to allow for consistency in questionnaire design. The questions were designed to triangulate with observation results and study school Notices and Memos to parents, staff and students (1988a-d) relating to operation of the DEAR scheme. The question would indicate if there was a problem with the conduct of the DEAR program. Question 22 asked about teacher modelling, while Question 23 dealt with student behaviour during DEAR. Hunt (1970) stated that teacher modelling was crucial to the success of any SSR scheme.

Question 24 related to WAG (Welfare Action Group) which was an alternative program held on Fridays after Recess at the study school. This question related to research question 1(b) which asks about alternative programs to DEAR (See Chapter 1). The next question (25) was concerned with the provision of reading materials in classrooms. Barbe & Abbott's

(1975) recommendations for SSR schemes to be successful included stocking classrooms with a minimum of 100 books. As the study school required students to bring their own reading material (Notice to Students 1988b), the question was designed to assess whether students were happy with this arrangement and whether some categories of students, such as Aboriginal male students, required assistance with books. The question was to be triangulated with observation data.

Questions 26, 27 and 28 related once more to the conduct of the DEAR scheme, in order to triangulate with questions 23 and 24. Questions 27-31 related to reading in general and self-perceptions of reading prowess. These questions were necessary to make initial comparisons between NESB, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal responses. Questions 28, 29 and 30 asked for simple YES/NO answers. They were designed to gauge students perceptions regarding the importance of DEAR in reading achievement and increasing reading interest. Question 31 was included as a measure of student perceptions of the work place and personal ambitions.

#### **4.4.2 Pilot of Student Questionnaire**

Arrangements were made with the second high school in the town to trial the questionnaire, once it was compiled. This particular school was selected because of its similarity in size, range of students and curriculum. The pilot school had a history of conducting DEAR sessions but had recently changed the name from DEAR to DEAL (Drop Everything And Learn) at the beginning of 1996.

In each of the two pilot sessions, students were given a very brief outline of the research (the Aboriginal aspect was not mentioned to them). Participation was voluntary and participants were asked to answer questions honestly. Students could add any extra words they wanted to the questions or make any suggestions which would be very valuable to the project. They had approximately 10 minutes to answer. They were also

assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

The English Head teacher was thanked for her assistance. The batch of response sheets was then examined to make necessary amendments. The pilot questionnaire appeared to work well in achieving a maximum of responses. They were easy to handle and relatively free of ambiguities. The wording and layout was clear and easy to read and the circling method allowed for fast responses. Results from the pilot showed that students were keen to add individual comments to certain questions, so the master questionnaire was amended to allow for greater flexibility of responses.

#### **4.4.3 Amendments to Student Questionnaire**

There were 33 questions in the pilot student questionnaire (Appendix B1) and these was amended to 31 questions in the final student questionnaire. In the pilot questionnaire, options for some questions were limited to YES and NO. After the pilot was trialled, a further option of 'SOMETIMES' was added to several questions on the study questionnaire. This option was suggested by several students during the trial, who did not feel comfortable with the limited range of answers.

'SOMETIMES' was added to Q.6 as it more accurately reflected student answers about whether they liked to read in their spare time or not. Questions 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 and 13 remained unchanged but 'SOMETIMES' was added to questions 11 and 14. Q.15 which asked, 'What do the letters DEAR stand for?' was added, when it was noted that students seemed to have trouble with acronyms. It was a possibility that some students would not know the meaning of DEAR. This question would highlight if there was a need for regular explanations to students or if there was a lack of cultural literacy, as suggested by Willmot (1981).

As a result of the additional question, questions 15-23 on the student questionnaire were renumbered as questions 16-24. They remained

unchanged except for Q.2 which added 'SOMETIMES'. Q. 24 on the student questionnaire was excluded. An open section was added to Q 25 to allow students to fill in their own preferences for reading materials.

Questions 26, 27 and 28 were reduced from closed questions back to a single open question (Q.26) in order to compare results with questions 23 and 24. Question 29 was renumbered as Q.27 and amended to include an open question to allow for individual comments. Q.30 was reworded to allow for students to select one of three categories. Questions 31-32 were renumbered as questions 29-30 and an open section was added to each. Q. 33 was renumbered as Q. 31 but remained unchanged.

#### **4.4.4 Compilation of Teacher Questionnaire**

The teacher questionnaire (Appendix C1) was designed to assess whether staff attitudes to the DEAR program were generally positive or negative. There were 25 questions in the teacher questionnaire. As comparison with student responses was a consideration, similarity and duplication of some questions determined the format of the teacher questionnaire.

As with the student questionnaire, a single sheet was printed on both sides to allow for easy handling, distribution, collection and sorting. Teacher questionnaires were to be anonymous and the layout was similar to student questionnaires with the same font and print size. Questions 1 - 4 required personal and professional information, such as whether the teacher was a member of the executive, his/her gender, if s/he worked full-time and the name of their faculty. These questions were included to group respondents if necessary.

Questions 5 and 6 related to experience with conducting DEAR sessions and were closed. Questions 7 and 8 were about personal reading preferences. Question 7 was common to both student and teacher

questionnaires, while Question 8 included the categories Novels and Non-Fiction as opposed to Books and Comics which were included in the student questionnaire. Magazines and Newspapers were also included in the student questionnaire. This question was important for the assessment of teacher modelling. Question 9 also dealt with the concept of teacher modelling, asking what teachers brought to read in DEAR. The categories were based on the researcher's experience with observing teachers in the study school. As mail was distributed at Recess, immediately before the DEAR session, the temptation to read professional material, rather than books was great. This could impact on the concept of teachers modelling reading books for pleasure. Perez (1986) and Howard (1993) discussed the need for teachers to demonstrate their own love of reading for pleasure.

Question 10 asked if teachers liked supervising DEAR while questions 11 and 12 looked at the administrative side of DEAR, at time tabling and whether the Program should be dropped altogether. These were common questions, designed to directly compare student and teacher responses. Questions 13, 14 and 15 once again related to teacher modelling asking what teachers did in DEAR. The first two were common questions. These questions would be compared with observations to assess the extent of teacher modelling. Question 16, related to WAG.

Questions 17 and 18 dealt with the provision of books in classrooms, an important aspect of Hunt's (1970) original SSR scheme, and what happens when students did not bring their own books. These were open questions to ensure a broader range of information. They were also common questions with the student questionnaire, to allow for comparisons. Questions 19 - 21 were concerned with distractions and noise. These questions were included to determine whether the DEAR rooms were suitable and quiet enough for sustained silent reading to take place.

Questions 22 and 23 investigated whether DEAR improved

achievement in reading and interest in reading. These questions, worded slightly differently, were common to both student and teacher questionnaires, in order to compare responses. A further question followed asking teachers to elaborate. As there were too many variables involved in statistically determining whether the DEAR scheme was directly involved in improving reading achievement and interest, the perceptions of teachers and students were invaluable in assessing the benefit of the program.

The final two questions 24 and 25 allowed for opinions to be expressed about the best and worst aspects of the scheme, from a teacher's point of view. This information would be useful to the school in planning future improvements in the conduct of DEAR and rectifying any aspects which may hinder the success of the program.

The teacher questionnaire was trialled at the same time as the student questionnaires in the pilot school. After examination of responses, several amendments were made.

There were 25 questions on the pilot teacher questionnaire (Appendix C1) and these were amended to 27 questions on the final questionnaire. An extra word, 'WHEN' was added to Question 6 and an additional question (Q.7) was inserted asking 'What do the letters DEAR stand for?' This was a common question on both student and teacher questionnaires. Questions 7-10 were then renumbered as questions 8-11.

A new question (Q.12) was inserted asking about the purpose of DEAR. This was designed to ascertain whether teachers were merely following instructions or if they had an understanding of the rationale for DEAR. This would affect their personal attitudes. Questions 11-15 were renumbered as questions 12-17 but remained unchanged. Q.16, relating to WAG was excluded as it was considered irrelevant. Questions 17-18 were renumbered as questions 18-19. Questions 19 - 21 were condensed into 2

questions (Q.20-21). Q.21 was amended as an open question, to allow for a variety of responses. Questions 22 and 23 were divided and new open questions (Q.23 and Q.25) were formed with amended wording. The word 'UNSURE' was added to Q.22 and Q.24. These complement the wording of similar questions on the student questionnaire. Questions 24-25 were renumbered as questions 26-27 but remained unchanged.

As no problems had been encountered in administration of the pilot questionnaires, the way was now clear to plan for administering the student and teacher questionnaires in the study school.

#### **4.5 Administration of Study Questionnaires**

The school calendar was consulted to find a day which was free of exams and major excursions for administration of both questionnaires (Appendices B2 and C2). The Principal and Deputy Principal (Administration) were notified verbally of the date, so that other whole school activities might be avoided. A list of all teachers, who have a Roll/DEAR group, was obtained from the Deputy Principal, along with a list of the entire staff. This was used as a guide to determine the number of copies of the questionnaires that needed to be printed.

A cover sheet (Appendix E1) was then compiled to advise teachers on the procedures required in administering both questionnaires. The cover sheet requested teachers to write any absentees on the bottom of the cover sheet. It also asked teachers to explain the reason for the questionnaire to students and suggested that they fill out their own teacher questionnaires at the same time. Teachers were then asked to send a student with all of the completed sheets (including the teacher's) to the Staff Common Room and to put them in a box marked DEAR questionnaire sheets.

The researcher talked about the project to assembled staff at Recess the day before the administration date and again on the day. A package

containing questionnaires and cover sheets was personally handed to each teacher involved (or left on their desk, if they were not available). This was done the day before. Teachers without Roll/Dear groups were personally given only a copy of the Teacher questionnaire.

At the end of the day, the box containing all questionnaires was taken home and the researcher checked the Roll groups of teachers who had put Cover sheets with their questionnaires in the box. A list was drawn up of teachers, who had not put their bundles in the box. These teachers were approached the next day. A list of absentees was also compiled and slips containing the names of these students were prepared to be slipped inside their Rolls the next morning before school. Included were extra questionnaire sheets, a thank you note and further advice (Appendix E2). This was only done once.

On the second day, any further absentees, who had still not completed a questionnaire were asked to go to the Library to fill in their sheets, supervised by the researcher. This process continued for a week until all listed absentees had been asked to complete questionnaires and the researcher was assured that most students, whose names were on the cover sheets, had been included in the survey.

The questionnaires were then sorted into Year groups, Male/Female, Aboriginal and NESB. The Aboriginal and NESB sheets were further sorted into Year groups and Male/Female. The Aboriginal Education Assistant was asked for a list of Aboriginal students in the school and their birthdates. These were then matched against the bundle of questionnaires marked Aboriginal, to ensure that all Aboriginal students in the school had filled in a sheet. Any students, who had been missed, were asked to fill in another questionnaire. This was done at the same time as the other absentees, so that the Aboriginal students would not feel that they were being singled out.



At the end of the survey, the staff was thanked verbally for their assistance. Questionnaires were grouped and the process of recording responses began.

#### 4.6 Recording of Questionnaire Data

A large spreadsheet was set up, using Claris Works 2 on a Macintosh Power Computer. Questionnaire sheets were numbered and categories were entered as headers on columns. Categories used were:

- \* Teacher: Male / Female
- \* Student: Year Group  
Male / Female  
Aboriginal / Non-Aboriginal / NESB
- \* Closed question options (Yes/No/Sometimes)

Although teachers were asked to indicate specific professional information about themselves the sample sizes proved too small to form any useful conclusions. The aim was to compare teacher with student responses, so the teacher data remained undivided into categories.

Response sheets were numbered and data from each sheet were coded numerically and entered within appropriate columns. Automatic addition of responses in each column on summary lines was possible with this method of recording responses. The preliminary data sheets have not been included in this thesis as it was felt that summary sheets would be more useful. When all the data were entered, summary spreadsheets (Appendix F) were organised to allow for analysis of results.

A second spreadsheet was set up to enter comments given in open questions. Similar categories were used, but response data were arranged vertically and multiples of the same answer were added mechanically by the researcher. Some grouping of responses was necessary here, even though

the actual wording of responses was slightly different and a summary spreadsheet (Appendix G) was prepared.

Descriptive statistics were used on summary spreadsheets to obtain percentages and ranges. These provided uniformity and allowed for comparisons to be made as well as the graphing of results. Data from student questionnaires were subjected to Chi square analysis (Appendix H), after coding and importation of data into a Statview document, to ascertain whether there was a significant statistical relationship between the students' questionnaire responses and their ethnicity or gender.

Erikson & Nosanchuk (1997, 247-253) state that Chi Square 'is a simple and popular way to work with two variables both of which are categorical'. The Chi Square test is 'non-directional' and tests for any difference from a "no relationship" pattern. If there is a significant difference from the expected pattern of responses, Chi Square does not explain that difference. It merely provides an indicator that there is some significance.

The raw data was coded and Contingency Table analysis was done using x and y factors on specific variables. The x factor was used for ethnicity in the first analysis and for gender in the second analysis. The y factor was used for each closed question on the student questionnaire. For example, Q.6 (relating to reading enjoyment) was coded numerically according to the 3 responses, YES, NO and SOMETIMES. This variable was then selected for the y factor. The x factor was applied to the ethnicity variable (ABORIGINAL and NON-ABORIGINAL).

When both variables were compared in a Contingency Table to determine if there was a relationship between ethnicity and reading enjoyment, a Chi Square value was determined. This showed if there was any significant difference between the observed frequency of result and the expected values. Figure 4.4 provides a statistical summary of the

relationship between ethnicity (Abor.) and reading enjoyment (Q.6).

Table 4.4 Statistical summary showing Chi Square values for Q.6 by ethnicity

Coded Chi-Square X1: Abor Y1: Q6

Summary Statistics		
DF:		3
Total Chi-Square:	8.327	p = .0397
G Statistic:		*
Contingency Coefficient:	.099	
Cramer's V:	.1	

The probability for this result is shown as  $p = .0397$ . If the level of significance for Chi Square in this study is set at  $p = <.05$  the result for question 6 indicates that there is a significant difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in their enjoyment of reading. Other closed questions in the student questionnaire were analysed in a similar manner. These analyses were used to support graph data and both methods of analysis were used to explain and compare students' responses.

An additional spreadsheet (Appendix I) summarising teacher responses was also drawn up using a vertical arrangement for responses and two columns, one for raw scores and one for percentages for each responses. Quantitative data on observation sheets were also recorded on a spreadsheet (Appendix J) and percentages calculated.

#### 4.7 Observation of DEAR in the Study School

In Chapter 2, an outline of the original guidelines for DEAR was presented. This was used to make a comparison between guidelines and current practice, during 17 observations held in DEAR classes over a four week period. The purpose of the observations was to answer the research question stated in Chapter 1

**Does current practice in the study school fulfil the initial aims**

**of the Program documented in the literature and school policy documents?**

In order to determine current practice in the study school, the researcher requested permission from the Principal to observe randomly selected DEAR groups over a period of four weeks (two cycles) during Term 2. The researcher also approached the Deputy Principal (Administration) for a copy of the list of DEAR teachers. This sheet was cut up into name strips which were then placed into a container and shuffled.

Individual names were drawn at random and noted onto observation Record Sheets (Appendix D), together with the number of each teacher's classroom. Headings on the record sheets required a count of the number of students present, absent or late, as well as any unexplained absentees. Such data would indicate deliberate non-attendances and would demonstrate whether or not the school had an effective attendance monitoring method. The second set of measurements required the researcher to note the number of students with a book or other reading material and the number who came unprepared. These figures were compared with student data in questions 19 and 20 which asked if students always brought something to read and what they brought. The researcher noted the time taken before everyone was quiet, how many students were writing, any noises, either inside or outside the room and whether the teacher was reading a book. This information was matched with data from teacher questionnaire sheets

The researcher approached teachers personally for permission, after roll-call, entered each classroom early and sat towards the back with a magazine. No explanation was given to students to avoid influencing behaviour. The researcher made discreet notes.

During the course of the observations, the researcher tended to blend

in with the student body as an observer, so that a number of students were not aware of the researcher's presence. Only two students approached the researcher afterwards and asked why the researcher was in the room. It is possible however, that the mere presence of the researcher in the room may have influenced the behaviour of both teachers and students.

#### **4.8 Reliability and Validity**

LeCompte & Goetz (1982) state that 'the value of scientific research is partially dependent on the ability of individual researchers to demonstrate the credibility of their findings'. This issue of credibility, leading to authenticity of results, when applied to scientific research is known as reliability and validity. In qualitative or non-experimental research, the reliability and validity of a research project may be difficult to ensure due to the large number of uncontrolled variables. This research project used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

In this study, the researcher has been aware at every stage of reliability and validity issues. Leedy (1993, 42) states: 'Reliability deals with accuracy'...'How accurate is the instrument that is used in making the measurement?' Validity on the other hand is 'concerned with the soundness, the effectiveness of the measuring instrument'. The survey design using questionnaires complemented by observations ensures that some measure of cross-checking and triangulation takes place. The large sample size, the fractional number of nil responses, the detailed planning and organisation of administration and collection, the variety, consistency and clarity of the questionnaires, as well as trialling a pilot beforehand, all contribute to maximum reliability and validity in this project.

While some validity was necessarily lost during observations, due to the presence of the researcher in the DEAR classrooms, this was not considered great enough by the researcher to negate results. The small number of students in the Aboriginal sub-group, however, may be

problematic. A comparison using descriptive statistics, such as percentages, are used as a guide only. A larger study extending into more schools would need to be undertaken to validate results.

Because of the careful documentation of procedures, the methods of data collection and analysis in this study can be replicated in schools which have a history of conducting DEAR programs.

#### **4.9 Ethical Considerations**

The study raised several ethical questions. Firstly, the confidentiality of responses needed to be maintained so that students and teachers would not feel inhibited in giving their responses towards the DEAR program. For this reason, no names were included on response sheets. Every step of the procedure was taken with the informed consent of teachers. Although written consent for participation in the study was not requested of parents, they were informed through the school newsletter of the impending project. There were no instances of parents objecting to the study. Students were asked informally by teachers to complete questionnaires at the start of the survey session. Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmais (1992) state that informed consent is not absolutely necessary in studies where no danger or risk is involved. In the school situation, it is the Principal's role, under Duty of Care provisions, to assess whether a project of this type is invasive or not and to give consent on behalf of the student body.

In the same way, the ASSPA committee in the school takes responsibility for Aboriginal students. Hitchcock & Hughes (1988) state that the circumstances of the study should determine the type of consent required and that use of a pilot study could uncover any problems which were likely to occur. A pilot study was used in this project and the researcher found that the students in the pilot groups were very keen to fill in the questionnaires and to be given the opportunity to voice their opinions.

A letter was sent to the Principal in order to obtain formal consent to the study and to seek advice on the best way to conduct the study with the least amount of disruption. The Principal informed the Executive at a weekly meeting and spoke to staff at a scheduled staff meeting. The researcher also spoke to staff informally at Recess on the day before the questionnaires were administered, to advise them of the coming event and then again on the same day. A formal letter was given to the ASSPA Committee, of which the Aboriginal Education Assistant was a member, as well as the Head of Department. The letter asked for their support. The AEA was also approached personally with a request for assistance in compiling student lists with birthdates. The Department of School Education did not need to give formal consent because the research was conducted in one school only.

Strict confidentiality was maintained at all times in the observation sessions. The observation sheets with teachers names were held privately, where they could not be accessed by other members of staff. They were not shown to the Principal, Deputy or English Head teacher during discussions of problems observed. Similarly, names of teachers were never divulged, nor were the names of students, who were disciplined during the observation sessions. The researcher assured teachers beforehand of impartiality and confidentiality, so that they would not feel uncomfortable in having another member of staff in the room.

The observations were held without incident and without any complaints from staff or students. A report of the observations has been made available to the school executive and any member of staff interested in the project. Throughout the project, the researcher worked closely with the AEA and the Deputy (Curriculum) to keep them informed of progress and to offer any suggestions to improve the DEAR scheme. Many of these suggestions were received gratefully and adopted.

The Research section of the University was also informed of the

project and copies of letters and questionnaires were lodged with the Research officer and ethical clearance was obtained.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

The Methodology employed in this research project has followed traditional methods employed by other social-science researchers. The type of study and the sample involved determined the methods which would lead to the most valid and meaningful results. Every care was taken to ensure full co-operation of participants and authorities involved and ethical considerations were foremost. The questionnaires were set out in a clear, easy to follow style which ensured a high level of responses and added to the reliability of the project.

Each question was constructed methodically and with a clear purpose, so that the data would be relevant and add to our body of knowledge about adolescent students and their attitudes to reading. Anonymity was maintained to ensure truthful responses, a pilot was conducted to avoid ambiguities, teachers were surveyed to aid in triangulation and observations were recorded to add depth and validity to the research data.

The next chapter deals with an analysis of the data collected and any significant findings which may have emerged as a result of this research project.