Introduction

In 2006, The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Report, ‘Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008’, pointed out that Indigenous students will make up increasingly large numbers of the student population over the next ten years. Australia’s Indigenous population is young: 40% of the Indigenous population is under the age of 15 years compared with 20% of the non-Indigenous population and it is growing at twice the annual rate projected for the rest of the population. In 2003, Indigenous students represented almost 4% of total school enrolments across Australia (p.3.) Most of these students will continue to be educated in government schools. Furthermore, it is well known that inequalities exist in Indigenous education outcomes when compared to non-Indigenous groups. Factors which influence this can be summarized as – lack of access to preschool, lack of academic achievement in literacy and numeracy – 20% below the national average considered to be due to English being a second language, low attendance, early school leaving which reduces post-compulsory school options, low numbers of Indigenous students completing Year 12- 39.5% compared to non-Indigenous -76.8% in 2004, and lower levels of participation in Certificate 111 and above of the Australian Qualification Framework, 54.7% compared to 79.5%. The report provides
recommendations for a national effort and includes, *engaging* Indigenous children and young people in learning, providing quality teaching which includes educational programs that respect and value Indigenous culture and languages and ensuring schools deliver personalized learning to all Indigenous students.

Keeping these recommendations in mind, this article focuses on a primary school where Indigenous children report that they are well supported and enjoy learning. This first section reports on previous research. The second outlines this research project and finally I discuss the findings of the research.

**Aboriginal students’ engagement with school**

In reviewing literature on Aboriginal student’s engagement with schooling, a positive relationship with the teacher was seen as an essential factor in encouraging self –identity for students. A motivational factor for Indigenous students toward working hard at school is the respect they have for the teacher. (Partington et al., 1997; Fanshawe, 1999; Harslett et al., 1999; Godfrey et al, 1999; Godfrey et al, 2000; Herbert, 2000; MCEETYA, 2000, Harrison, 2004, McDonald, 2004; McRae et al, 2005; MCEETYA, 2006.) A study of 471 Aboriginal students in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools across Australia by Godfrey et al, 2000, used student surveys based on 56 questions, using a Likert scale to collect data. This data was analysed for frequencies, means and standard deviations and concluded that Aboriginal students have a positive attitude to their schools and education.

Teachers need to show respect for students, demonstrate an acceptance and valuing of their individuality and culture, convey sensitivity, listen intently, are warm, encouraging and helpful, interact positively with
Aboriginal students and provide clear explanations. This positive relationship between teachers and students is critical in promoting a positive self-identity and creating a supportive and empowering environment for learning. (Colman-Dimon, 2000; Purdie, et al, 2000; Nakata, 2003; McDonald, 2004.) ‘If you are obeyed and respected by Aboriginal students it is not because of your role as a teacher but because the children consider you worthy of respect.” (Christie, 1987, cited in Harrison, 2004a. p. 8) Teaching methods need to be interesting and stimulating to maintain student interest.(Harslett et al., 1998c; Godfrey et al, 2000). In an epic study by Malin, 1989 for her doctoral thesis, she reports in 1994 of 21 hours of videotaped classroom observation of Aboriginal students in urban schools. Malin constructs an understanding of what is happening in the classroom, based on her knowledge of Aboriginal learning at home. The tension which exists between each context and the behaviours which are valued at home and school make cultural knowledge for preservice teachers an important part of their teacher education program. Previous studies have used similar methods to those used in this study. Whilst Malin and others have contributed significantly to our understandings about Aboriginal students’ engagement with schooling there is still an absence of student voice in the data presented in their research. Many of the studies were conducted nearly ten years ago and it is time to reflect on whether any progress has been made in urban schools and classrooms, for supporting Aboriginal students in their learning.

Aboriginal students do not respect teachers who rely on authoritarian and aggressive teaching and discipline methods. These approaches do not promote successful learning and student engagement.(Bourke et al, 2000;
Transmission based models of teaching which reflect authoritarian practices that position the teacher as the holder of the knowledge disempowers Indigenous students (Harrison, 2004a). Indigenous students are often incorrectly categorized as underachievers. This occurs due to lack of understanding on the part of the teacher, of Aboriginal language and culture, transience, and Aboriginal students' failure to meet the expectations of educational mainstream systems. Teachers and schools often have low expectations of the capabilities of Aboriginal students, and are readily accepting of their academic failure. (Partington et al., 1997; Fanshawe, 1999; Godfrey et al., 1999; Herbert, 2000; MCEETYA, 2000b; MCEETYA, 2001b; McRae, et al, 2005; Sarra, 2006).

"If the staff embraced a culture and society of dismal failure, then this was what we were destined to achieve." (Sarra, 2006, p.188)

The use of assimilation practices and lack of recognition and support of Indigenous pedagogy are barriers to school engagement for Aboriginal students. Assimilation of Indigenous students into mainstream education which ignores their cultural identity means that the school system and curriculum lacks relevance for Indigenous students. The lack of recognition of their languages, traditions, and Indigenous identity leads to alienation. (Partington et al., 1997; Harslett et al, 1998; Harslett, 1999; Bourke et al, 2000; Colman-Dimon, 2000; Education Qld, 2000; Herbert, 2000; MCEETYA, 2000(b); Partington et al 2000; MCEETYA 2001(a); Malin & Maidment, 2003; McDonald, 2004; MCEETYA, 2006). Teachers often have limited knowledge of Indigenous language and traditions which lead to conflict, misinterpretation of
student behaviour, learning behaviour and learning ability, and insensitivity to students’ needs. (Partington et al 1997; Bourke et al, 2000; Education Qld, 2000; Hogan, 2000; MCEETYA, 2000(b); Reynolds, 2005; Simpson & Clancy, 2005). Mainstream education in Australia is still regarded by some Aboriginal people as an “instrument of assimilation; children are there to be changed; to be weaned away from the loyalties that have made them Aboriginal”. (Coombes, 1994, cited in Reynolds, 2005)

Racism and discrimination in schools (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Partington et al, 1997; Harslett et al, 1998; Godfrey et al, 1999; Harslett, et al, 1999; Bourke et al, 2000; Colman-Dimon, 2000; Education Qld, 2000; Hogan, 2000; Partington et al 2000; Purdie et al, 2000; Howard, 2002; Malin & Maidment, 2003; McInerney, 2003; McDonald, 2004; McRae, 2005; Reynolds, 2005; Sarra, 2006) is well described over a long period of time, as being a significant barrier to the development of supportive classroom and school environments. If these issues can be overcome by schools then relationships can be developed with staff and other students. This leads to engagement with learning and connection with the school. The school environment should “nurture a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today’s society” (Sarra, 2006, p.190).

**Methodology**

This study was conducted in 2005 in a small metropolitan primary school in South Australia. Data was collected from Indigenous students using a survey and an interview. Both were conducted by an Indigenous Research Assistant. Permission to work with the students was sought from the school, University Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Children’s Services.
(DECS). In total 25 Indigenous students returned permission letters which allowed them to participate in the research project. Twenty-four completed the survey and 22 completed most or all of the interview questions. The students spanned the R-7 range. Four students were in Reception, two in Year 1, one in Year 3, eight in Year 4/5 classes, and seven in Year 6/7 classes.

The child survey and interview used in this project were developed by Fredrick et al. (2003) based on the literature of measures of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, used for a study of children’s engagement in inner city schools in the United States- Chicago, Milwaukee and Detroit. The goal of her study was to, ‘examine school and classroom factors that influence engagement in the elementary school.’ Fredrick and her colleagues did an extensive study and interviewed teachers about their judgment of students’ progress. The study I conducted was much smaller, using Aboriginal students in one metropolitan primary school in South Australia. Staff were not invited to give their perceptions of the Aboriginal students as learners, or to discuss their classroom practices. This research listens to the perceptions of the students about the learning environment, the curriculum and the teachers’ attitudes toward them as learners.

**Interview data**

I am using data gathered during interviews conducted with the Aboriginal students for this paper. Responses to the interview questions were coded using NVIVO 7. There were 75 questions to be answered during the interview and the students were able to stop at any time for a break. Several interviews were resumed a number of days later. Questions used for the interviews were based on Fredrick’s (2003) work. Questions are arranged in 7 sections. These
What makes a supportive school?

It is not only the classroom that must be supportive of learners and learning, but the whole school culture and ethos must reflect this, from the Groundsperson to the Principal. In listening to the Aboriginal students in this school, it is possible to reflect on their perceptions of how well the school are achieving the criteria of a supportive school as described in earlier studies. (Colman-Dimon, 2000; Purdie, et al; Fanshawe, 1999; Hayes,et al, 2006) . It is useful to break down the elements of the schooling experience to examine the responses given by indigenous students when asked to comment on their perceptions of all of these elements during an interview.

Positive and respectful relationships

Relationships which exist between students and other members of the school community, especially within the classroom have been consistently identified as having a significant impact on student learning outcomes. (Malin, 1989; Fanshawe,1999; Hayes, 2006). This is true for all students. Indigenous students in this study again confirmed this. They described their classroom as supportive if they felt valued for their Aboriginality by both the teacher and the other students, and therefore were accepted by other class members and had friends within the classroom. When asked to talk about their teacher, students said, ‘She looks after people, makes sure that they’re OK. She’s a teacher you would like.’ Many used terms like ‘nice,’ and a few said their teacher was happy. One said, ‘Well, she’s not very tall, but not short, she’s got very
very short hair, blonde hair and blue eyes, nice, big voice, fun, happy.’ This student has clearly made very careful observations of the teacher to be able to describe not only her physical appearance but some of her behavioural characteristics. When asked whether they thought the teacher cared about them, most students said that this was evident. Reasons given were that the students knew the teachers wanted them to be successful in their learning and were prepared to help them with this. They said, ‘Because she helps out a lot and if you’re in trouble with your work or something, she explains it to you and ‘She’s there for you, like when you need help’ and another, ‘She’s like, she cares what you do. Because some teachers just sit there. Like she looks at your work often and checks it and makes sure and if you’re not she talks to you and like helps you with it.’ One student noted that even though he had kept asking and asking, the teacher didn’t get frustrated with him. ‘They help you, even if they don’t have the time and they don’t get mad at you if you ask something.’ Other students felt they could talk to their teacher and said they knew the teacher would never hurt them. This attitude was contrasted with comments about previous schools and experiences of teachers yelling and being angry. A number of the students had been to one or more schools previously. Some made positive comments about these experiences, but most were happy to be in their current class and school.

Teachers who showed confidence in their Indigenous students’ ability were appreciated greatly by them. Being able to make mistakes as a learner was something the Indigenous student’s understood to be okay in a supportive classroom. One student said, ‘It’s OK because it’s just the first thing that I’ve done and like I’ve never done it before and if I make a mistake, I just ask, “Can
you please help me, can you help me with this thing " and she says, “Yeah. I'll help you, I'll write it down for you in a way that you understand and then you could do it all yourself because I know you can do it.” And yeah I did it, it was good.’ Understanding that it is important to ask for help and take risks as a learner in order to be successful was well understood by the students in this school. They said, ‘You might not get it right the first time, but you keep trying,’ and, ‘Its OK to make mistakes because we’re only learning.’ Having an understanding and sensitivity regarding the diverse learning needs of students was well understood by many of these Indigenous students' teachers. When asked, ‘How does your teacher help you with your work?’ students were able to describe this. One said, ‘Like talks it out more understandly (sic) Just so you understand it better, cause yeah. And shows you diagrams and yeah, how to do it differently.’ Another said, ‘She explains it step by step and she writes stuff on the blackboard or she calls us over to her desk and she does the first couple for us and explains it to us.’ Other examples were given which included, working individually with students and giving more assistance to the whole class. It has been established in earlier work that rewards in the classroom for good behaviour and academic achievement (McInerney, 2003; McRae, et al, 2005) directly influence indigenous student’s learning outcomes.

The attitude of a teacher toward their students as Aboriginal people, including an interest in their culture and history were seen by the Indigenous students as an important part of the relationship building process. Understanding, incorporating and respecting the cultural practices, values and perspectives of Indigenous students, supporting their individual learning styles and their Aboriginal identity enhances a positive school/teacher/student relationship.
which leads to improved academic outcomes. (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Hughes & More, 1997; Partington et al, 1997; Nakata, 2003) In the interview students were asked to say how their teachers showed that they valued them as an Aboriginal person. Many of the students could give examples of how their teachers did this. One said, ‘She participates in the Aboriginal stuff that we do with Alana (Aboriginal Education Worker) and she lets the whole class do Aboriginal paintings and she does activities about it and she tells stories. She finds books in the library about stories about Aboriginals.’ Another student said, ‘They like us, just because we’re different doesn’t mean they have to act different around us but if one of us is different to anybody in the class, then she would make us welcome because we feel safer with the teacher if we know the teacher very well.’

Stability of teachers in schools is a critical factor for Indigenous students as they feel much safer in schools where they know the teachers well. A number of students were aware that the teachers in the school gave Aboriginal students respect, and one said, ‘This is a good place for Aboriginal kids’. This theme was supported by several other students who commented, ‘A lot of the Aboriginal kids here have got friends, there’s no racism here. So no one gets called black or white.’ The Aboriginal student who said, ‘Yep, because it should be an Aboriginal school’, was very satisfied with the learning experience she was receiving at the school. Other comments from students were that everyone was treated fairly and they were not treated differently to other students in the school. The work of Fanshawe (1999) has indicated that teacher qualities are important to Indigenous students. He concludes in his research that Indigenous students’ educational outcomes
were better when teachers were friendly, supportive and warm, in contrast to
cold, distant and aloof, which has been the experience of the students in this
school.

In this school, there is a strong commitment by staff to celebrate
success in learning. Being rewarded for success in a learning activity was
done at school assemblies but also through encouragement in the classroom.
Students in the lower year levels were given stickers as rewards for good
work and one said, ‘She tells me that it’s good and sometimes I get a sticker or
get to go show another class.’ Other rewards were noted. ‘Sometimes when
we do handwriting she sends me down to the Principal to show my work.’ Most
students said that the teacher usually told them that their work was good,
wrote it on their book or told the whole class.

One older student was able to enjoy his teacher’s humour when he
said, ‘We did the cloze activities and I go 20/20 and she said I did really poorly
and I knew she was lying.’ His relationship with the teacher was enhanced by
being able to share her teasing and making fun, as his confidence was high,
and she was able to support this through the use of humour. The use of
humour in the classroom is important to Aboriginal learning. This has been
demonstrated in a number of studies. (Godfrey et al, 1999; Bourke et al, 2000;
Godfrey et al, 2000; Harslett, 2000; Herbert, 2000; Harrison, 2004b;
McDonald, 2004). The sense of fun that Aboriginal students value was evident
in this statement, ‘Yesterday was Book Week and she (teacher) dressed up as
a witch from a book and everyone in the class was scared of her, they didn’t
know who she was because she was dressed up as a witch. She makes it
enjoyable and stuff. She always puts you in a good mood.’
Classroom

When describing the indigenous student’s perceptions of what makes a supportive classroom, it is useful to reflect this against what the current literature says. A recent Australian research project conducted in Queensland schools, examining elements of productive pedagogies (Hayes et al., 2006, p.61-62), identified supportive classroom environments as those which showed;

- Engagement
- Student self-regulation
- Student direction of activities
- Social support
- Explicit criteria

Indigenous students in the SA study described their classrooms as supportive of their learning in a number of ways. Many of their responses can be aligned with the categories described by Hayes et al. When describing their classrooms Indigenous students talked about the physical aspects, the artwork that was put onto the walls and their relationships with other students. ‘Most of the kids are helpful and they are nice and there’s always help when you need it,’ one said. Another talked of swapping classes as she was in a class with people that she didn’t like. With regard to the structure of the learning activities, students were asked whether in their classroom they had any choice in their learning activities. Many of the younger students appeared to have more opportunities to make choices about learning tasks. Several students said that during spelling lessons they were able to select
activities that they wanted to do. One student spoke of feeling proud of themself when choosing an activity to do as, ‘they knew they could do it and that the teacher would be helping if they made a mistake.’ One student said their teacher let them choose activities most of the time and this made them feel better because, ‘you know how to do stuff,’ and another said, ‘it was fun to do things you had chosen to do.’

Regulation of behaviour by students was generally managed by the teacher. Use of a chart where students’ behaviour was monitored was consistently described as the way teachers monitored adherence to classroom rules. The students could articulate their classroom rules and understood why rules were used. One student stated, ‘They didn’t have a chart because the students all behaved as their teacher was tough,’ and consequently she didn’t need to use this method of regulating behaviour. A number of students talked about how they had broken the class rules in the past, with several stating that other students broke the rules, but not them. Transgressions were mainly for not putting your hand up to speak, rocking in your chair and leaving the classroom without permission. The Indigenous students accepted the rules and were particularly supportive of the manner in which the teachers were consistent in applying consequences. This was most evident in relation to complaints about bullying and harassment.

**Curriculum- challenging, but fun**

One student when discussing their teacher noted, ‘She’s good. She does hard work but fun, interesting and she listens.’ This attitude regarding the challenging nature of the schoolwork was mentioned in a positive way a number of times by the Indigenous students, along with wanting their learning to be relevant to their future. A student said about their class, ‘It’s got good
work, like it’s interesting, because some teachers just do boring work and just maths and sums. And you do interesting stuff, like we do text books and that and learn different stuff for the future.’ Malin (1989) in her study noted that the culturally aware teacher expected higher academic success from the Indigenous students and spoke to these students in a more positive manner. This aspect is also supported in the productive pedagogies work of Hayes et al (2006, p.90) where they advocate that all students should be given tasks that require them to demonstrate high-quality academic outcomes as a form of social justice, based on the assumption that all students have the right to the equitable distribution of educational resources and a right to experience quality teaching.

The Indigenous students were diverse in their choice of favourite curriculum areas. Many enjoyed Physical Education and fitness activities while others preferred art, science and technology, health-book and maths. Most were very happy to participate in the Boys Group and Girls Group activities which were lessons provided by the Aboriginal Education Worker (Alana), on a weekly basis. As you would expect there was a great amount of variation between individual students and the level of difficulty they experienced with their school work. When asked whether they were bored in class, a small number of students said they were bored when they did their least favourite subject, or when they finished their work and had nothing to do. The majority of students said they were not bored at school.

**School ethos and environment**

When asked to talk about their school, the Indigenous students frequently responded that school was fun. Schoolwork was discussed on six occasions with comments about particular subjects, ‘I don’t like recorder and spelling sometimes,’ from a female Yr 4/5 student. Another female Yr6/7 student said
that the schoolwork was hard, while another female Yr4/5 student said the schoolwork wasn’t really hard. ‘School is cool’ said a male Yr6/7 student, ‘there are good subjects’ and one female Y4/5 student listed a number of Special Days which she enjoyed –Discos, Casual Day, Wheels Day and Sports Day. One student mentioned ‘nice teachers’ and two commented that it was better than other schools they had attended, where they had been teased and called names. Other comments were that it was safe. Friendship was also mentioned twice. One female Yr6/7 student said she had friendship problems and another talked about having lots of friends.

The study by Hayes et al (2006) conducted in Queensland confirmed that a number of factors enhance student learning in schools. Principally, supportive school environments for students were those which had classrooms where students were engaged in their learning, student direction of activities was encouraged and were socially supportive. This was the case for all students not just those who were Indigenous.

When asked about whether they liked coming to school, responses to this question were overwhelmingly positive with 15 saying yes, 5 said no, one said sometimes and 1 was unsure. Reasons given were relationships with friends, meeting new people and feeling welcome when you are new to the school, having fun and learning. Specifically learning to write, read, do maths, spelling, Art and using the computer were mentioned along with one female Yr1 student who said she enjoyed subjects where she learned about different people and different countries. Learning was seen as important for employment – to get a good job and earn lots of money and a female Yr4/5 student said, ‘so that you could go to university and have a good life’. One
student said PE was why they liked coming to school and one said playing with pets in the classroom and playing on the equipment.

When asked, what they like most about school overwhelmingly the response to this question was to be with their friends and teachers. When asked how they felt about themselves at school the most frequent response was ‘proud’. One student went on to say that they were proud of their achievements at school as they had been able to do many more things than they believed they could. Another three students said they felt good about themselves at school and happy, and that they had friends. Two students said they had met people and made friends and this made them feel good about themselves at school. One felt they were lucky to come to this school. Several students discussed their feelings in relation to their performance in learning areas. One female Yr 4/5 student said, ‘In Art I’m pretty good but in writing stuff, I don’t really get it finished on time, even though everybody else does.’ A male Reception student said, ‘Sometimes nervous when I don’t get my work done and sometimes happy.’ A female Yr1 student said, ‘A bit fun, a bit sad’. Similar feelings were expressed by a female Yr6/7 student who said, ‘When I’m at work I feel like if I complete something that’s supposed to be completed I feel happy but if I don’t I feel sad.’ Another male Yr 6/7 student said, ‘Cool – like safe.’

The things that made these Indigenous students feel good about themselves produced a variety of responses. Three students said they felt good when the teacher gave them praise after finishing their work. Another mentioned getting an ‘A’ for a project in the previous year and feeling good when he asks for help, which is not often. Other students described feeling
good when they were with the school pets, drawing and making friends, doing PE and Spelling, because they were popular at school, had mates and played sport. One female Reception student talked at length about the playground and the flowers in the yard which made her feel good.

**This should be an Aboriginal school**

From the interview responses given by these 22 young Indigenous students it is evident that the Aboriginal students at this school feel positive about their school and believe they have a supportive school environment. It isn’t perfect, there are areas for improvement, but from listening to the voices of the Indigenous students they are feeling positive about themselves, their learning, their school and their teachers. These are not the voices of oppressed students working in classrooms with teachers who hold deficit views of Indigenous learners. When a female Yr 4/5 student says, ‘This should be an Aboriginal school’ it signals that there are many positive practices occurring in this school. The gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is not considered ‘normal’ in this school context. These Aboriginal students have high expectations of themselves and believe that their teachers do also. The area of Indigenous education is addressed in a comprehensive way in many of the classrooms. This school appears to have incorporated the elements described and recommended throughout the many studies conducted into what influences successful outcomes for Aboriginal students during schooling. The critical issue of respect, understanding and acceptance of cultural difference, allied with teacher dispositions for learning more about cultural practices, appears to be a strong indicator for successful teaching and learning with Indigenous students in an urban school.
References


