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**PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION IN CLASSROOM  
LEARNING: A STUDY OF ABORIGINAL GIRLS FROM A  
BUSH SETTING**

**Learning ESL in A Non-Aboriginal Urban Secondary School**

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**1. Introduction**

The four Aboriginal female students in this study were from Elcho Island, Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory where they lived a traditional lifestyle. Part of this research study included a trip to Galiwinku, Bunthala and Gawa to compare and contrast the Aboriginal homeland community with the urban learning environment.

Elcho Island is a remote Aboriginal community with a population of about 800, mainly Aboriginal people who live a traditional style of life. Balanda, or white European, people require a special permit to enter this community in Arnhem Land. The purpose for this visit must be stated on an application before the actual visit takes place. This application must then be approved by clan elders before the visit is allowed and the permit issued.

English is spoken as a foreign language here. The main Aboriginal dialect is Djambarrpuyngu although several of the girls also spoke other Yolngumata, or Aboriginal languages, such as Djangu which is the dialect of the Warramiri clan. The children seem to pick up English through cultural interface. English is spoken in some interchanges with the Balanda people such as missionaries, the MAF pilots and their families and business contractors who come onto the island to do various jobs. Some English is also learned through popular culture such as television, music and videos, however,

Yolngumata is the main language spoken. Tribal elders still make decisions, everyone shares and looks after each other and the main source of food is from hunting. The senior girls were the first from their clan to graduate from a mainland Australian high school.

The senior girls were 19 years old and Year 12 students. They had been studying at the college for four years and been breaking new ground in terms of their tradition. They had also been the leaders of the junior girls who were in Year 9. One of these junior girls enrolled in 1994 and was repeating Year 9 because of her literacy and numeracy level. She was 18 years old. The other junior student was new in 1995 and slightly younger at 15 years of age. She also had a stronger literacy and numeracy background as she had completed the Foundation Studies program in the Northern Territory.

The study documents much-needed data on the participation patterns and learning of Aboriginal learners in a non-Aboriginal urban school setting. This will assist ESL and mainstream teachers to meet the needs of these learners in such contexts. This information provides documentation of the experiences that facilitate success in learning English for Aboriginal learners in this non-Aboriginal urban school setting. The study could therefore result in a better understanding of the participation patterns of Aboriginal learners in non-Aboriginal urban school settings, and of the cultural and language factors involved.

The study will also provide a preliminary data and methodology base for further investigations into the applicability of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales to the ESL learning of Aboriginal learners in this context. This data collected here may inform later investigations in this area.

### **1.1 Methodology**

The methodology most appropriate for this ethnographic case study was chosen to be diary studies based on close observations on how the traditional Aboriginal students participate, learn and the methods that constitute success for them in a non-Aboriginal urban school environment. The observations were written daily by the principal researcher. Some longer entries were made at the end of each week if significant or unusual events, outcomes and/or interactions had taken place. Diary studies were kept from June through November in 1995.

The observations were mainly done during English as a Second Language classtime, ATAS (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ESL Assistance Scheme) DEET tutoring time and during general school activities. Some video tapes were made of the senior students working in selected mainstream classes, all four students on excursions and a general interview session with all the girls. Mainstream teachers were also interviewed and samples of work assignments collected.

The methodology also entailed a visit to the homeland community on Elcho Island (see Map 1) and several outstations (see Map 2). This visit provided first hand observations, knowledge and experience of the traditional Aboriginal community lifestyle and the differences to the Balanda urban school setting where the girls were learning. The differences in appropriate patterns of participation were also noted.

### **1.2 Background of the Students**

The visit to Galiwinku, Elcho Island provided first-hand knowledge and experience of a very different world. All of these students were products of Elcho Island's outstation schools of the bush, Bunthala and Gawa. These are remote area schools with few, if any, resources and some without power or telephone. Everything required must be taken there, like food, flour, tea, coffee, sugar and so forth. Main food

sources must be hunted and cooked over fire. There is running tap water and a kind of outhouse toilet. Here, all ages of students learn together from primary to upper secondary teenagers.

There were about 18 students at Gawa outstation. This outstation was 2 hours away from the main settlement of Galiwinku over rough, ungraded track. It is on the far northern end of the island overlooking the Gulf of Carpentaria and some uninhabited homeland islands. Some schooling is done in English, however the majority of lessons are in the native Yolngumata Aboriginal dialect.

The outstation school of the bush begins in the morning after a breakfast of damper, tea and porridge although someone must start the fire first. This usually happens just after sunrise. After breakfast, someone rings the school bell and everyone gathers on the verandah of the small school. The young primary students go to one end of the verandah, the young teenagers go to the other side of the verandah and the older boys stay separated in one of the two classrooms. There is one community teacher and another assistant community teacher who also had the job of starting the campfire and making the damper.

School finishes just before lunch. Generally there is a theme which relates to the Arnhem Land calendar and a particular food source for that time of year. During my visit, it was dhuwar goku, or wild bee's honey. After some explanation, vocabulary and discussion, everyone went hunting in the traditional style. In the midst of thick bush, a wild honey tree was discovered. Some advice was given to look for the sheen of the bee's wings in the sunlight. This was an ineffective technique for the untrained eye, especially when the correct tree was not even discernable.

Excursions are often to the mangroves, where mangrove worms, mudcrabs and shellfish are collected mostly by the females. The boys go to the ocean and fish, spear stingray or collect oysters and crayfish. Depending on the season, other natural and traditional food sources

are sought such as wild honey, magpie geese, turtles, turtle eggs, bush fruits or root crops.

Some students go on to Shepherdson College in the main settlement of Galiwinku on Elcho Island. This is the only standard school on the island and was begun by the missionaries some years ago. Most Aboriginal students attend this school and are taught by Balanda, or white European, teachers and Yolngu, or Aboriginal teachers and assistant teachers. The Balanda teachers are generally young, inexperienced teachers. There is a certain amount of tension and as a result, attendance at school is poor. I was informed that not many Aboriginal students go beyond Year 5 because of the difficulties.

The Aboriginal girls found learning in an urban environment very different mainly because of educational requirements. They stated that on Elcho, there was no required homework, assignments or exams. School finished at midday on Friday so everyone could go home and begin the weekend. English was not spoken at school either. There were no required school uniforms, shoes, hats or bags.

One of the Junior girls completed her Foundation Studies Certificate at Shepherdson College. The other Junior student was only developing her literacy set at the time of the study. The Foundation Studies program is one possible pathway in Northern Territory curriculum for Aboriginal schools. This program is generally for students up to the end of Year 7 and who are under 13 years of age. If students do not meet these requirements they may be counselled into special category curriculum. Following after the Foundation Studies, is a program of General Studies. Students who complete all the units in Technical Studies, Home Economics, Career Education may be awarded Year 10 Statement of Results for these subjects.

The Senior girls had attended outstation schools of the bush, in addition to some schooling at Shepherdson College. They arrived at Emmanuel College four years prior to the study to begin Year 9. Many

teachers and even one DEET employee remembered their first arrival. They had been extremely soft-spoken and barely able to make eye contact with anyone. Their heads were hanging down low. This was a very different picture from the two confident young ladies who arrived at their senior formal in a limousine and looked like princesses with coiffed hair, gowns and high-heeled golden sandals.

### **1.3 The Urban Learning Environment**

The urban learning environment of the Aboriginal students was Emmanuel College in Carrara on the Gold Coast. It is a non-denominational co-educational Christian school with approximately 950 students. About ten percent of the enrolment are overseas students or those with non-English speaking backgrounds. There are students from Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macedonia and Arnhem Land. The college was just over ten years old. It was seeking to be an extension of the Christian home and aimed to educate the whole person in a disciplined environment. Emmanuel College was also the only school in the southeast Queensland area which accepted enrolments from traditional Aboriginal communities.

## **2. Description of the Students**

The following descriptions detail information about the senior and junior student groups involved in this study. This section also provides individual accounts which map out student developments from the time they had arrived at Emmanuel College and offers some comment about their participation patterns and English skills at the time of the study.

## **2.1 Junior Students**

### **Student 'Y'**

Student Y was 18 years of age and repeating Year 9. She had attended Emmanuel College the previous year and rarely spoken a word. She had been unable to answer in class, make a presentation or complete set tasks and homework. She often did not make any eye contact and could be easily overlooked in a classroom of energetic and sometimes noisy Australian Year 9 students. She was extremely shy, not competitive, lacking in self confidence and unsure of much Balanda cultural capital. She had sat alone in most classes and seldom participated. The year of the study she had a counterpart, or shepherd, from Elcho as a friend and they attended all the same classes together and worked together too.

In her first year, one of Y's male teachers became very upset when she did not turn in an assignment for assessment. He claimed she was busy writing and rubbing out all year yet had not completed her major assignment. He may have been misled by her habit of writing and rubbing out, when in fact, Y had not even developed her literacy set when this study took place and had been unable to hand in an assignment.

Student Y was perhaps the most difficult to place on the NLLIA ESL Bandscales. Initially she read at 1B level. She then moved into a 2 and appeared to be a 2 in writing. She was improving all the time and was able to speak out in class, write on the board and give an oral presentation in front of a small ESL class or a group of girls in her mainstream English class. This may have been related to her greater self confidence and Aboriginal support that year from her counterpart.

She was also sent around the school on various 'missions' to help move her into the next stage (McKay and Scarino 1991). She was sent to favorite female senior teachers on errands, for example, to borrow



scissors, make a photocopy, etc. When first asked to do this, Y panicked and very nearly refused to go. Her first errand was successful and she only improved since then. She never hesitated when the study took place and even went to speak to male teachers (of her own volition). After initial noun items were asked for, adjectival descriptors were added for some greater complexity. She was required to ask for a sheet of light blue paper, a black or dark coloured spool of thread with a needle, very strong glue and so forth. She completed all tasks successfully and even seemed eager to go and do these special things.

In completing a video interview, Y spoke very softly in English and only offered information about her favorite classes and teachers. One of the senior girls broke into their native Yolŋumata and explained in English that Y would now speak in their own language. Y panicked again and was unable to do this. She was also unable to write words in her own language when working on a radio show for mainstream English. In writing a biography earlier this year, she whispered that she had not gone to school until she was 14 years of age.

She was able to write very simple sentences but could not use connectives or any complex constructions. In reading a short story about her people of Arnhem Land, she was unable to explain simple words in her own language. All of these instances indicated that she may have been a beginning learner of English with limited literacy and numeracy skills in her first language and a disrupted educational background.

Y enjoyed participating in games, especially the word game called 'Hangman'. The game constituted a major breakthrough for her as it was the first time she indicated that she would like to participate, get up in front of a class, speak and become actively involved. It was amazing to see her happily playing and enjoying it so much. She generally required constant reassurance, encouragement, pictorial

support in reading tasks and much support in learning how to learn skills.

Earlier in the year, other beginning English students were given the task of writing a short biography working from the text *CONTEXT, An Australian Intensive English Course* (S. King and B. Paltridge) unit "People and families". The purpose of this was discussed, several examples were given and then the text gave a possible structure as format. General sentences were given and students were only required to fill in the missing key words or phrases. Student Y had great difficulty with this task. It was partially an oversight of possibly culturally inappropriate material on my own part, however, it turned into a very good learning experience for both of us.

Some of the required sentences were "My mother ..... was a ....., while my father ..... worked as a ..... . When I was ..... years old, I went to a school called ....." Y was whispering to her Elcho counterpart, student W. As the teacher, I began to wonder if something was wrong. Student W finally spoke. "What do we write here? (indicating the father's job) Her father (meaning Y's father) doesn't really....., well, ....., umm..... he ....., I mean ....." I realised the problem and asked them if her father had something he did in his life. Student W said, "He paints on bark." "Oh, that's wonderful", I smiled, "he's an artist." They both seemed pleased to have an answer that fitted the required structure and asked me how to spell 'artist'. Later Y wrote that when she was 14 years old, she went to Shepherdson College. The following day students were required to turn in their work but Y had removed that particular sentence. I believe that this may have been on advice from her senior counterparts.

**Student 'W'**

In contrast, student W was 15 years of age and new to Emmanuel College in that year. She was a 4 in listening and speaking on the ESL Bandscales and moving into a 4 in reading and writing. She also was shy in groups and in front of large classes. This shyness appeared to be an inhibiting factor at this age. W had a stronger basis of literacy and numeracy skills than Y. She had also developed more successful patterns of participation even though she had been in the non-Aboriginal urban school less time than student Y. I believe this may have related to her greater level of self-esteem and confidence.

When student W first arrived at Emmanuel, she was sent by another teacher, accompanied by several Balanda students to the ESL unit. The girls introduced her to me and left quickly. W would not speak, communicate or look at me for nearly 50 minutes in a one-on-one situation. Finally, she began to read a simple text fairly well. I was impressed with her skill level in comparison to student Y. We were finally able to communicate and she glanced fleetingly at me too. She subsequently gained confidence and was often quite verbal in ESL class, leading discussions and giving answers, especially on topics of interest. She showed ability to skim, scan and get the gist of most texts, although cultural differences caused some problems.

W was usually the leader of the two junior girls, although Y was more mature in attitude. She often spoke loudly to Y in mother tongue. Y sometimes ignored her and went on with whatever she was doing. W became more bossy, although in their culture it may have been a kind of encouragement to Y to participate more. They often worked together on mainstream assignments. During an English magazine preparation, W said assertively, "It's YOUR turn!" Y acquiesced gently and took her turn. W whispered quietly to me, "She always waits for me to do all the work!" It was also another way of W letting Y know that she would not allow her to lean on her too much or be too weak.

As the teacher, I believe that W had a greater base of knowledge from which to draw. She understood more readily what was expected and how to go about doing it. Y lacked this basic foundation knowledge and regardless of how much she wanted to participate, she really did not know or understand how to go about it until she was shown or led through the task. This was a great difference between the two students and one that can prevent or facilitate success. Y required much more specialised support.

W won her age championship in athletics at school. After the athletics carnival, awards were presented in an all-school ceremony. W was too shy to go forward to collect her medal. She has also placed fourth in a regional track event but without training or wearing shoes. Teachers in charge of the event had wondered what would have been possible if she had had the appropriate equipment and been encouraged to train properly.

## **2.2 Senior Students**

### **Student 'G'**

Student G was 19 years old and had completed senior studies to a satisfactory level and graduated. Most of her chosen subjects were activity based, which showed her preferred learning style. G liked Catering because she could cook and make things, Art because she could draw and paint, ESL because there were some excursions, Communications because she could practice keyboarding skills and Health and Physical Education because she could play basketball.

Of the two senior girls, G was mostly 5 on the ESL Bandscales and seemed on a plateau in her learning. She kept to safe areas in her speaking and required support in writing tasks. Her understanding of verb tenses was uneven and she often did not capitalise the beginning of new sentences. She had difficulty with spelling and this impeded

her writing. Despite this, she was an avid reader and seemed to enjoy typical Balanda romance novels. I saw her during school arts performances reading these novels and not paying the slightest attention to the actors or performance going on live just in front of her.

She was also confused in writing tasks from her Communications class where she was required to write a letter as a client asking for information and then answer it, giving information as a small business. Her letter had aspects of both roles and relationships in it. Her task was to write to a travel agency in New Zealand requesting information on accommodation, costs and sight seeing. She also then had to become the travel agent and answer the client with appropriate recommendations, costs and things to do. G said, "Please write down the questions so I can see them to answer." Visualisation seemed important to her learning.

This senior girl had a lovely way of nurturing and looking after her junior counterparts. She kept a close eye on them and often reprovved student W in particular for one thing or another in mother tongue. Student W took notice of her too. She also wanted to help them with their assignments and took it upon herself to type pages, letters or other pieces of work for them on the computer. They willingly allowed her to do this, however, the work nearly always had to be redone because of spelling errors, lack of capitalisation, grammatical inconsistencies and other mistakes. On Elcho, she was an immense help in looking after the younger children in the clan.

G was also a good hunter on Elcho. She could track and find all sorts of food. She had superb bush skills which she probably learned from her mother who made the best damper I have ever tasted. G's mother could also easily start the fire each morning at the outstation when no one else could. G was a keen basketball player and looked forward to a good game. The two senior girls often were very fast and signalled to each other in native tongue to confuse their opponents.

**Student 'D'**

The other senior girl, student D, was between 6 and 7 on the ESL Bandscales in most skills. Her reading was more on 6 level as she struggled with informationally dense material and sophisticated vocabulary. She was becoming independent in her writing but still required some support to substantiate her arguments. We worked over an essay for Health and Physical Education many times before she turned it in. She hadn't realised it but she was repeating similar ideas over and over without adding anything new, substantiating evidence or referring to relevant study notes. Finally she pulled out research from class notes and improved the essay considerably. She ended up with a VHA (Very High Achievement) which pleased her immensely.

Student D had well developed skills. She was socially competent and generally the leader and spokesperson of all the girls in this group. She also sometimes spoke to the younger girls in abrupt mother tongue and they never back answered her. Her attitude and behaviour, as well as all the others, were faultless and exemplary. She seemed to realise that she had to set the standard.

D loved activity, as Student G, such as basketball games, Catering and cooking, Art, ESL and keyboarding skills on the computer. The senior girls offered to teach the ESL class about survival skills and hunting bush tucker. We had an excursion where nearly everyone got stuck in the mud except the Elcho girls. They discussed tracks in the sand left by stingray, taught how to look for crabs and successfully catch them as well as finding mangrove worms which revulsed everyone else.

D's dream was to enter university and become a primary teacher who could teach anywhere, not just in the Aboriginal community. More than anything, she saw her role as one of helping her people and her community. First hand observations of her with the younger members of the clan on Elcho showed her gifting. D told the children stories in mother tongue that absolutely enthralled them. She believed that

education was the key to helping her people. She was subsequently offered a place at Northern Territory University in her chosen field of primary teaching.

### **3. Patterns of Participation**

The following patterns of participation emerged during the six months of diary studies and classroom observations.

#### **3.1 Clannishness**

The four Aboriginal girls stuck together and liked to be together. Often they sat behind our school staff room on the ground, alongside a dusty unsealed road and under a tree to have their lunch. No other students went there because it was too hot and dusty, yet they often preferred this spot. After my visit to Elcho, I realised that this was very much like their home environment. For many months, they seemed to keep to themselves. They also preferred to speak in their mother tongue but were somewhat hesitant about speaking in front of Balandas. After we began to know each other better they spoke much more frequently in front of me and even began to teach me a few words.

Despite their clannishness, they made some very good friends from Papua New Guinea and Australia. The senior students participated with these friends in Catering class and often planned activities where they prepared tacos, spaghetti or pumpkin soup at lunch to sell. The senior girls worked very well with these other students as a team. Several non-Aboriginal student friends were invited to their homeland in Elcho as was myself and the Home Economics teacher that they liked very much.

It also seemed important to have another Aboriginal female to attend classes with and do the work together. Y improved during the year the study took place with the attention of student W. They appeared to prefer the 'shepherd' approach where one was shepherding the other through the school. The shepherd may not have been the high achiever but rather the companion for the higher achiever.

### **3.2 Frustrations with Studies**

All of the Aboriginal girls experienced frustrations with their studies for several reasons. One was they didn't understand the 'big words'. Another was they didn't know how to set work out. They had little understanding of genre styles and textual features. An example of this occurred when student W came and asked for assistance with her English assignment. Of course, what did she have to do? "Give a speech", was her reply. "Oh that's easy, come in at lunch and we'll put together some ideas," I told her. She still looked confused. "But Mrs. Ashton, what's a SPEECH?", she asked.

The senior girls had difficulty with lexically dense texts. Often, they did not understand large words and had some problems choosing precise language for their senior essays. At times, they tended to be repetitive without adding any new evidence, substantiation or illustration. Student D was more attentive to the nuances and once asked, "What is the difference between effect and affect?" When this was explained, she thought for a moment and then said, "I think I should say 'affect' here." She had made the appropriate choice. Student G was generally unable to do this even after several explanations.

It was sometimes disappointing to ask the junior girls for work to be completed before the next lesson and then to find nothing further had been done. Not only had nothing further been done, but the notes and mind maps we had gone through previously had been lost. Time after



time, it seemed we had to start again from scratch. They were reminded to write down in their diaries what was required and host parents were also reminded. I began to wonder if this was a kind of anti-participation pattern to keep the actual task at bay and prevent completion of an uncertain activity or if the girls just really did not understand how to go about completing the task. This did not happen with student D, although at times student G's participation reflected this behaviour in that she forgot to bring completed homework, assignments or worksheets. Generally, she always was able to complete the assignment and turn it in slightly late.

One particular junior mainstream English task involved designing a magazine. This task was beyond the comprehension of student Y as many composite parts were required and included letters to the editor, feature story, book review, recipes, puzzles, editorial, poetry, an advertisement and so forth. It was also beyond their cultural comprehension as Aboriginal culture does not have any model magazines nor does it traditionally engage in written expressions through print media. They were given examples from 'Dolly' and other westernised versions. It was therefore very difficult to involve the Aboriginal girls in this task without appropriate models.

We struck the idea of designing a magazine around the idea of 'Bush Tucker' one afternoon. It was actually student W's idea and it seemed so appropriate for them. It would give them an opportunity to draw on their own culture and use it in a worthwhile way. I found an old model magazine of 'Gourmet Traveller' for them to look at while they formed their own ideas and designs. It was a long, painful publishing process but a most worthwhile effort in the final product. The junior girls were very proud of their hard work and efforts once it had been finished.

### **3.3 Preference for Senior Female Teachers**

The Aboriginal girls stated in their video interview that they preferred senior or older female teachers. This seemed to be a cultural preference as they are not allowed to be tutored by any male teachers unless they were in a group together and with a female teacher. The mother of student D has also told me that traditionally, discipline was handed down from older females to the younger ones who needed it. The senior females of the clan are more experienced and respected. Females have more business together in the traditional lifestyle such as gathering certain types of food, preparing and cooking it, and nurturing the younger members of the clan. These may therefore have been some of the reasons for this cultural preference.

This gender preference may not only have related to male teachers, but males in general. The senior student, D, asked me to go to another senior male student to sort out a problem with her school jumper. She had ordered the Year 12 jumper with her name on the back and when she received it, there was no name. It was curious that she was disinclined to attend to this herself, but she obviously preferred me to do it. When I inquired, the senior male student (non-Aboriginal) told me that she was not allowed to have nicknames on her jumper. I reported this back to D who began giggling. She said she had told him she wanted her last name on the back of the jumper and he had misunderstood her, thinking that her last name was a nickname. I believe that she sensed a similar misunderstanding and felt more comfortable with an elder intermediary.

Another time during the gathering of information for this research report, a male Physical Education teacher came to me about the mysterious disappearance of the two junior girls from his class. I assured him they had come to be with me during this time, even though it was not on the timetable. He did not understand why they missed his class until I asked him what the class was doing. He told me they were doing a unit on dancing. I asked him if students were

required to dance with boys and he said, "Yes, that's the idea." When I asked the girls why they had missed the class there was a reaction of shame and dishonor with heads lowered and loss of eye contact.

Further discussions with D proved that it was not appropriate for young girls to be with boys or touch them. Usually on Elcho, she told me, girls and boys went off to play separate sport and were not used to being together in their culture because of getting into big trouble. The girls would be allowed to dance as partners themselves, but not partnered by boys. She also asked me to explain this to the male teacher.

The senior girls also indicated that they were 'promised' back home to certain males as their family determined; D said she was promised to an older man who already had a wife. When I asked her if she was happy about that, she told me that she didn't really have to marry him if she didn't want to. "That tradition is not so strong today," she explained.

### **3.4 Preferred Learning Style**

During interviews, the students expressed that their favorite classes were those where they could do things, paint things, cook things, make things, play games or go on excursions. This was obviously a more successful way for these students to learn through a kinesthetic and visual learning style. It was also in contrast to the lack of comprehension over 'big words' and struggling with various genre constructions. Another preference in learning was to be able to relate a task to their own culture and thereby draw on their own existing knowledge to make it more meaningful and appropriate.

Some successes in this area were discovered during this project. One of those was through a mainstream English assignment where the junior girls were required to design a magazine. The magazine had to

be modelled after a current issue and include generic features as already discussed. Another was a breakfast radio show where they were able to speak in their mother tongue. The magazine was most daunting however.

This task was overwhelming, especially to Y. We finally succeeded in striking the idea of designing a magazine that shared their culture. They called it BUSH TUCKER and really became engaged while writing recipes for magpie geese and a feature story about the Arnhem Land calendar which relates to certain seasons of the year, appropriate natural bush foods, as well as the seasonal features. The girls relished the task once it became something known, or familiar to them. The magazine was completed on time and the junior girls received a B+ for their efforts. They were very proud of this.

Another success came in designing curriculum where the girls learned more about successful role models from their own culture. Worksheets were prepared about Aboriginal heroes such as Cathy Freeman, Ernie Dingo, Yvonne Goolagong and Mal Maninga. These were titled 'Australian Achievers' and really engaged the girls. The worksheet included a short biography, vocabulary, cloze exercise, comprehension questions, some personal opinion and map exercises. Student Y particularly enjoyed finding places on the world or Australian map such as where Cathy Freeman was born, had raced or won. It became almost a sort of treasure hunt for her. She was usually first to find all the places and was very pleased to be able to help other students locate these countries or cities.

Another mainstream English task was to make and record a radio program. This again was difficult for the softly spoken student Y. I encouraged them to plan a radio show where they could also speak in their own Yolgnuṁata as well as English. They chose appropriate Yothu Yindi music and Christine Anu's 'My Island Home' (originally written about Elcho). They had to write a jingle, a good morning announcement, weather, world news, community news and an ad.

During this task, the ideas and original scripts were continually lost. W spoke too loud and Y too soft. W remarked one day, "Let Y do it, I had to do everything on Bush Tucker!" It was unusual for one of them to speak like this (even though it was partially true) so I reprimanded W and reminded her that we all help each other. The senior girls had a close eye on their participation too. G spoke up in mother tongue and had words with W. Participation returned to equal partnership then.

One day I remarked that we had spent too much time preparing this radio show and should finish so we could go on to something else. This was after approximately 6 weeks of practice, polish and rehearsal recordings. G commented, "The juniors are slack!" A senior Taiwanese boy came into the room and I asked him to help us. I explained the morning radio show task and asked the girls to practice on him and 'wake him up'. Y looked panic-stricken and repeatedly looked to the senior girls for guidance. I realised I had just asked her to speak loudly in front of an older male. G remarked, "It's good practice!" and D nodded and smiled too. Y giggled and then proceeded. The Taiwanese boy made a beautiful job of 'waking up'. Y particularly studied his face intently as she was 'broadcasting' and I believe that the added visual of speaking to 'someone out there' from a radio broadcaster's point of view was valuable for her. Finally, the radio show was recorded a day later and done successfully. It was also interesting how senior student G became judicial during this junior assignment.

The Aboriginal girls seemed to prefer lessons that dealt with Australian animals, the land of Australia, dreaming stories and other myth-like tales, videos such as The Bush Tucker Man (who gives great credibility to the Aboriginal people for teaching him many things), Aboriginal people, Aboriginal art, history and culture, Aboriginal songs, special excursions and certain games like map activities or word games. The interest in such lesson material peaked and totally engaged them.

### **3.5 Rubbing Out and the Rubber**

This was a particular pattern of behaviour for the junior girl Y and sometimes W, although eventually it was not quite so intense. They spent a short time writing something and a rather long time rubbing it out. This seemed to mask the fact that they did not understand what to do or how to do it. It also tended to make them invisible as students to teachers who may have been looking for students who wished to participate actively. This particular pattern of behaviour seemed to be slowly easing and not as apparent in the last 6 - 8 weeks of the study. A newer, more unusual pattern was emerging.

The rubber had become something of a bond symbol between the two junior girls. They shared one constantly and even bickered over which one may use it. This appeared to happen most often when there was work to be done with a degree of difficulty. It could have been a sort of security symbol or even an unspoken communication. Y could have been saying to W (inaudibly), "Talk to me, I need help. I can't do this, how are you going?" The junior girls made a great show of sharing the rubber and turn taking with it. The senior girls were noted in a similar pattern although their interaction on this issue was much more subtle.

One day near the end of term, I found a large rubber on the floor in the ESL unit. I asked the junior girls if it belonged to them and they said no, although W looked at it longingly. I said, "Well, you might need to use it today." I came back from the office I noticed that W had written her name all over the rubber in very large letters and claimed it as her own.

### **3.6 Nominal Imperatives**

Student W, in particular, used this pattern of participation to great effect. Often she would say to me, "Sheet!" when she required a sheet of paper. Other imperatives included: 'whiteout', 'rubber', 'scissors'

and 'paper'. There was no reason for the shortness of these requests as W was perfectly capable of expressing her needs. I reminded her that usually when we wish to ask someone for something we say politely, "Do you have a sheet of paper please?" She hung her head sheepishly and then asked again softly. Sometimes she forgot and repeated on other occasions but a bit of playful reminding would often bring about a complete sentence.

### **3.7 Nurturing**

As previously mentioned, the girls shared one another's tasks. The seniors looked after the juniors and often made suggestions or offered to help. For example, during the magazine publication, D offered to do much of the art work while G offered to type some pages. The junior girls were quite willing to allow them to help in this way. D was often occupied with her own numeracy tutoring across the room yet was able to 'listen with one ear' and have some input.

Once, after finally publishing nearly all parts for the magazine, the English teacher returned it with some pages penciled over. She suggested use of several articles such as 'a' and 'the' in the letters to the editor. The page had already been decorated and completed. The girls were apparently told to redo the page. I was a bit surprised at the officious corrections but tried not to express this in front of the girls. D, however, became offended and told the juniors in an authoritarian voice, "Rub it out and give it back to her. She's wasting paper!"

On one occasion, one of the girls forgot to bring her lunch. Each one of them shared something with her so she would not go without. On Elcho, in their homelands, this was common practice. If a hunt was good, food was shared around with cousins and other family members.

The senior girls were also well aware of the junior girls' weaknesses, particularly Y's. Once we had scheduled tutoring time at lunch but W

had already come and asked if she could play in the House basketball final. I agreed and when Y came in I knew she would probably ask if she could go and watch too. Instead, she hovered until G came into the ESL room. They spoke in Yolnguṃmata for a bit, then G said, "Mrs. Ashton, Y wants to talk to you." Y paced back and forth and kept looking at G. G insisted that she had something to talk to me about. They spoke again in Yolnguṃmata and G left the room after looking pointedly at Y and then towards me. Y looked absolutely helpless and followed her like a puppy. She came back into the room in a few moments and finally asked me if I would mind if they watched basketball 'just for today'. I believe that Y wanted G to speak for her, but G insisted like a mother that she must do it herself. In some respects, G knew that Y must begin to speak up for herself especially as she would not be around next year.

It was an interesting stage to put Y through, similar to the 'missions' to other favorite female teachers. From that day on, Y was able to ask questions more frequently and much more confidently. This was an important pattern of their particular style of participation. It related to their ongoing relationships with one another and the means by which they support each other in another environment.

### **3.8 Learning by Doing and Seeing**

The Northern Territory Department of Education has documented the differences between learning in European society and Aboriginal society (1988). European society and learning involves "learn by being told" whereas Aboriginal society and learning involves "learn by doing". In European society, students are also "expected to learn by themselves" while in Aboriginal society, children "learn from older, wiser people".(p. 12)

This pattern of learning was evident in the ways that the Aboriginal students participated in tutoring sessions. During the time that we



rehearsed the radio show, I often cued Y to speak louder or with more expression by 'conducting' her with upsweeping arms movements to indicate a louder voice. Other cues were countdown movements with fingers to indicate 1, 2, 3 and a large and inclusive upsweep of hands to register the start of the recording.

D watched with interest week after week from across the room during her numeracy tutoring. Finally, we were recording for the English assessment and she jumped up and came over. Immediately, she took over with identical movements to cue the junior radio broadcasters. The only difference was that she spoke to the juniors in Yolnguṁmata. I was relegated to pushing the buttons on the Karaoke machine while she 'conducted' the radio show. It was very interesting to watch her imitate all the identical movements I had used during the practice sessions. I realised how subtly we as teachers influence these students and how much of us they may take back to their homelands without us even realising it.

### **3.9 Peer Problems**

The junior girls experienced difficulties in their mainstream English class and in their Home Group class. The difficulties were generally with male members of their Year 9 class. Once the door to Home Group was locked by one male member even though he saw the girls approaching with a pass. The teacher had apparently instructed the student to lock the door at a certain time to prevent lateness. The girls seemed to feel that this was an insult to them.

Again, in English class, rehearsals were underway for recitation of *The Ancient Mariner*. The Aboriginal girls were working in one part of the room when some male classmates began laughing at them. They did not like this behaviour so W tossed a small stick at the boys as a warning. The boys threw the stick back at them and shouted, "Get lost you idiots!" As a result, W refused to recite in front of these male

classmates. The teacher offered to allow them to recite in front of only the female members of the English class which was acceptable.

Y was willing to perform and had palm cards ready. She also asked me for assistance on the morning of her recitation. W, on the other hand, had become very upset and refused to comply with any form of recitation. She withdrew deep into herself and cried throughout lunch. She reminded me of the petrified young girl who had first arrived at Emmanuel College and refused to speak for more than 50 minutes. Y was looking at me as if to say, "What should I do now?" and oddly enough, it was she who was coping fine.

#### **4. Comments From Mainstream Teachers**

The type of comments from mainstream teachers differed according to gender. Some of the male teachers questioned why the Aboriginal girls were at the college in the first place while some of the female teachers enjoyed and appreciated the difference in culture the girls brought with them. One male teacher commented, "Why are they here? Is it just for a cultural exchange?" The female art teacher, on the other hand, loved and encouraged the girls in their art work. She appreciated their special style of creativity.

Most teachers, whether male or female, agreed that there were huge differences in the educational standards that the girls brought with them. Their education had certain gaps and insufficiencies according to our standards. One of the largest was the lack of comprehension of Western written genres. There was little understanding or knowledge, for example, of how to set out a particular type of essay. The girls did not only not know how to set out their work, they also did not understand the differences between types of essays such as analytical, persuasive, explanatory, expository, etc. Some of the other inconsistencies are outlined in the following teacher comments.

Several teachers noted that the girls were slow to complete tasks and lacked the basics to properly understand the task criteria or requirements. Their reading was slower than many other students and the girls had difficulty with vocabulary and comprehension. Some teachers also felt that their writing skills were deficient, especially in sentence structure and vocabulary use. Most teachers remarked that there was a lack of comprehension of Western written cultural genres and this caused major confusion.

Other male teachers remarked that the students did not ask for help nor were they articulate in classrooms. The history teacher felt strongly that the Aboriginal girls lacked knowledge of cultural history that most Caucasians have. His example was when the class studied civil rights in the United States and the Aboriginal girls had no idea of what this was about. This teacher felt that because of the cultural differences and lack of cultural capital, it might be more appropriate for the Aboriginal girls to study geography.

Despite insufficiencies in educational background, nearly all teachers applauded the girls' behaviour in class and their efforts to succeed. Perhaps if these teachers had been more aware of the preferred learning styles and successful learning experiences for these students, there would have been a better understanding of cultural and language factors involved.

## **5. Summary of Findings From Readings**

Much of the research done on Aboriginal students has been done in bilingual school contexts in the Northern Territory (Harris 1990). Some classroom process research has taken place investigating the patterns of Aboriginal pupils in classroom settings. Malcolm (1979a; 1980; 1982), a key researcher in this area, has undertaken classroom-based research on interaction of Aboriginal students in schools. One of Malcolm's studies reported on the interaction patterns

of learners in a primary school in Western Australia where 60% of the students were Aboriginal. Malcolm examined classroom exchanges and provided an analysis and commentary, highlighting how Aboriginal children fail 'to meet with the requirements of the discourse pattern, resulting in an ongoing process of redefining the terms for the interaction as it proceeds' (p.178). He provided suggestions for improving classroom communication out of this research.

Another very interesting study was done on Aboriginal students in an urban classroom by Merridy Malin (1990). In this five-year ethnographic study in Adelaide, Malin illuminates the culturally based skills, assumptions and values which these Aboriginal students bring from home to school relative to those of the Anglo students. The study describes how a combination of cultural differences, ideology and subsequent micro-political processes resulted in the marginalising of some of the Aboriginal students, both academically and socially. Malin refers to this process through her notion of 'visibility' and 'invisibility'.

Malin has described some very comparable patterns of participation in her study. One of those was the nurturant attitude of older Aboriginal students towards younger siblings and playmates. This was contrasted to Anglo parents who did not trust children's competence at being responsible care-givers. The pattern of behaviour was described as 'affiliation' which also suggests a similar kind of clannishness and nurturing attitude among the Aboriginal students in this report.

Malin describes a kind of social equality between the Aboriginal adults and children where the autonomy of the child was respected and nurtured. Her findings are paralleled by Susan Philips' (1983) study at Warm Springs Native American community where children were encouraged to be independent regarding the affairs of daily life while still watching out for the well-being of those around them, particularly

those younger than themselves. Certain abilities were expected by Aboriginal parents and Native Americans to be essential for urban living, such as self-regulation and self-reliance.

The social equality between Aboriginal adults and children caused some difficulties in the urban classroom described by Malin. Some teachers interpreted this as a sign of disrespect, defiance and lack of acceptance of the legitimacy of their role as teacher. The autonomous orientation of some Aboriginal students also meant that they would ignore teacher directives, either by delaying their response or by not responding at all. This resulted in certain Aboriginal students who understood the necessity of compliance and therefore shared co-membership or particular rapport with certain teachers. The majority of teachers were unaware that they were witnessing culturally based expressions of particular competencies. This was an unfortunate aspect of this study in that it appears to point out a certain deficiency in lack of understanding and awareness on the teachers' part of the relationship.

Malin further describes repercussions for those students who did not share co-membership. These students actually became disadvantaged while those students who did share co-membership gained advantage or visibility. The disadvantaged, or invisible, students had their workbooks serviced last, if at all, were the last to read or allowed to read for considerably less time, were consistently prevented from having as long a time on a task, lacked teacher contact with family, lacked encouragement, were given more severe teacher disciplinary responses and less privileges. These Aboriginal students became social isolates and marginalised in their education when they were attempting to be competent through affiliation and autonomy, normally accepted in their culture.

The study paints a vivid picture of the perceptions and meanings which are brought into classrooms by students and teachers alike. Cultural differences need not seed counter-productive relations if

teachers can be sensitive to their students' respective personalities, needs and respond accordingly. This study also emphasises the need for Aboriginal students to have other Aboriginal students in the classroom.

Eades (1991), in her ethnographic study of communicative strategies in Aboriginal English, highlights a number of ways in which meanings and interpretation of common grammar structures can be different according to the sociocultural context of Aboriginal ways of speaking. She details one of those ways as the wisdom and power attributed to old people. This may reflect the preference to senior female teachers among the Aboriginal female students in this research project.

Another pattern of communication Eades identifies is the widespread Aboriginal notion of 'shame', which is a combination of shyness and embarrassment occurring in 'situations where a person has been singled out for any purpose, scolding or praise or simply attention, where he/she loses the security and anonymity provided by the group' (Kaldor and Malcolm 1979:429).

This also relates to the patterns of participation in this study where the athletic W did not get up to collect her award in front of the school assembly. It also reflects the rubbing out strategy of avoidance in classroom participation. The Aboriginal students may have preferred to remain safe and anonymous in the class group rather than being singled out for any purpose, such as answering in class, participating in class activities or presenting oral recitations. Although this pattern was apparent in much classroom interaction in ESL, the pattern did change when students were afforded opportunities to participate in activities they enjoyed, such as games.

Eades cites recent research in the classroom education of Aboriginal children which accents the need for teachers to develop an awareness of accommodation to Aboriginal ways of interaction. Much of the research was done with children speaking traditional Aboriginal

languages. However, the work of Gray (1985), Malcolm (1979a; 1979b) and Walker (1983) focus on Aboriginal English-speaking children. In particular, Malcolm (1982) shows that the questioning strategies used by classroom teachers are often ineffective in communicating with these children.

According to Eades, indirectness is a key feature and characteristic of much interaction within Aboriginal crosscultural situations. Self-assertiveness is also not common nor a highly valued personal characteristic in Aboriginal society. The implications of these features of communication became apparent to me in dealing with the junior girls. First, when they disappeared from their Health and Physical Education dancing class and unobtrusively joined the ESL unit without any explanation.

The other time occurred when the recorded radio show was finally finished and ready to hand in. The girls took it home to listen to and determine if it was right to hand in for assessment. When I asked them if they were happy with it or if they wished to redo it, they agreed that it was okay. At least I thought they agreed that it was. In the meantime, the teacher continued to ask me what had happened to their radio show. Whenever I asked W and Y when they were going to turn it in, W said they would and Y just looked doleful.

It seemed odd that the tape had not been turned in although W assured me it would be. This confirms another of Eades' communicative strategies called 'gratuitous concurrence'. This is an agreement or confirmation which serves to keep the conversation flowing, and does not necessarily signify the speaker's actual agreement with a proposition. Weeks later, after many questions were asked and no appropriate answers given, W finally announced that the tape had been broken. She had apparently thrown her school bag and forgotten that it was in the bottom of the bag. The tape shattered. It was unfortunate that they could not admit this to the mainstream English teacher and

took so long to admit it to me. It was also interesting that Y would never do in W either.

This study of Eades is thought provoking in that it highlights the fact that in large multicultural societies 'speakers may have similar lifestyles, speak closely related dialects of the same language, and yet regularly fail to communicate' (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982). This statement is particularly applicable in urban and rural Australia where miscommunication and resulting conflict and tension occur daily between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people speaking closely related dialects of English. More positive and constructive approaches to cultural awareness and understanding are needed through the development and expansion of studies of communicative strategies in Aboriginal English.

As far as the school side of participation patterns of Aboriginal students, *Supportive School Environment: cross-cultural tensions and student interaction in school (1992)* is an intriguing study from The Education Department of South Australia.

Case studies of eight schools in the state were compared. Data was gathered from primary and secondary sources as well as student questionnaires. Recommended strategies for change were made in the areas of school planning, curriculum, research, language, counseling, student leadership and extracurricular activities, behaviour, staff awareness, training and development, parents and the community. The document now stands as a manual of schoolbased models for change which have been implemented in a range of school settings.

Findings include the need for culturally inclusive education and Aboriginal studies education. Aboriginal cultures need to be given a high profile in all school resources, classroom practices and methodologies need to take into account preferred learning styles for Aboriginal students and other NESB students, as well as assessment and reporting procedures should provide clear, meaningful and direct



feedback to Aboriginal and NESB students. Senior secondary curriculum offerings and their modes of delivery also need to be reviewed for effectiveness with Aboriginal and NESB students. Another recommended strategy for change in this government report included the need for investigation and implementation of appropriate methodologies for Aboriginal and NESB girls.

All of these recommendations and strategies for change interface with the patterns of participation detailed in this study. There were differences in participation when the curriculum contained examples of Aboriginal Australian achievers. There were differences in the participation patterns of Aboriginal girls when they were required to dance with boys, negotiate, question or speak with males as well as a stated preference for female senior teachers. There were differences when Aboriginal females were given opportunities to participate in their preferred learning styles.

The case study methodology which was used in *Supportive School Environment Research Project* prevents any generalisations being made across all schools. The findings do support other studies which have been carried out nationally as well as in South Australia (Slonieć 1992). This study also points to the fact that Aboriginal students seem to achieve better in a school which provides them with support structures, visibly values their contribution and background and is inclusive of their parents.

Jane Boustead appears to have captured the essence of utilising a preferred learning style with a lesson that provides interest and motivation to Aboriginal students. In her recent Master's Thesis (1992), Boustead attempts to motivate underachievers to write procedural texts through the popular context of playing marbles as a genre. The study demonstrated that it was possible to capitalise on the language of a popular context such as playing marbles and use this as the basis for teaching children how to write procedural texts. Children actually played the game and then wrote the texts. They also traded

texts and attempted to play the game of marbles following each other's directions.

In addition to the majority of ESL, Aboriginal and special unit children successfully accomplishing the task, several unexpected outcomes emerged. The study demonstrated that these children had the capacity to construct procedures with a remarkable degree of independence and that the influence of the peer group with respect to disadvantaged learners emerged as a powerful factor. The approach used in this study was both viable and effective in terms of teaching procedural text writing to ESL, Aboriginal and special students in mainstream Darwin primary schools.

Again, these findings collaborate with the successful patterns of participation found in this research study. The Aboriginal girls were motivated by things that interested them and participated more successfully. They also enjoyed the learning experience when permitted to learn in their preferred learning styles, by doing, by actively becoming involved, by sharing with another in a worthwhile relationship and by relating the experience to their own culture and knowledge.

Ashmore (1993) believes that missing ingredients in a successful educational formula for Aboriginals are *time* and *trust*. He believes these are ingredients that cannot be supplied by any large bureaucracy no matter how good the intentions. The philosophical underpinning, content, teaching methodologies, assessment methods, etc., have to take into account all the knowledge of the students and their community that is necessary to provide the kind of supportive teaching/learning environment that will lead the students to attend, learn, feel secure and supported in meeting their needs.

The gathering and maintenance of this knowledge and its organisation into a form that can be called upon whenever and wherever it is needed is a task which requires trained Aboriginal researchers and the

ingredient of time mentioned previously. This is undoubtedly a huge undertaking but unless it is taken on in faith, Aboriginal education may remain marginalised, unsuccessful and many of the students invisible, both in reality or as absentees. Ashmore says the second ingredient of trust is a chimera, for various political, social, educational and governmental agendas which may not be in accordance with longterm Aboriginal agendas.

## **6. Discussion**

As seen from the summary of findings from readings, there are a number of similar patterns of participation documented by other researchers in the areas of Aboriginal education and communication. The data and findings in this research project will be summarised into the various categories of avoidance strategies, successful tasks and the nature of the interactions that took place as well as highlighting the differences between senior and junior students.

### **6.1 Avoidance Strategies**

Several avoidance strategies were used during the data gathering time of this research project. One of these was the rubbing out strategy. This was an apparent device used by the junior girls and especially student Y. It appeared that she was working in class and to all apparent effects she was working. However, she was copying words and lines of text which she could not understand and then rubbing them out. Student Y had not developed her literacy set and was barely able to write even short sentences. By keeping her head down and looking busy, she avoided eye contact with teachers and the possibility of being called upon for answers. She avoided participating in educational experiences which she was uncertain of and insecure in.

Another avoidance strategy used by the junior girls was the lack of continuation and/or persistence with some lesson materials. Study notes, mind maps, worksheets, stories and books were often 'forgotten' or lost. Some assignments were not completed and there was a general lack of concern attitude. A particular due date for assignments seemed irrelevant to the juniors. Work which should have been completed was left undone. Time after time, lessons, homework or assignments had to be picked up exactly where they were left off the previous lesson or tutoring session. These avoidance strategies could have been a result of the difference in the educational environment and requirements. They could also be a form of deferent behaviour used by students who do not really understand how to participate successfully and require more time to understand the system and culture.

In contrast, this happened occasionally with the senior girl G. It was somehow more acceptable because she sometimes came to school and forgot to wear her shoes. But it rarely, if ever, happened with senior student D. The newness of junior W to our culture and educational environment may have required some time for adjustment and adaptation. She was only recently at the school this year and came from a very different educational environment where homework, assignments and exams were not part of the school routine. Student Y was generally better organised as she had a previous year to adjust to the educational requirements and expectations of a non-Aboriginal school. Y really lacked the basic skills and cultural capital to participate effectively therefore masking this deficit with her rubbing out behaviour. The avoidance strategies were used more frequently by junior girls than senior girls.

Another avoidance strategy used by the junior girls was non-attendance in the class that threatened their law or cultural standards. This occurred when it was necessary to dance with boys in the Health and Physical Education class. Rather than confronting the male teacher or being explicit about the situation, the girls chose to withdraw from

that class and attend ESL instead. Perhaps this was because they felt protected in ESL with a senior female teacher or it may just have been a soft option for them.

## **6.2 Successful Tasks**

There were more successful tasks noted in this research project than avoidance strategies. The successes may have been partially due to the reading materials and increased awareness involved in this research, the detailed diary studies and reflective thinking about the participation patterns of these Aboriginal girls and the time and trust that gradually developed over the extent of this project.

One of the most successful junior tasks could have been the *BUSH TUCKER* magazine assignment. This was the first time the junior girls had to complete a task in terms of westernised or Balanda standards. The task comprised a number of generic components which were unknown to the girls. They had no standard or model from their own culture to look to. Examples from *DOLLY*, etc. were inappropriate for them.

Once the theme for their magazine had been determined, the task became easier because they could relate and draw upon their own heritage and culture. The component generic parts then became the stumbling block. This was overcome again with patience, trial and error, explanations, modeling and most of all, the interface of familiar subject matter which motivated the girls and from which they could draw upon.

From this mainstream assignment, the radio show, recitations of *THE ANCIENT MARINER*, other subject tasks as well as support from ESL and DEET ATAS tutoring, the girls gradually became accustomed to our educational requirements and environment. They gained confidence and understanding in learning what was expected of them.

Their learning was supported in an intensive mode through the ESL unit and the DEET ATAS tutoring program. Through this, they were able to gain knowledge, understanding and become involved in the discourse and participate successfully.

Curriculum which involved Aboriginal studies and/or Aboriginal role models was another success. The students' interest peaked and both groups of girls really became engaged in their learning experiences. They enjoyed Aboriginal songs, biographies, art, history and culture, reading stories, writing their own stories with Aboriginal dreaming, Australian animals and material about Australia in general as well as related excursions.

Another very successful task was our hunting excursion. We had been studying a language unit on survival in ESL and notions of bush skills, hunting and survival were discussed. The senior Aboriginal girls offered to teach the rest of the class how to hunt in the bush. This was an unexpected lesson but one that will not soon be forgotten. It was successful because the Aboriginal girls were thrilled to have their knowledge valued. They were able to use skills that are generally invisible in our culture and educational environment. Other students were able to share their special knowledge and skills thereby gaining a little understanding of traditional Aboriginal life.

Successful participation tasks with the senior girls involved the completion of major senior essays. These essays required particular genre styles, textual features and formats which the girls were unfamiliar with. They worked over these essays week after week in a diligent manner, accepted criticism and made necessary adjustments in their own time. The essays were then brought back for further corrections and refinement. The attitude and efforts of the girls were exemplary. Student D began receiving VHA assessments on her essays while student G achieved satisfactory and occasional HA results. A major motivating factor seemed to be the ambition to return home and help their own people.

The greatest success of all could have been when the senior girls graduated this year and made history. This was the first time anyone from their clan had graduated from a mainland nonAboriginal high school (see newspaper article included). Eleven of their family members flew from Elcho to share this special occasion with them. The girls laughed, cried and were very emotional.

The following week they participated in the senior formal and dressed elegantly in gowns, high-heeled golden sandals and had their hair done at the beauty salon. They rented a chauffeur-driven limousine with several of the other Papua New Guinea female students. Several weeks later, after student D had returned home, there was a letter to announce she had been offered a place at The Northern Territory University in primary teaching, her chosen field. This was a normal admission, not a special one.

These successes began a rippling effect. The family clan members were so pleased for the girls and the knowledge and skills that they brought back to the community that they planned to send more students to Emmanuel College the following year. This represented a greater challenge but also one which was achievable because of what had already been done.

### **6.3 Nature of Interactions**

The nature of the interactions between the researcher and the Aboriginal girls changed over the time of this project. It is difficult to say exactly how and why but a trust developed and the relationships became much closer. This may have been due to the visit to their homelands, the increased time spent in class and tutoring sessions and/or the sense of accomplishment and success as the seniors completed four years in a non-Aboriginal school environment, graduated and made history.

Again, this study is told from a Balanda teacher's perspective and any offense caused through trespass over delicate cultural or political issues is unintentional. It may be appropriate, therefore, to let the girls have a voice in this section and express what schooling in a non-Aboriginal school has meant to them. These remarks were written by the students during the last weeks of school and quoted exactly as written.

### 6.3.1 Junior Students

#### STUDENT Y:

*"I like to learn English by playing games. My favorite games are Hangman and Wordup. I like to write on the black board too. I learn English through pronunciation, reading stories with pictures and watching videos and T.V I like listening exercises too. I don't like speaking in front of the class. I don't want to do this because I feel very shy.*

*I want to learn more English by reading. I also want to learn more writing. I need help on how to do assignments too.*

*I think I am learning a little bit. School is easier this year because I understand more. I can speak in front of the class now too.*

*It is easy to learn English with new games reading, books looking at pictures with words and watching videos.*

*It is difficult to speak in front of a class and do homework like this"*

#### STUDENT W:

*"Emmanuel College has been a helpful school to me and I've learnt alot about this school. This school is a good christian school and I*



*think it's good for everyone. It gets boring sometimes because there's no sport, I like the school very much because of some subjects I like. Well mostly I like this school because of the sports.*

*Emmanuel College has been a good to me. And I like some of my teachers, most of them are funny and that's why I like this school. I enjoy going to this school and I learnt a lot. Some teachers are helpful and I like them too!"*

### **6.3.2 Senior Students**

#### **STUDENT G:**

*"Emmanuel College has meant to me a lot because I have learned more English and met lots of friends here. The best thing about Emmanuel College is that, it's a good Christian school and I have good to lots of exciting excursions as well as gone to year 9, 10, 11, 12 camps which I enjoyed the most. I had so much fun here and met lots of friends from different cultural backgrounds. But the boring thing about school is assignments, homeworks and essays, but the rest of the year I have the best year."*

#### **STUDENT D:**

*"During the past few years of my life at Emmanuel, I have seen many changes in terms of my attitude towards school. I have seen many positive changes in terms of my school work and my English in the following areas- speaking, writing, understanding and responding. Emmanuel College has done many good things for me. This school made me realize that my people need good education. It made me realize that my education is the key towards helping my people back at home.*

*Emmanuel College as a christian school with caring teachers and students gave me a new perspective in how to build bridges between people of different cultural backgrounds. This school, where christian values are encouraged made me a stronger person inside. It gave me hope in my heart to restore my relationship with the Lord. And for the first time I feel that God has sent me to this school for a purpose to fulfill his will and for the first time I feel that I'm studying here and collecting wisdom for my people not for myself or to please the Balanda people but I'm doing this for the sake of my community.*

*I have enjoyed being here especially the excursions and the student free days. And in terms of Sport this school has given me many opportunities in a wide range of sporting activities which encouraged me alot."*

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has been very valuable, especially for those involved in the project. Without the project, the related readings might never have been completed, the awareness might not have developed, the visit to the girls' homelands might not have eventuated, the deeper understanding of the traditional Aboriginal community resulted, the successes might not have been so great and the relationships might not have developed in time and trust with the likelihood of extension, accordingly.

Patterns of participation have been identified. These patterns relate and interface with other researchers' findings. They involve avoidance strategies as well as successful tasks in learning. They also involve the nature of the interaction from the participants' point of view. Appropriate methodology involving preferred learning styles and ways of learning, lesson materials, ways of communicating successfully and learning experiences have also been identified.

## **7.1 Recommendations**

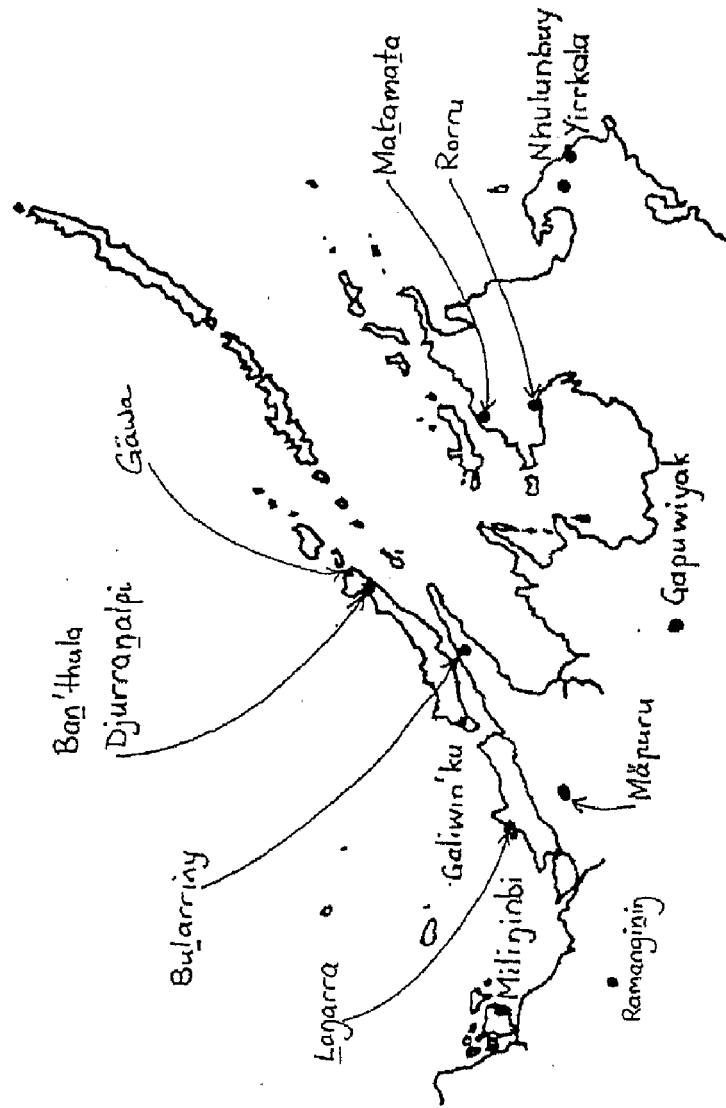
It is therefore appropriate to close with some recommendations for ESL and mainstream teachers who may be interested to meet the needs of similar learners in such contexts.

1. Be aware of cultural differences.
2. Be supportive in classroom and learning situations.
3. Encourage students to share aspects of their own culture and value this knowledge and their mother tongue.
4. Design appropriate tasks to enable students to utilise and draw upon their own heritage as well as to learn more about their own culture through successful role models, songs, poetry, drama, sport, art, stories, etc.
5. Design appropriate tasks and activities to support favoured learning styles. Include games such as treasure hunts, do map exercises, allow time for aesthetic expression and excursions.
6. Understand the useage of avoidance strategies.
7. Provide extra time modeling, explaining, giving plenty of examples and activities which enhance understanding of western written cultural genres.
8. Keep an eye out for successful and engaging learning experiences and try to build on those experiences.
9. Take time to develop trust and nurture it.

The study has gathered initial data in the area of Aboriginal students participating in non-Aboriginal urban schools. The findings relate

specifically to the learning of English as a second or third language but also relate to Aboriginal girls' patterns of participation in their learning of ESL in a non-Aboriginal urban secondary school. It is gratifying that the study proved success was possible in a number of ways. This should assist and encourage other ESL and mainstream teachers to meet the needs of these learners and replicate further successful patterns of participation.





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