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Aboriginal Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education

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ABORIGINAL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal parent and community participation in the education process has been identified as a priority for educators of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. The priority is one strategy aimed at addressing the inequity of student outcomes for Aboriginal children.

This study set out to investigate the opinions of school staff and Aboriginal parents regarding the opportunity for, and value of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process. Also, similarities and differences of opinion between school staff and parents were identified and discussed.

The study employed qualitative methodology and included triangulation for internal validity. Semi-structured interview schedules were used to collect the data from participants who comprised school staff and parents of Aboriginal children from five metropolitan schools.

It was found that participants agree that schools are making an effort to encourage Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process but that parental involvement at school is still limited. However, many school staff believed that Aboriginal families do not value or support the education process at home, while Aboriginal parents expressed their value of education and reported involvement to varying degrees, in their children's learning at home.

Additionally, it was found that both school staff and parents value parental involvement at school. However, school staff value parental involvement that engages parents as agents of the school, while parents value involvement that allows them to monitor the safety and performance of their children at school.

The findings of this study support the view that Aboriginal parents, not only wish to be involved, but are already involved in the education of their children. However, frequently involvement occurs in ways that are not recognised by school staff. Furthermore, Aboriginal parents can be empowered towards greater involvement when school staff acknowledge and accommodate the perspectives of Aboriginal parents. Recommendations are offered to assist schools in this endeavour.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature _____

Date _____22-08-2001_____

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal parental involvement in early childhood education has become a priority for schools with Aboriginal children in Western Australia. This chapter provides a brief background to the current situation and outlines how this study adds to empirical knowledge relating to Aboriginal parental involvement in early childhood education. The research problem and questions being addressed are identified and definitions of the terms used are given.

1.0 Background

In recent years it has become apparent that the schooling system of Western Australia has failed to engender relevance for many indigenous people. This is highlighted by the findings of the Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice (Government of Western Australia, 1994). It found that 21% of Aboriginal children aged 6 – 14 years were not attending any school and that the level of truancy was six times greater for Aboriginal students than for non-Aboriginal students. The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples found that 13% of Aboriginal children aged 5 years were not participating in schools compared to 6% of non-Aboriginal children aged 5 years (cited in Aboriginal Education Operational Plan 1997-1999). Aboriginal children have become the most educationally disadvantaged people in Western Australia (Government of Western Australia 1994; Burney 1997). Further evidence of the inequities is clearly seen in the available statistics gathered by the Monitoring

Standards in Education (MSE) Project (cited in Aboriginal Education Operational

Plan 1997-1999). For example,

> "91% of all Year 3 students met or exceeded the Level 2 MSE requirements for reading
>
> skills compared to 69% of Aboriginal students;"

> "76% of all Year 3 students met or exceeded the Level 2 MSE requirements for
>
> mathematics skills compared to 38% of Aboriginal students" (p16)

Such statistics demonstrate an imbalance of results achieved by the schooling

system for indigenous children. However, the Task Force on Aboriginal Social

Justice (1994) found that positive experiences for young children in early

childhood enhance the outcomes in later life and recommended that Early

Childhood programmes be given priority. In addition, it points to

Recommendation 289 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in

Custody which noted that pre-school initiatives will only succeed if they involve

Aboriginal parents, as well as the children. Both state and federal governments

have produced documents aimed at addressing the issue of inequities in student

outcomes for Aboriginal children (Western Australian Strategic Plan for

Aboriginal Education and Training 1997-1999; Aboriginal Education Operational

Plan 1996-1999; National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002 Early Childhood Education). One strategy that

is common to recommendations at both levels of government has been the call for

increased Aboriginal caregiver and community involvement in schools. Priority

number one of the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander Peoples (1996-2002) Early Childhood Education is,

> "to establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and
>
> Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision making" (p9).

Also, the Aboriginal Education Operational Plan (1997-1999) of the Education Department of Western Australia identifies Aboriginal Community Participation as Key Focus Area 4. The performance characteristic for this focus area is

> "The extent to which Aboriginal parents/caregivers and community are
>
> effectively involved in the education process" (p20).

These recommendations set the agenda for increased Aboriginal parent and community involvement in schools. They are supported by the assumption that this involvement has positive effects on academic performance and helps to overcome cultural barriers, thus making school more relevant to Aboriginal children.

1.1 Significance of This Study

Most researchers and theorists support the trend toward increased family participation in their children's schooling. However, some researchers are acknowledging gaps in empirical knowledge and suggest that although parent involvement in their children's education can be a positive force it is also important to consider that there may be negative effects to parental involvement (White, Taylor & Moss 1992; Lareau & Shumar 1996). Coleman and Churchill (1997) suggest two challenges relating to the issue of family involvement. The first is the lack of consensus in defining family involvement. It can mean different things to different people and research does not always clearly indicate what form of involvement is being measured. The second challenge is the diversity of family-school environments. Some families may be more responsive to school

policies and family involvement because the school environment is congruent with the home environment. A lack of family involvement by other families does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in their children's education. Therefore, it is important to obtain empirical data exploring the reasons families are or are not involved in their children's schooling and to identify valued forms of involvement that can be specifically measured for their links with student outcomes.

This study sets out to investigate the participants' perceptions of the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process, explore the reasons for the current levels of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process, and identify forms of parental involvement that are valued by the participants. In addition, related issues that are raised by the participants are investigated. The study seeks to identify similarities and differences in the responses of the participants and the subsequent implications for the implementation of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process.

1.2 Research Problem

The implementation of the government recommendations on Aboriginal parental involvement in their children's education becomes the responsibility of schools and will directly affect not only the school staff members but also the families of Aboriginal children. In an area where support for the theory is widespread but where challenges exist, the purpose of this research is to give voice to those most directly affected by the recommendations. The qualitative nature of this study will

add to the empirical knowledge, providing a new insight into the issue of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process.

1.3 Research Questions

The three major questions to be addressed in this study are:

1. What are the opinions of the parents of Aboriginal children concerning the opportunities for, and the value of, Aboriginal parent and community involvement in the education process?

2. What are the opinions of early childhood educators concerning the opportunities for, and the value of, Aboriginal parent and community involvement in the education process?

3. What are the similarities and differences between the opinions of parents and educators concerning the opportunities for, and value of, Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process?

1.4 Definition of Terms

1.4.1 Aboriginal

In this study the Aboriginal children investigated were those identified by school records to be of Aboriginal descent. Reference to Aboriginal school staff and Aboriginal parents includes those participants who identified themselves as being Aboriginal. Therefore, this study accepted the Aboriginality of those participants

who identified with the Aboriginal community and who claimed Aboriginal heritage.

1.4.2 Parent

In recognition of the diversity of family situations apparent in Aboriginal homes, this study defines the parent as the primary caregiver of the Aboriginal child. Therefore, it may include a family or community member who is not the child's biological parent or legal guardian, but who is the child's primary caregiver and has accepted parental responsibilities for the child.

1.4.3 Involvement

As it is the aim of the study for participants to identify the type of involvement they value, this study adheres to the broadest definition of involvement to include contributions to any aspect of the child's education. This would encompass every type of involvement in education, from participation in school-based activities and decision-making groups, to supporting the child's learning in the home.

1.4.4 Early Childhood Education

The Western Australian Government identifies early childhood education as inclusive of children from three to eight years of age. However, this study investigated families and educators of children attending kindergarten (ages 3-4years) and preprimary (ages 4-5years) as these are the initial levels of entry into the Western Australian school system.

Having introduced this study on Aboriginal parental involvement in early childhood education, it is noted that there have been previous studies relating to parental involvement in schools and the education of indigenous and ethnic minority groups. Therefore, it is important to review the literature that is available and consider what is already known. Chapter two provides a review of the literature.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

In past years, there has been much discussion on parental involvement in education. Reynolds (1992) noted that,

> "few activities in education have had more appeal than PI (parent involvement)" (p441).

In early childhood programmes it has become accepted as developmentally appropriate practice to work with parents (Bredekamp, 1987). This chapter will review literature relating to parental involvement in schools. It will also review literature discussing the theory behind parental involvement in early childhood centres and the empirical knowledge relating to parental involvement. As this study relates to indigenous people of Western Australia, the review will include literature pertaining to indigenous education, as well as relevant government documents.

2.1 The Theory Behind Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Centres.

There has long been theoretical ground for supporting parental involvement in early childhood centres. It has been argued that there would be benefits for children if parents and teachers collaborated, and over the years interest has grown in the need to maintain continuity between the different social settings in which children find themselves.

The practice of working with parents is supported by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. He theorized that systems outside the child (e.g. home, school, church, and neighbourhood) can influence a child's development in the way they interact with the child and also in the way they interact with each other (Puckett and Black, 2001). This theory suggests that child development at school is more complex than the influence of the child-teacher relationship. Rather, development is also influenced by other relationships, such as the parent-teacher relationship. Indeed it is the whole social experience that mediates development.

Shimoni and Baxter (2001) pick up Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as an important model for early childhood professionals. Its importance is seen in the recognition of the intertwined nature of factors affecting development. Shimoni and Baxter suggest that the application of the ecological approach helps early childhood professionals to see the child in a more holistic way. It helps in the understanding of factors that impact the child; provides insight into the relationship between the child, the family and the early childhood centre; and suggests that promoting the well-being of children entails involvement on many levels. In addition, they seize on the need for professionals, not simply to know the family, but to be aware of the family as a system. This includes such things as knowing the implicit rules that operate in each family; knowing the roles of all the members of the family; being aware of the impact of interactions with family members; and being aware of potential misunderstandings.

The link between social experience and cognitive development is also maintained in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development (Berk and Winsler, 1995). This theory asserts that social experiences shape the way an individual thinks and interprets the world. It emphasises the importance of understanding the social relations of an individual so that one can better understand that individual.

More recently, Robert Pianta (1997) has also emphasised the importance of social relationships in mediating performance at school in the early years, citing various studies which support this concept. He concluded that social processes are as significant as developmentally appropriate practice for academic outcomes in early childhood. In addition, he identified the need for continuity across the child-adult relationships and emphasized the need for schools to be aware of other child-adult relations in assessing and treating the child's performance.

Emphasis on continuity across systems has also been an important part of discussions relating to the education of indigenous and minority groups. Budby (1994) reasoned that parent and community involvement in the planning and implementation levels would increase the possibility that the goals of the parents would match the goals of the school, making the educational process meaningful to Aboriginal people. He suggested that parents were the key to making a difference in schools serving Aboriginal families. The Government of Western Australia Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice (1994) also noted that close co-operation between parents and teachers was required to provide continuity in the children's education (p359).

In addition to the emphasis on continuity across social systems, concern about assimilation is also expressed. Heitmeyer, Nilan and O'Brien (1996) noted that Aboriginal values are lost under conditions where emphasis is on changing children's behaviour to fit the school values. They argued the case for a new model of education that would merge the knowledge of both cultures. The Yolngu metaphore of "Ganma" was used to describe this model. Ganma is where a river from the sea and a river from the land mutually engulf and enrich each other, forming a lagoon. Therefore, the "Ganma" education model would be the meeting and mixing of Aboriginal and Western cultures, resulting in both cultures mutually informing each other and being enriched by the experience. It acknowledges that there is an Aboriginal way of knowing, that is different but not inferior to the Western way of knowing. However, Heitmeyer et al. suggest that this model is a paradigmatic shift, involving great changes to the present situation and may be currently unattainable. Therefore, their suggested short-term strategy towards "Ganma" is for Aboriginal people to participate in and control education of Aboriginal students and also some areas of the education of non-Aboriginal students. The purpose of parental involvement is, therefore, to empower Aboriginal people to provide a culturally appropriate curriculum that acknowledges Aboriginal ways of knowing.

Consequently, the importance placed on the social context of learning, the desire of early childhood educators to develop the whole child and the emphasis on

empowerment rather than assimilation for indigenous and minority families, have led to a call for increased parental involvement in early childhood programmes.

2.2 The Empirical Knowledge

The practice of involving parents in early childhood centres assumes that all participants will benefit from parental involvement in the programmes (Powell, 1989). There is empirical evidence showing a correlation between parental involvement and student achievement. However, in the past, definitions of parental involvement have been ambiguous and there does not appear to be any agreement as to what parental involvement really means (Shimoni and Baxter, 2001; Coleman and Churchill, 1997; Marcon, 1999). In addition, empirical evidence does not always support the assumption that all parental involvement is beneficial (Powell 1989) and there has been very little investigation into negative effects of parent involvement (Griffith, 1996; Lareau and Shumar, 1996). Therefore, the empirical evidence demonstrates that although there is support for parental involvement in the education of their children, there are gaps in the available data and parental involvement cannot be considered uniformly effective (Shimoni and Baxter, 1996; Coleman and Churchill, 1997).

2.2.1   Gaps in Empirical knowledge

Increasingly, reviewers are acknowledging problems in past research with methodology and over-generalization of data and are suggesting that empirical support for parental involvement to improve student performance is mixed and

inconclusive (Powell, 1989; White, Taylor and Moss, 1992; Edwards and Warin, 1999)

In his review of the literature, Powell (1989) noted that research supports the use of some practices that involve parents in the early childhood centre, while failing to support the use of other practices. He also noted problems of inappropriate generalization, scarcity of research and limited applicability of available data in the field of early childhood education. In addition, Powell suggested that the empirical evidence did not support the assumed causal pathway of parent-teacher collaboration leading to home-school continuity, leading to improved child competence. However, Powell concluded that the absence of data was a reflection of the research done and not the importance of the home-centre relations. He further suggested that the theoretical ground for parental involvement was strong and deserved to be tested more completely.

White, Taylor & Moss (1992) also conducted an analysis of parent involvement studies and found that although reviewers had cited these studies in support of parental involvement, there was no convincing evidence for this position. It was argued that poor methodology and insufficient analysis resulted in misinterpretation of data. For example, in their meta-analysis of the studies, White, et al. found no evidence that intervention programmes involving parents achieved greater effect than intervention that did not involve parents. They concluded that the empirical evidence could not support claims that parent involvement in early intervention leads to greater benefits. However, White, et al.

acknowledged that the only type of parent involvement their study addressed was parents as intervenors and the conclusions of their analysis cannot be generalized to include all types of parent involvement. They suggested the need for systematic examination of the types of parent involvement to discover which types of parent involvement will benefit which children and their families.

Additionally, Lareau and Shumar (1996) expressed serious reservations about the claims of benefits from parental involvement, particularly in the light of policies mandating family-school relationships. They were unenthusiastic about the ability of policies mandating parental involvement to close the gap in outcomes between privileged and non-privileged students. Lareau and Shumar suggest that not all parents will be able to participate at every level and some will not be able to participate at all. They further suggest that parents' choice not to be involved may be due to any number of factors, rather than to a lack of interest. In their own research, Lareau and Shumar found that the negative consequences of parental involvement sometimes included parent-child conflict. Furthermore, they suggested that there were indications in other studies of negative effects of parental involvement that had not been explored by researchers. Lareau and Shumar concluded that although forging family-school relationships can be valuable, some negative outcomes of parent involvement have been undervalued and the diversity of parent perspectives has been overlooked. However, they do not suggest that parent involvement be dismissed, rather that policy makers and schools acknowledge and accommodate the diversity of parent perspectives.

Anderson and Smith (1999) also emphasise the need for schools to accommodate the diversity of parental perspectives. They suggest that the trends most impacting on parents' ability to be involved in school programmes are single parent households, non-traditional families, out-side-of home employment and cultural and ethnic diversity. Thus families faced with such circumstances are less likely to be able to participate in school activities. Nevertheless, Anderson and Smith maintain that most parents want to be involved in their child's education and their circumstance will not preclude them from doing do so when their situation is acknowledged and accommodated.

However, Cooper and Mosley (1999) make the comment that there are times when involving the parent at school is not in the best interests of either the child or the parent. They suggest that this may be the case when there is tension in the home environment; or the child is abused or neglected; or the student has behavioural problems; or the parent is overly authoritarian. It then becomes the school's responsibility to assess how beneficial it will be for the family to be involved at school.

Other writers who address their recommendations to policy makers and practitioners are Edwards and Warin (1999). They argue that parental involvement is currently endorsed as a means of improving academic achievement, even though a review of the literature suggests that it may not always be worthwhile. They support the view expressed by Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) that areas of parental involvement have not been sufficiently

analysed or theorised. In their study, Edwards and Warin found that parent involvement initiatives in the United Kingdom were implemented as a one-way flow of information in an effort to make parents an agent of the school. They suggest that not only does this ignore what parents have to offer, but it may place disadvantaged children in double jeopardy, as it is their parents who are least likely to be able to operate as agents of the school. In their closing argument, Edwards and Warin support parental involvement that allows a two-way flow of information, but recommend that before this can happen, teachers require training and professional development in order to more completely understand the complexities of parental involvement.

Therefore, it can be seen that although questions are being asked about the validity of some forms of parent involvement and gaps in the empirical knowledge are being recognized, it is not being suggested that parental involvement be dismissed. Rather, what is being recommended is that schools be thoughtful about how and why they implement parent involvement strategies. In addition, acknowledgement is made of the need for future researchers to make clear definitions of the types of parent involvement being recommended and to explore the impact of each type of parent involvement on student outcomes.

2.2.2   Research Base Supporting Parent Involvement

Researchers are acknowledging the gaps in knowledge and inconsistency of results and the more recent studies are attempting to address these issues and

clearly define the type of involvement being measured. An American study by Astone & McLanahan (1991) found that student-rated home engagement is an important influence on academic success.

Astone and McLanahan (1991) examined family structure and its influence on school achievement. Although they focused on the influence of family structure on learning outcomes, they also examined the influence of other variables such as parenting styles and aspirations, on student achievement. Astone and McLanahan analysed data from the High School and Beyond (HSB) study conducted in 1980 and three subsequent surveys completed by a sub-sample of the HSB respondents in 1982, 1984, and 1986.

The HSB study is a nationally representative study that includes students who were randomly selected from 1000 high schools. Students were the source of the data, although some school records were included. Astone and McLanahan (1991) examined the influence of six parenting variables on six student outcomes. The six independent variables were family structure, parental college aspirations, mothers' monitoring of school progress, fathers' monitoring of school progress, general supervision and parent talk with the student. The student outcome variables were the educational aspirations of the student, the students' grade average, school attendance, student attitude to school, continuous school retention and completion of high school by age 22.

The results of the investigation indicated that the two parenting variables of, general supervision and parental college aspirations for their children, were significantly and positively related to all of the student outcomes. In addition, the monitoring of school progress was positively and significantly related to most of the outcomes. This adds to the empirical support for parental involvement in their children's schooling. In particular, the students' perceptions of parental college aspirations, parental monitoring of school progress and the parents' general supervision were positively associated with student outcomes. This study did not measure in-school involvement such as volunteering for school activities and attending school events. Also, in generalizing this knowledge, it must be remembered that the sample was of high school children, rather than children in the early childhood years.

Reynolds (1992) conducted a study with younger children. He suggested that few previous studies had compared types of involvement and that the perceptions of teachers, parents and children may vary and thus affect what is reported. Therefore, Reynolds examined the influence of different types of involvement as reported by teachers, parents, and students on the mathematics and reading achievements of the students. The students' results in standardized reading and mathematics tests were used as measures of student achievement. Reynolds suggested that results may vary depending on the sample. The sample for his study comprised second year students considered at risk because they were from minority, low-income families in poor neighbourhoods. Therefore, his results are specifically related to early childhood children from minority, low-income groups.

Reynold's findings indicated that although the results varied according to data source (whether teacher, parent or student), there is a significant and stable influence of parent involvement on student achievement. For example, teacher-rated parental involvement had a significant and high correlation with student achievement, while self-reported parental involvement had a significant but low to moderate correlation with student achievement. Child-rated parent involvement had a low but significant correlation with school achievement.

Reynolds (1992) also found that the influence of parental involvement was not uniform across the types of involvement. For example, parent and teacher ratings of the parents' participation in school activities was positively and significantly associated with student achievement, while child-rated parental involvement at school was negatively and significantly associated with student achievement. This could be explained by the association children make between problem behaviour and school involvement, influencing them to under-report school involvement. In addition, teacher-rated home engagement activities were positively and significantly associated with student achievement, while parent-rated home engagement activities had a positive but not significant association with student achievement. However, the child-rated home engagement activity of talking about school at home was positively and significantly associated with student achievement, while helping with homework was negatively but not significantly associated with student achievement. Again these results may be reflecting the perceptions of the respondents, rather than the actual influence of parental involvement. Also the sample included only those students whose parents had

returned their questionnaires and the absence of hard to reach parents would have reduced the variation required to see the influence of parent-rated home engagement.

Therefore, the results of Reynold's (1992) study supports the findings of Astone and McLanahan (1991) that student-rated home engagement is an important influence on achievement. However, it highlights the need to be specific about what is being measured, as one form of home engagement had a strong association with achievement, while another did not. Each type of involvement has its own level of influence. Reynold's study also demonstrates that the perceptions of the data source may also be influencing results. However, it is supportive of the correlation between parental involvement and student outcomes for minority and low-income families, no matter what the data source.

In Canada, Desclandes, Putuin and Leclerc (1999) examined the relationship between family characteristics, parenting style, parental involvement in school, and school achievement. The findings supported a positive association between parenting style and parental involvement and school achievement. The data for this study were gathered from questionnaires administered to students at school and from official school records. Therefore, the family structure, parenting style and parental involvement measures were student reported. It was found that regardless of family structure, the students' perceptions of parental warmth, supervision, and affective support in schooling behaviours appeared to be critical in mediating school achievement. Although this study was of middle class, high

school students and results may have varied in the early childhood setting, it provides further confirmation that student-reported parental involvement in their children's schooling is positively associated with student achievement.

An American study designed to discover how much family involvement was needed to influence student outcomes of preschool children in hard to engage families, found that a minimal amount of involvement resulted in a positive influence on student academic and developmental progress (Marcon, 1999). This study surveyed sixty-two teachers from forty-nine schools and interviewed them to determine the contact they had with each child's parents. Parental involvement was measured by identifying four categories of involvement including parent-teacher conference, home visit by teacher, extended class visit by parent, and parental help with class activity. Parents were then divided into two groups by classifying parent contact as low for those who fulfilled 0-1 categories and high for those parents who fulfilled 3-4 categories. Therefore, parental involvement that was categorized as high actually included minimal parental involvement that was only marginally more than no parental involvement. The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale – Classroom Edition was the standardized measure used to assess the children's behavioural development and the school district's Early Childhood Progress Report was used to assess academic and physical skills. This study found that parental involvement at school had a significant influence on student outcomes. However, since the teachers assessed the children's academic progress and no standardised measures were used, it is possible that the teachers' assessments of the children's academic progress were influenced by the contact

they had with the children's parents. Therefore, the source of the data may be confounding the results of the study. Nonetheless, the Vineland composite score was significantly higher for the high involvement group and the results continue to provide support for the benefits of parental involvement at school.

Another American study (Desimone, 1999) that focused on parent initiated parental involvement and its association with student achievement, used standardized test results in mathematics and reading, as well as the students' grades. Twelve parental involvement measures were correlated with each of the student achievement measures and controlled for ethnic identification and income. The ethnic groups were categorised into the four groups of White, Black, Hispanic and Asian, while the income groups measured were low-income families and middle-income families. Desimone (1999) found that results varied according to the data source, the students' race-ethnicity and family income, and the parental involvement being measured. For example, parent-school involvement had a stronger association with test scores than grades; student perceptions of involvement were more able to predict achievement than were parents' perceptions for all races and income groups; and school volunteering was more strongly associated with achievement for White middle-income students than for other Asian, Black, Hispanic and low-income groups. The results of this study also confirm that parental involvement can have a negative association with student outcomes. For example, student-reported parent help with homework had a negative association with achievement for all races-ethnicities and income levels. When cross-model comparisons were done, many of the variations were

found to be statistically significant. Therefore, these results suggest that the influence of parental involvement is not uniformly beneficial, although it continues to support the statistically significant correlation between some types of parental involvement and student outcomes.

Thus, more recent studies continue to show a positive correlation between parental involvement and student achievement. However, it is becoming evident that some forms of parental involvement have a greater impact than others and that various unmeasured variables may be confounding results. The importance of measuring specific parental involvement behaviours and the need to anticipate and test for other variables is apparent in order for a greater understanding of the mechanisms through which parental involvement affects student outcomes. Some researchers are investigating integrated hypotheses.

One such team is that of Reynolds, Mavrogenes, Bezruczko, and Hagemann (1996) who conducted a study to investigate mediators of the effects of preschool intervention on children's school achievement in year six. The sample was of low-income minority children and included two groups, one of which participated in the intervention Child Parent Centre Programme (CPR) while others did not. Children were excluded from the study if they were not part of the CPR programme group or if they did not have the same school comparison. The groups were matched on school characteristics, race, sex, parent education, income, kindergarten participation, and primary-grade intervention. The investigated measures explaining student achievement included preschool participation,

kindergarten cognitive readiness using the Iowa Tests Basic Skills standardized assessment, teacher-rated school adjustment, parent and teacher rated parental involvement, school mobility, grade retention and reading and mathematics achievement using the Iowa Tests Basic Skills standardized tests. A model was estimated using latent-variable structural modeling techniques. The study confirmed that preschool intervention yielded the strongest association with student outcomes in year six and also that family-support was one of the factors mediating student achievement in year six. However, Reynolds et al. found other factors also mediated student performance and proposed an integrated hypothesis. When cognitive and family mediators were estimated together, instead of separately, a significant improvement in model fit emerged. Therefore, the need for parental involvement continues to be highlighted, but it is also linked with cognitive development.

James Griffith (1996) acknowledged that inconsistencies in findings were due to the lack of analysis of other variables that may influence participants' perceptions and affect results. He suggested that parental empowerment is important to student outcomes and aimed at investigating the relationship between parental involvement, parental empowerment and student outcomes. In his study, Griffith tested for student, teacher and school characteristics, including ethnic identification, gender, school grade, eligibility for free lunch, teacher experience, student-teacher ratio and school size. The respondents included parents from forty-two schools that were systematically chosen to represent a metropolitan school district with a total of one hundred and twenty-two elementary schools.

The involvement was measured by the frequency of participation in activities at school and student achievement was measured using the results of tests employed by the school system to assess each school's performance. Empowerment was measured by the parents' perceptions of the school's willingness to accommodate parental participation and governance. Griffith found neither ethnic identity nor eligibility for free lunch to be as strong a predictor of academic performance as parental involvement. Although parental involvement was the strongest predictor of academic performance, Griffith found that parents' perceptions of empowerment were also important in predicting academic performance.

Griffith (1996) conducted regression analyses that corresponded to four models in the prediction of student performance. These models controlled for school characteristics, student racial-ethnic characteristics, family income characteristics, and combined student and school characteristics. In all models, parental involvement and empowerment had the strongest association with student outcomes. These findings continue to support the correlation between parental involvement at school and student outcomes. However, they also suggest that the parents' perceptions of empowerment is another important variable associated with student outcomes, pointing to the need to institute parental involvement programmes that empower parents in the education process of their children. Others have also emphasised that a goal of parental involvement programmes should be to empower parents in their endeavour to participate in their children's education. (Shimoni and Baxter, 2001; Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer, 1999).

While some writers are investigating integrated theories, others accept past research advocating the value of parent involvement in school and are investigating characteristics of parental involvement programmes that are successful as well as the teachers who implement them.

Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli and Slostad (1999) conducted a study of three teachers. They found that all three teachers initiated frequent contact with parents, considered parents' needs, encouraged informal interactions, respected and trusted parents and enjoyed the process of involving parents in the education of their children. They also found that each teacher had developed their expertise in working with parents via a process of discovery, rather than through professional development or training. This prompted Lazar, et al. to survey 148 teachers to discover if lack of training in parental involvement was common to other teachers. They found that thirty-five percent of the teachers surveyed had received no formal training in the area of parental involvement; most teachers wanted this kind of educational support; and education on parent involvement was highly dependent on teacher initiative. Lazar et al. concluded that teachers both wanted and needed systemic pre-service and in-service training relating to parental involvement. Additionally, they advocated that teachers be provided with the opportunity to hear about the experiences of other teachers who were implementing successful parental involvement programmes and to experiment with parental involvement and monitor outcomes.

In a further article, Lazar and Slostad (1999) discussed obstacles to parent-teacher partnerships and identified ways in which they could be overcome. One obstacle to parental involvement discussed by Lazar and Slostad was the belief by many teachers that low-income and minority families do not value education: a narrow and largely inaccurate assumption. Lazar and Slostad identified overcoming such assumptions and understanding ways in which parents are able and would like to be involved, as important steps towards successful parental involvement programmes. An additional barrier to parental involvement identified by Lazar and Slostad, is the view held by teachers that parental involvement is an extra chore. However, they reported that teachers who overcame this barrier and engaged parents, believed that it relieved stress rather than added to it. Lazar and Slostad also reported that teachers effectively engaging parents gained professional status among parents and were less likely to experience miscommunication and conflict.

Similarly, Hepworth Berger (1995) reported that professionals who develop a good relationship with families, find them to be strong allies. Hepworth Berger also noted that there are different levels of parental involvement and that families change from one level to another at different times. Effective parent involvement does not require every parent to help out in the classroom; rather it requires communication and collaboration.

Therefore, the empirical evidence continues to support a positive correlation between parental involvement and student outcomes, although not uniformly.

Researchers are seeking a greater understanding of the mechanism through which parental involvement works and integrated hypotheses are being investigated. However, it remains undisputed that there are benefits to engaging parents in the education of their children. Educators are being encouraged to continue to reach out to parents and become informed about effective parental involvement.

2.3 Indigenous Education

There is a strong call for Aboriginal parental and community involvement in our Australian schools. However, the emphasis is on the need for parental involvement to include two-way communication and participation. Lippmann (1986) emphasizes the important role of parents as partners and contributors in the Aboriginal context and argues that involvement needs to accept the values and experience of Aboriginal parents.

A South Australian study of early childhood services in six Aboriginal communities found that although Aboriginal parents place a high priority on formal education, it creates a dilemma as it often contradicts and undermines the Aboriginal families' own cultural values, beliefs and identity (Glover, 1994). In addition, Glover found that there is a fear among some Aboriginal families that early schooling may lead to assimilation and loss of Aboriginal identity. These fears appear to be well founded. A study of urban Aboriginal children by Malin (1990) found that due to a mismatch of values, the skills and characteristics of

many Aboriginal children were not well-regarded in the classroom situation. Their successes usually remained unacknowledged by their teachers.

Furthermore, Wooltorton (1997) presented evidence suggesting that the current education system is assimilatory. He maintained that although there are individual success stories, the assimilatory approach is responsible for the negative student outcomes of Aboriginal children from the South-west of Western Australia (Nyungar students). Wooltorton suggests that hope for Nyungar students will come when there is real regard for Nyungar culture and practice, and when Nyungar people are involved in decision making and implementation of their education. Similar suggestions are made by others who call for the education of Indigenous students to include a genuine two-way partnership with their families that allows for the acceptance of parents' values and provides autonomy, and not assimilation (Harris, 1993; Heslop, 1998).

Burney (1997) stresses that educational settings must acknowledge, respect and cater for young Aboriginal children's Aboriginality. Empirical evidence supporting such advice can be found in a South Australian study of ten successful Aboriginal students in years eleven and twelve (Russell, 1999). Russell investigated factors associated with the retention and achievement of these ten students at school. She found that all students believed it important for teachers to establish a good relationship with them. Characteristics of such a relationship included non-racist behaviour, being culturally aware, being sensitive to the feelings of Aboriginal students, dealing with racism and assisting Aboriginal

students deal with racism. In addition, the most significant school factor influencing the retention and achievement of the students was found to be the appointment of Aboriginal education workers who facilitated all other factors. Therefore, the importance of supporting Aboriginality is verified.

The need for culturally appropriate programmes in urban settings is highlighted by statistics demonstrating the situation in Canberra, which is home to Australia's most affluent Aborigines. The Aboriginal teenagers of 1986 were three times more likely than the non-Aboriginal teenagers to leave school early and twice as likely to be out of work when they did (Keeffe, 1992). This would indicate that there is a need for urban classrooms to be made relevant to Aboriginal children. Aboriginal participation in the education process is a common recommendation for the purpose of providing a culturally inclusive curriculum.

Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (1999) investigated participation by parents in school education. Their study involved the use of semi-structured interviews with school staff and parents of Aboriginal children from twenty-two primary and secondary schools in Western Australian metropolitan and regional districts. Harslett et al. concluded that Aboriginal parents are participating and involved in their children's schooling to varying degrees, but that empowerment to participate more fully will occur when intercultural dynamics are recognized and school leaders commit to developing more autonomous relationships with the indigenous community. Therefore, the key to greater

indigenous participation is in overcoming the challenges presented by intercultural dynamics.

Models of indigenous education from overseas that are deemed to be successful, include two-way parent involvement as a major component of the programme. Stiles (1997) examined four such programmes from four different countries. The four programmes included the Cree Way Project from Quebec, the Peach Springs Haulapai program from Arizona, Te Kohanga Reo from New Zealand, and Punana Leo from Hawaii. Each of these programmes incorporated parent and community involvement and was designed to support an endangered indigenous language. The benefits included, not only the revitalization of interest in the indigenous language, but also a decrease in student drop out rates and an increase in sense of identity and academic outcomes. Interestingly, all four programmes received some initial reservations from the community, but with two-way communication, these barriers were overcome. Stiles found that the time taken to develop the grounding elements of community support, linguistic training and resource development, was the key to the success of these programmes. Therefore, the involvement of parents, community and indigenous staff was a key element in all of these successful models. The fact that others have referred to the success of these programmes would confirm their importance as models for indigenous education.

Ford (1996) considered Te Kohanga Reo to be a model worthy of consideration for the Australian context. Furthermore, Minimbah, an Australian school set in the

rural city of Armidale, New South Wales, implemented a Literacy Nest Programme with elements very similar to that of Te Kohanga Reo (Watson and Roberts, 1996). In this community, few Aboriginal families spoke a traditional language. Therefore, the curriculum focused on developing English language skills. Parental involvement was accepted at whatever level parents felt comfortable. In addition, various opportunities for parents to become involved were presented. The types of participation valued and encouraged, included teaching their child the sounds of the alphabet, telling and reading stories, purchasing books for the children, sharing talents such as cooking and painting, sharing artifacts and cultural history and attending staff workshops and planning sessions. Watson and Roberts found that Aboriginal parental involvement was not only attainable, but resulted in a culturally inclusive programme, with benefits extending to student outcomes, staff and parents.

Other Australian programmes such as the Arrernte Early Childhood Project, also include parental and community involvement (Dobson, Riley, McCormack, and Hartman, 1997). This project stresses the need to involve extended family members in the development and implementation of the programme. Rosalie Riley reported

> "When we developed the curriculum, we got two strands out of it; the family and
>
> Arrernte values. A lot of input has come from elders and parents ..." (Dobson,
>
> Riley, Mc Cormack and Hartman, 1997. p25)

The curriculum included visits to traditional country land. The knowledge, skills and materials collected from these visits were taken back to the classroom to support the children's learning at school. In the classroom, older children from

the group taught the young ones. Family and extended family members were included at all levels of curriculum development and implementation.

Therefore, the literature relating to indigenous education suggests that Aboriginal parents value formal education, but are afraid that Aboriginal identity will be lost in the process. The need for Aboriginal involvement in decision-making and the importance of schools supporting Aboriginal identity are highlighted. There is acknowledgment that Aboriginal parents are already participating to some degree, but empowerment to participate more fully is required. The call is for a two-way partnership in the education process, as opposed to parental involvement that requires parents to act as agents for the school. Some schools have achieved two-way partnerships and are used as models for appropriate practice.

2.4 Government Documents

Recent government documents have acknowledged the recommendation for increased Aboriginal participation in the educational process of Aboriginal children and have included this recommendation in national and state priorities. There are four main documents that identify the current government aims for Aboriginal education in Western Australia. Following are brief details of these four documents with an emphasis on parental and community involvement recommendations.

2.4.1 The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy

This document lists 21 goals for Aboriginal education, seven of which relate to Aboriginal parental and community involvement in educational decision making or early childhood education. The very first is,

> "to establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of pre-school, primary and secondary education services for their children" (cited in Education Department of Western Australia 1997, p34).

Thus, it identifies Aboriginal parental and community decision making in early childhood education, as a significant issue.

2.4.2 A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002. Early Childhood Education.

Eight priorities were identified from the 21 goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) for early childhood education. The first priority is,

> "to establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making" (p11).

This priority acknowledges the significance of Aboriginal parental and community participation in the education process. The strategies recommended for its

implementation include developing partnership relationships with indigenous communities.

2.4.3 The Western Australian Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Education and Training for the Triennium 1997-1999

This plan was designed to complement the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002 and was developed in collaboration with educational providers and Aboriginal bodies to address the needs of the Western Australian situation. The first priority of the plan is,

"To ensure Aboriginal people are involved in, and Aboriginal perspectives

and attitudes impact on, education and training decision making" (p4).

This relates directly to the first national priority. The fourth priority addresses the need for participation by Aboriginal children in education and Outcome 4.3 identifies increased parent and caregiver involvement as a means of achieving this priority (p8). Once again the importance of caregiver involvement in education is highlighted.

2.4.4 Aboriginal Education Operational Plan 1997- 1999

Key focus areas are identified in this document with Key Focus Area 4 being Aboriginal Community Participation. This focus area acknowledges that,

"Aboriginal people are still not effectively involved in the schooling process

of their children" (p21).

It further states that,

> "successful schools communicate and involve Aboriginal families in creating an environment which welcomes and fosters cultural identity of Aboriginal people" (p20).

The performance characteristic for this focus area is,

> "the extent to which Aboriginal parents/caregivers and community are effectively involved in the education process" (p21).

Therefore, the involvement of Aboriginal parents and caregivers in the education of their children is highlighted as an essential ingredient of successful schools and a strategy to be initiated by Western Australian schools serving Aboriginal students.

2.5 Summary

The literature indicates that there has been ambiguity in the definition of parental involvement; that there are gaps in the available data; and that parental involvement cannot be considered uniformly effective. In addition, the concerns raised by Lareau and Shumar (1996) with regard to ability or desire of parents to be involved in the education process deserve consideration. This has become evident in the light of research indicating that the influence of parental involvement varies according to sample, source and the particular parental involvement being measured. However, the study by Watson and Roberts (1996) indicates that increased Aboriginal parental involvement in the educational process is both achievable and desirable. The positive outcomes in schools with a high level of parental involvement, and the strong correlation between parental

involvement and student outcomes, are an indication that parental involvement can and does have positive effects.

Nevertheless, it is also apparent that parental involvement may be part of a complex mechanism for improving student outcomes and that other variables need to be considered in conjunction with parental involvement. Support for this argument is provided by the study of Griffith (1996) which confirmed the links between parental involvement and empowerment and student achievement. The link with parental involvement and empowerment has been recognized in indigenous education, where the emphasis is on parental involvement for the purpose of empowerment and not for the purpose of making parents agents of the school.

The implementation of the government recommendations for increased Aboriginal parent and community involvement in schools affects both school staff members and the parents and caregivers of Aboriginal children. In an area where support for the theory is great but where challenges exist, the purpose of this research is to give voice to those most directly affected by the recommendations. Therefore, this study aims to discover the opinions of the parents and educators of Aboriginal children and provide insight into their response to government recommendations for Aboriginal and community involvement in the education process.

The next chapter discusses the method employed in this study to investigate the opinions of educators and parents towards Aboriginal parental involvement in their children's education.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

In this chapter the conceptual framework driving this study is discussed. Also outlined are the selection of participants, the choice and development of the research tool, the procedure for data collection and the limitations of the study.

3.0 Conceptual Framework

The literature reveals that there are links between parental involvement and student achievement. In addition, parental involvement for indigenous and minority groups is recommended for the purpose of empowerment and continuity across systems. However, not all forms of parental involvement can be assumed to be beneficial. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the opinions of the participants with regard to the implementation of the government recommendations for increased Aboriginal parent and community participation in the education process for the purpose of identifying parental involvement that is valued.

In investigating the opinions of parents and educators on the value of, and opportunities for, parent involvement in schools, it is expected to discover if there is congruency of perception between educators and parents with regard to what is happening and why. Reynolds (1992) found that perceptions across data source can vary. Therefore, by giving voice to the opinions of parents and educators,

matches and mismatches of perception can be identified and recommendations made to address any incongruity.

Furthermore, valued types of parental involvement can be identified. The literature calls for future research to clearly define the parental involvement being measured. Thus, the identification of valued parental involvement also identifies types of parental involvement for future researchers to define and test for links to student outcomes.

In the identification of the valued parental involvement, Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology is used to categorize the responses of the participants. Epstein and Dauber's typology includes,

Type 1. Basic obligations of families: Provision of health and safety for the child, provision of a positive home environment, parenting practices, and behaviours that support school learning.

Type 2. Basic obligations of schools: School communications with families about the school programme and the child's progress.

Type 3. Involvement at school: Participation in school activities and events, from volunteer work at school to attendance at special performances and events.

Type 4. Involvement in learning activities at home: Assisting children at home in learning activities.

Type 5. Involvement in decision-making: Participation in advisory, governance and advocacy committees or groups.

Finally, it is anticipated that the implementation of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process requires understanding of issues that should not be overlooked. Any issues raised can be highlighted and addressed.

Therefore, this study aims to discover why Aboriginal parent involvement in the education process is or is not happening; types of parental involvement valued by schools and parents; and issues that require understanding in the implementation of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process.

3.1 Participants

The participants for this study were drawn from schools selected on the basis of location in respect to the metropolitan area of the City of Perth, Western Australia and in respect to the Aboriginal population as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997). Areas of significant Aboriginal population were chosen in order that parents of Aboriginal children could be accessed. Five schools located in the north, south, and eastern suburbs of Perth were selected. The western suburbs were omitted because there were no significant Aboriginal populations in these areas. Permission was sought to proceed with the study and all five schools agreed to participate.

The total number of participants was forty-five and consisted of fifteen parents and thirty school staff members. Table 1 provides a profile of the participants of the study. It is important to note here that non-Aboriginal parents of Aboriginal

children were not excluded from this study, since they have responsibility for the care and education of their Aboriginal children and they reflect the diversity of situations from which Aboriginal children come.

Table 1 Participants For The Study

	Parents	AIEWs and Assistants	Teachers	Administration Staff	TOTAL
Aboriginal	10	8	1	-	19
Non-Aboriginal	5	7	8	6	26
TOTAL	15	15	9	6	45

3.1.3 Selection of The School Staff

As the aim of the study was to explore the opinions of those implementing the recommendations for increased Aboriginal parental involvement, staff members sharing contact with the parents of the Aboriginal children attending the kindergarten and preprimary sectors of the five participating schools were invited to participate. The final composition of staff members participating in the study included six administrative staff, nine kindergarten and preprimary teachers, three primary school Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers [AIEW], and twelve kindergarten and preprimary teacher assistants.

3.1.2   Selection of The Parents

The parents of the Aboriginal children attending the kindergarten and preprimary centres were drawn from those who responded to an invitation to participate in the study. On the advice of school staff and AIEWs, initial contact with the parents was made through two methods. The first method comprised a morning or afternoon tea and information session where the proposed research was outlined to those present and an invitation to be involved was extended. In two schools the information session was carried out in conjunction with the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness [ASSPA] meeting. The second method was to make contact on a one-to-one basis with parents as they collected their children from school. An introduction from the school AIEW or the class teacher sometimes preceded this.

On initial contact, twenty-eight parents agreed to participate in the study. However, thirteen were subsequently unable to keep appointments, so that at the completion of the study, fifteen parents had been interviewed.

3.2 Research Tool

Much of the previous research on family involvement in the education process has been quantitative. Therefore, a descriptive method of research, using a qualitative approach is adopted in this study to elicit responses that will give new insight into this issue. The aim of the study is to give voice to the opinions of those most

directly responsible for implementing recommendations for parental involvement. Gay (1992) indicates that descriptive methods are appropriate when studies are concerned with the attitudes and opinions of informants.

3.2.1 Pre-testing

Semi-structured interview schedules were initially developed in consultation with individuals working in the field of Aboriginal education. They were then trialled with two Aboriginal parents of primary aged children. Following feedback from these sources, three guided interview schedules were developed: one for school administrators, one for the other school staff, and one for the parents (See appendix A, B, and C).

3.2.2 Triangulation

Triangulation is a technique used to improve the internal validity of a study and may include the use of two or more data collection methods or two or more sources of data (Burns, 1994; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This study achieved triangulation by interviewing participants from three different sources. Perspectives were provided by the parents of the Aboriginal children, the school staff who come in regular contact with Aboriginal children and the school administrative staff who are held responsible for the education of the Aboriginal children. In addition, the interview schedules included some close-ended questions as well as open-ended questions, in order to maintain a combination of objectivity and depth. This allows responses to be tabulated as well as explained

(Gay, 1992). Riessman (1993) advises that the combination of open-ended questions with close-ended items is an appropriate practice, as the different data collection methods produce different information. Therefore, there was triangulation of source and data collection.

3.2.3   The Tool

As already noted, a guided interview schedule was developed after consultation and pre-testing. This format was chosen to allow participants to use their own words in response to the questions asked, thus producing in-depth data which would not be possible using a structured questionnaire. This method also enables the researcher to follow up on responses that are unclear or incomplete (Gay, 1992). Walcott (1985) supports the use of semi-structured interviews in research that is searching and sorting for themes supplied by the participant and recommends the practice as a primary research activity.

Each interview consisted of two parts: the first providing background information on the participant and the second addressing the research questions. The demographic data were sought for clear identification of the sample of participants and also for the detection of any variables that may influence the attitudes and opinions of the participants.

3. 3 Procedure

After permission to proceed with the study was granted by the Director General of the Education Department of Western Australia and the appropriate school district directors, data collection began in the beginning of the school term three of 1998 and continued until the end of the school year. School staff members were approached first. Once the principals and teachers agreed to participate, an interview time was arranged and decisions made on how best to make contact with parents. When contact was made with the parents an interview time was arranged at the parents' convenience. All the interviews were conducted with as much privacy as could be made available in order to maintain confidentiality. Three parents agreed to interviews being conducted in the privacy of their homes. The remaining twelve were interviewed at school. All staff members were interviewed on the school grounds.

During the interview, the interviewer manually recorded the responses. This method was chosen to avoid nervousness on the part of participants over the use of a recording device. It was also found to be useful in providing a natural "wait-time", allowing participants to add to or clarify their initial responses. The time taken to complete the interviews varied from thirty to ninety minutes and was at the discretion of the participant.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

It is acknowledged that the study surveys metropolitan schools where the situation differs from that pertaining to schools in rural and isolated geographical regions.

The schools are situated in areas of high Aboriginal population and therefore have access to support mechanisms such as AIEWs and in some cases Aboriginal preschools. Consequently, the situation may be different in urban schools with a smaller Aboriginal population where the support mechanisms are not in place, or in schools located in rural and remote areas. In addition, the investigation was made over the kindergarten and preprimary year levels so it is likely that the situation will differ in other settings.

The sample of parents who participated in this study is representative of the diversity of the Aboriginal community. However, because the method of contacting the parents was through the school, hard-to-reach parents may be under-represented. Never the less, parents considered to be hard-to-reach did participate and due to the qualitative nature of the data collection, these parents provided valuable insights to add to the scarce empirical knowledge available on Aboriginal parental involvement in their children's early education.

The results of the data collection are reported in the next four chapters. Each chapter discusses the results of one source of information. Chapter four reports the findings gleaned from interviews with the administrative staff; chapter five reports the teachers' responses; chapter six the assistants' responses; and chapter seven the parents' responses.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ADMINISTRATORS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study gathered from interviews with six administrative staff from five participating schools. The findings are reported in two sections. The first section reports the findings from Part A of the interview schedule and provides background information on the administrators and their teaching experience. These findings provide valuable insights into the administrators' experience as educators.

The second section reports the opinions of the administrators concerning the value of, and opportunities for, Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. These findings are reported from Part B of the interview schedule and respond to the second general research question dealing with the opinions of early childhood educators concerning the value of, and opportunities for, Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

4.1 Part A: Background of Administrators

The principals of all five schools participating in the study were interviewed along with one deputy principal. The deputy was interviewed at the recommendation of

the principal because of his extensive experience in Aboriginal education of both children and adults.

All the administrative staff possessed over twenty years' experience in the teaching profession, which included experience in schools with significant Aboriginal populations. They had also had prior experience in the role of principal or acting principal. However, none had been the principal of their current school for more than two years and four of the six administrators had less than three years experience as principal.

In the area of Aboriginal education, the administrative staff demonstrated that they were aware of, and had read government documents related to Aboriginal education. They were confident in their knowledge of Aboriginal issues, although three of the six administrators reported that they had not received any cross-cultural training. The limited cross-cultural training was an issue addressed by two principals, who maintained that there was very little training relating to Aboriginal education being offered when they undertook their teacher training. Three of the principals indicated that they had since participated in some cross-cultural professional development, but that it was minimal. In the words of one principal,

> "Professional development days are very sporadic and haphazard. Most
> stuff I know I have picked up from AIEWs and Aboriginal parent and
> community workers"

Therefore, although the administrators had limited cross-cultural training or professional development, they were confident of their knowledge of Aboriginal issues in education. They reported that they remained aware of Aboriginal issues in education and kept up to date with government documents, communicated with Aboriginal staff and community members, and occasionally participated in professional development relating to Aboriginal issues.

4.2 Part B: Opinions of Administrators

4.2.1 The Extent of Parental Involvement

Having indicated that they were aware of government documents recommending greater Aboriginal parent and community involvement in schools, the administrators also indicated that it was within their school philosophy to encourage the involvement of Aboriginal parents in their child's schooling. A typical comment was,

> "Parent involvement is highly encouraged for all parents."

However, two administrators expressed a personal belief that although parental involvement is encouraged, putting pressure on Aboriginal parents to participate was inappropriate. One contended,

> "My experience tells me, if parents come for that sort of pressure it is short
>
> term. Any parent involvement has to be in-built."

The other said,

"It is not realistic to involve parents who have other survival issues to deal

with."

This administrator maintained that full participation would be very difficult at his

school, because in addition to survival issues, differences of opinions exist

amongst Aboriginal groups. These differences mean that participation by some

families results in conflict with other families. Therefore, it becomes a greater

priority to maintain a nurturing environment for the children at school.

Although these two administrators expressed doubt about seeking the involvement

of all parents in their schools, they expressed the belief that Aboriginal parental

involvement in schools was desirable and part of their personal philosophy. Thus,

all administrative staff support the policy of seeking Aboriginal parental

involvement in school and believe that their school encourages Aboriginal

parental involvement.

While every administrator indicated that Aboriginal parental involvement was

encouraged, they also acknowledged that it was limited in their school. However,

one principal expressed pride in his school's record of dealing with Aboriginal

issues and believed that the school had developed a working relationship with the

Aboriginal community. This principal was comfortable with the levels of

Aboriginal parental involvement at his school and believed it to be equivalent to

non-Aboriginal parental involvement. The remaining five administrators

expressed concerns about the level of Aboriginal parental involvement in their

school. They voiced a desire to work towards building a more appropriate

relationship with the Aboriginal community. One of these five administrators

indicated that considerable progress had been made in this regard in the past year due to the changed role of the school AIEW and the priority given to forming relationships with parents. However, two of the administrators also believed that limited parental involvement was an issue for the whole school and not just for the Aboriginal population of the school.

Therefore, the administrative staff report support for increased Aboriginal parental involvement in schools and believe that it is encouraged in their school. However, two administrators discussed reservations about involving all parents. Additionally, all administrative staff reported Aboriginal parental involvement to be limited, with five of the six expressing concerns about this situation. However, one administrator expressed pride in the school's relationship with the Aboriginal community and two identified parental involvement as an issue for the whole school population, not just for the Aboriginal community.

4.2.2 An Explanation for the Extent of Parental Involvement

All six administrators acknowledged a level of challenge to the task of involving parents. One issue raised by all administrators was how to overcome the reluctance on the part of the parents to become involved in schools. In the words of one principal,

> "Willingness of people to be involved cannot be prescribed. Those parents who want to be involved will get involved."

Another principal accepted that schools had a part to play in developing greater parental involvement, but that there was a limit to what they could do. This principal commented,

> "We have to create the need but also the parents themselves have to want to
>
> be involved. You can only do what is in your control to do."

These comments indicate that administrators find overcoming the parents' reluctance to be involved in schools a challenge, with aspects beyond their realm of influence.

In understanding why parents seemed reluctant to become involved in school activities, most administrators cited more than one reason. One principal suggested that it was not appropriate to give just one reason as,

> "Aboriginal parents are no more one, than non-Aboriginal parents."

However, another principal said he had no idea why parents were reluctant, but then continued to give three possible reasons. Therefore, the number of responses may have been in recognition of the diverse nature of the Aboriginal population, or it may have been due to uncertainty as to why parents seem reluctant to be involved in schools.

Table 2 displays the reasons perceived by the administrators for the reluctance of the parents of Aboriginal children to become involved in their children's schools. As most administrators gave more than one response, all responses have been collated, categorized and reported under thematic headings.

Table 2 Reasons Perceived By Administrators For The Reluctance Of Aboriginal Parents To Become Involved In Schools.

Reason	n=6
The parents' view of school	4
Cultural issues	3
The type and degree of contact desired by parents	2
Systemic issues	1
Commitment to other priorities	1
The parents' view of their own skills	1
The level of education of the parents	1
The parents' value of schools and education.	1

From Table 2 it can be seen that the most frequently given reason perceived by administrators for Aboriginal parents' reluctance to become involved in their children's schools, is the parents' view of school. Underlying this theme is the assumption that past negative school experiences currently influence the parents' participation in schools. This assumption was voiced by three of the six administrative staff. Another administrator expressed the belief that if parents are comfortable with schools they will participate in school activities. These four administrators held the opinion that some Aboriginal parents were not involved in school activities because they held negative views of school and are therefore, not motivated to be involved.

The second most frequently given reason relates to cultural issues. Three of the six administrative staff made comments indicating that they perceive cultural

issues to be an influence on Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. As one principal stated,

> "The whole cultural experience of one hundred years has led to barriers
>
> being built up"

For this administrator, the past responses of the dominant culture to Aboriginal culture now influences the relationship between schools and Aboriginal parents. Thus, because of their history, it cannot be assumed that all Aboriginal parents desire involvement with the school.

Two other administrators noted that schools did not always consider the perspective of the Aboriginal culture and cited situations where expectations of the school did not embrace an Aboriginal cultural perspective. One administrator gave an example where a previous school viewed Aboriginal parental involvement as minimal because very few people attended the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) meetings. However, this administrator noted that parents discussed school matters informally and that those who did attend the meetings represented the opinions of others not in attendance. He asked,

> "What is involvement?"

In addition to the three administrators who believe that cultural issues influence parental involvement in schools, another administrator suggested that there are barriers within the education system. This administrator stated,

> "Most of our Aboriginal parents are concerned about children's education
>
> when you ask them but they are not necessarily involved in making it

happen. That could be because our education system is not set up to meet
their needs"

Although this administrator did not refer to Aboriginal culture, there is an indication that like the two administrators who believed that schools did not always take into account Aboriginal cultural issues, this administrator believed that the school system did not cater for the needs of Aboriginal parents. Therefore, four of the six administrators perceived intercultural dynamics as an influential factor on Aboriginal parental involvement.

The only other response common to more than one administrator relates to parents' desire for contact with the school. Two of the six administrators believed that the parents have their own reasons for limiting contact with schools. One suggested that,

"Regular commitment is something that they are not keen on."

The other said,

"I think it is evident that Aboriginal people seem to be a little shy."

Neither administrator indicated whether they perceived these issues as relating to cultural differences or simply personal characteristics. However, the responses indicate that administrators identify the parents' choice not to commit to in-school involvement as influencing the level of Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

The one administrator who believed that the level of Aboriginal parental involvement at his school was appropriate indicated that this was the result of a trust relationship and two-way communication. He stated,

"The involvement we get is because we have established ourselves as being fair and honest and the people trust us."

He commented further,

"Our experience is that when parents see we genuinely welcome their input and that they have stuff to offer and nothing to fear, they are willing to become involved."

This principal indicated that it was school policy to consult with Aboriginal parents when issues concerning their children or other matters arise. The issues are discussed at the time of need, using a forum that suits the purpose. He indicated that this process was comparatively slow and tedious, but valuable in the long term.

Priority to developing a trust relationship with the Aboriginal community was also reported by another principal, who indicated that great progress had been made since this priority was established.

From these results it can be seen that most of the administrative staff perceived that the reasons for reluctance on the part of Aboriginal parents to become involved in schools relate to the parents' view of school and intercultural dynamics. In addition, most offered more than one reason for reluctance on the part of parents to become involved in schools, suggesting that they perceive the

solution to overcoming the reluctance as a complex issue. However, two administrators believe that reluctance to become involved in school activities can be overcome with the development of a trust relationship through two-way communication.

4.2.4 Valued Parental Involvement

Although administrative staff identified challenges to involving all parents in school, four of the six administrative staff still believed that the most important thing Aboriginal parents could do to help their children succeed at school was to be involved at school. Table 3 demonstrates the range of responses received from the administrators in answer to the question "What is the most important thing Aboriginal parents can do to help their children succeed at school?" Once again some administrators gave more than one response and all responses were collated, categorized and recorded under thematic headings. Additionally, these themes have been categorized using Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology of parental involvement as outlined in Chapter Three.

Table 3 <u>Aboriginal Parental Involvement In Schooling Valued By Administrative Staff.</u>

Epstein and Dauber (1991) Type of Involvement	Involvement	n=6
Type 3	Become involved in schools	4
Type 1	Encourage children to attend regularly	2
Type 1	Provide continuity	1
Type 1	Encourage children to take pride in themselves and their culture while recognizing the wider community	1

Table 3 demonstrates that most administrative staff place high priority on in-school involvement. However, for some administrators the more practical reality is that continuity and regular attendance at school would be the most beneficial. For another, the issue was not in-school involvement, but personal pride and identity. The latter behaviours fit the first type of involvement in Epstein and Dauber's (1991) parental involvement typology. Type one involvement is the 'Basic Obligations of Families' and includes providing for health and safety, providing a positive home environment, parenting practices, and behaviours that support school learning. Therefore, four of the six administrators value home engagement that fulfills the basic obligations of families. Thus, in school involvement and the basic obligations of families are the two types of involvement most frequently valued by the administrative staff.

4.2.5 Other Arising Issues

Having identified how Aboriginal parents could best help their children succeed at school, the administrators were asked how schools can best help parents assist their children to succeed in school. From the responses, two themes emerged. The themes included the need for schools to develop cultural awareness and the need for schools to develop a relationship with the Aboriginal community.

The first theme that became apparent was the need for schools to develop awareness and understanding of the Aboriginal culture. Suggestions that related to this theme included offering a more inclusive curriculum, providing access to good Aboriginal role models, sharing cultures, valuing Aboriginal culture, modifying classroom practice and acknowledging the past. Two administrative staff identified the need for teaching Aboriginal culture and history in the classroom, while four administrators identified the need for staff awareness of Aboriginal culture and related issues. Every administrator identified some aspect of valuing and promoting awareness of the Aboriginal culture as part of the school's role in helping Aboriginal parents assist their children at school. Four of the six administrators included the need for staff awareness of Aboriginal issues.

The second theme that emerged in response to the ways in which schools can help Aboriginal parents assist their children to do well at school, was that of developing relationships with the Aboriginal parents and the Aboriginal

community. Four of the six administrative staff discussed the importance of relationship building. In the words of one principal,

"Understanding and forming trust relationships will be the most important thing."

Some of the relationship building strategies suggested by administrative staff included promoting an open door policy, displaying real care for the children, genuinely welcoming the input of the Aboriginal parents and community, going into the community rather than expecting them to come to school, and marketing school needs. In discussing the implementation of such strategies for developing relationships, four administrators highlighted the importance of the role of the Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW). Thus, the AIEW is viewed as important to the task of developing a relationship with the Aboriginal community. As one principal stated,

"We make contact through the AIEW."

Therefore, the administrative staff believe that there are two important strategies that schools can implement to help Aboriginal parents assist their children to do well at school. These include playing a role in developing awareness of Aboriginal culture and developing a trust relationship with the Aboriginal community. The work of the AIEWs is seen as important to this task and these strategies are seen as steps towards greater Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

An acknowledgement that the road to improved Aboriginal parental involvement in schools is a process which takes time, is another issue that emerged from the data. This issue was raised by three of the six administrative staff. In the words of one principal,

"You can't wave a magic wand."

Another principal who believed his school had developed a positive relationship with the Aboriginal community stated,

"It has been the result of long term stuff. Short term spectacular doesn't

work. You have to build, over years."

Thus in general, administrators consider it unrealistic to expect instant results to campaigns for improved Aboriginal parental involvement in schools due to the reluctance of parents to be involved and the long-term nature of overcoming this reluctance.

However, another point made by one administrator is that being able to track students through the system is also important. This administrator noted that it was not uncommon for Aboriginal students to have attended five or six different schools in a three or four year time span. Therefore, the practical issue of being able to effectively track students in order to pass on information and minimize disruption to learning was considered by this administrator to be the most effective help schools could offer parents.

4.3 <u>Summary</u>

This study found that the administrators are experienced educators although most had less than three years' experience as principal and all had less than three years' experience in their current position. They are confident in their knowledge of issues relating to Aboriginal education even though cross-cultural training was minimal. The ways in which administrators maintain knowledge of Aboriginal issues include awareness of government documents on Aboriginal education and communication with Aboriginal staff.

In relation to research question 2 of this study which investigated the opinions of early childhood educators concerning the opportunities for, and the value of, Aboriginal parent and community involvement in the education process, all six administrators reported that they value Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. Further, they all contended that the school in which they are employed, supports and provides opportunity for Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process. However, two administrators acknowledged some negative effects of parental involvement in schools. In addition, all administrators asserted that there are challenges to achieving full Aboriginal parental participation. Five of the six administrative staff expressed concern about the level of Aboriginal parental involvement in schools, though two of these administrators were also concerned about the level of non-Aboriginal parental involvement.

Every administrator identified overcoming the reluctance of parents to participate in schools as one of the challenges to parental involvement. For some, this challenge contained aspects beyond their realm of influence. Each parent's view of school, cultural barriers and the type and degree of contact desired by parents were the most commonly perceived influences on Aboriginal parental involvement.

However, most of the administrators believe that in-school involvement is the most important thing that Aboriginal parents can do to assist their children to succeed at school. The administrators believe that schools can help parents achieve this by promoting the Aboriginal culture and developing a trust relationship with the Aboriginal community. In discussing how such strategies could be implemented, the importance of the role of the AIEWs was emphasised. In addition, half of the administrators viewed parental involvement as a process that takes time to achieve. Therefore, full parental involvement is perceived as an unrealistic expectation, particularly in the short term.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TEACHERS

5.0 <u>Introduction</u>

This chapter presents the findings of the study gathered from interviews with nine

teachers from five participating schools. The findings are reported in two

sections. The first section reports the findings from Part A of the interview

schedule and provides background information on the teachers and their teaching

experience. These findings provide valuable insights into the teachers' experience

as educators.

The second section reports the opinions of the teachers relating to Aboriginal

parental involvement in schools. These findings are reported from Part B of the

interview schedule and respond to the second general research question dealing

with the opinions of early childhood educators concerning the value of, and

opportunities for, Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

5.1 <u>Part A: Background of Teachers</u>

The nine teachers included four kindergarten teachers, three from Aboriginal

kindergartens, and five preprimary teachers. Of the nine teachers, five had more

than ten years of teaching experience, two had over five years' experience and

another was in her fifth year of teaching but had served five years as a teacher

assistant before carrying out her teacher training. Therefore, most teachers had

over five years of experience in early childhood education. However, just one teacher had remained at the current school for over ten years with four having served three years or less in the current school.

One of the nine teachers was Aboriginal and her previous experience had been in Aboriginal Kindergartens. The remaining eight teachers indicated that their experience with Aboriginal children prior to taking up their current position was limited. However, two are teachers in Aboriginal kindergartens with over seven years of experience in that situation. Therefore, three of the nine teachers have seven or more years' experience in Aboriginal education.

Every teacher indicated that they had no Aboriginal cross-cultural training prior to taking up their current position. Many indicated that they had participated in a compulsory multi-cultural unit that included some Aboriginal content and one of the kindergarten teachers indicated that she had later chosen two units in Aboriginal studies towards her Bachelor of Education degree. This teacher was the only teacher to express feelings of inadequacy in her knowledge of Aboriginal pedagogy. Therefore, one teacher only had completed any formal training in Aboriginal education and another teacher is of Aboriginal descent with prior experience in Aboriginal education. The remaining seven teachers have received no formal cross-cultural training.

All teachers were aware of the government documents regarding Aboriginal education. However, three only reported the existence of copies in their centre.

One teacher expressed the desire to have greater access to such documents although she was concerned with the large number of documents on many topics with which teachers were required to be familiar. This teacher mentioned that she seeks such documents when her situation demands and with just two Aboriginal children in her class she had not placed a high priority on seeking information about Aboriginal education. Of the three teachers who did have copies of the document in their centre, two were teachers in Aboriginal kindergartens and the other was a preprimary teacher in a school where the policy is to place all Aboriginal children together until year three. This is done specifically to deal with the impact of Aboriginal children being in the minority and to provide maximum opportunity for them to look to each other for support. It is considered that by year three their sense of identity will be sufficiently well developed for them to require less support. Therefore, all three teachers who had copies of government documents on Aboriginal education in their centre had significant numbers of Aboriginal children in their class. Two indicated that they had referred to the documents for their own professional development, while the other believed that they were not helpful.

Therefore, it can be seen that eight of the nine teachers have over five years' experience in early childhood education. However, all teachers took up their current position without any prior training in Aboriginal education even though the school serves a community with a significant Aboriginal population. Just three of the nine teachers currently have more than five years' experience in Aboriginal education and one only has participated in formal cross-cultural studies. It can also be seen that, for the teachers, access to government documents

on Aboriginal education is limited although there is a degree of indifference on the part of the teachers to make themselves familiar with these documents.

5.2 Part B: Opinions of Teachers

5.2.1 The Extent of Parental Involvement

The responses given by the teachers revealed that every teacher believed that attendance at their centre was beneficial to the Aboriginal children. However, six of the nine teachers expressed the belief that the parents of their Aboriginal children may not consider regular attendance to be as important as they believe it to be. In addition, there is some uncertainty as to the level of home support that the parents provide. Of the nine teachers, two only, assumed that Aboriginal parents discussed school activities with their children at home. The remaining teachers expressed uncertainty or the belief that some or most Aboriginal parents do not support their child's learning at home.

However, teachers believed that the school encouraged parents of Aboriginal children to become involved in their child's schooling. Table four displays the strategies identified by teachers as those used by the school to encourage Aboriginal parental involvement.

Table 4 <u>Strategies For Encouragement Of Aboriginal Parental Involvement.</u>

Strategies	n=9
Access to Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker [AIEW]	5
Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness [ASSPA] meetings	4
National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration [NAIDOC] activities	3
Social events for families	3
Homework group	2
Newsletters	2
Parent information meetings	2
Verbal communication	2
Parent Roster	2
Cross-cultural awareness for staff	1
Open days	1
Dance group	1
School open house policy	1
Older children are encouraged to come in	1
Aboriginal talent among parents is recognized	1
Administrative staff make contact with parents who are around	1

From Table 4 it may be seen that teachers identify the most commonly used school strategies to encourage Aboriginal parental involvement as access to AIEWs, the formation of an ASSPA committee and NAIDOC activities. Other common strategies include the establishment of a homework group, newsletters,

the use of verbal communication, parent roster and parent information meetings. Teachers reported that not all of these strategies successfully increased parent participation. However, NAIDOC activities and social events for families were identified as resulting in high parent participation. In addition, although not initially identified as being strategies for encouraging parental involvement, assemblies, child performance events such as sports day or the end of year concert, and activities related to Aboriginal culture were identified by three or more teachers as receiving high attendance by parents. Therefore, the activities identified as drawing the highest response from parents all related to child participation and child performance activities, which were part of the whole school programme.

Although all nine teachers believed that the school encouraged Aboriginal participation in the school, one teacher only was comfortable with the level of involvement in the educational process by Aboriginal parents. The remaining eight teachers indicated that there were problems associated with engaging parents of Aboriginal children in school activities and six of the teachers expressed feelings of regret or frustration when trying to involve them. However, three of the teachers also said that they experience similar problems with non-Aboriginal parents. One teacher stated,

"I see it as an S.E.S. (socio-economic status) problem rather than racial."

Therefore, teachers believe that schools encourage Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process and identified a variety of strategies employed by the school to achieve this. They reported that NAIDOC activities,

social events and child performance events draw the highest levels of Aboriginal parental involvement. One teacher expressed satisfaction with the current levels of Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process while six expressed frustrations. However, similar to the administrative staff, three teachers reported that limited parental involvement is not restricted to the Aboriginal population.

5.2.2 An Explanation for the Extent of Parental Involvement

As with the administrators, there is a degree of uncertainty as to why Aboriginal parents are not more involved in schools with many teachers giving a number of reasons for the parents' limited involvement and indicating their uncertainty by using vocabulary such as "Perhaps..."; "Maybe..."; "I think ...". One teacher simply stated,

"I don't know what the answer is."

Table five displays the reasons perceived by teachers for parents' limited involvement at school. As most teachers gave more than one response, all responses have been collated, categorized and reported under thematic headings.

Table 5   Reasons Perceived By Teachers For Limited   Aboriginal Parental
          Involvement At School.

Reason	n=9
The parents' value of schools and education	4
The parents' view of school	4
Parents' commitment to other priorities	4
The type and degree of contact desired by the parents	3
The level of parental education	2
The parents' view of their skills	2
Cultural issues	1
Systematic issues	1

From Table 5 it can be seen that one of the most frequently given reasons offered by teachers for the limited Aboriginal parental involvement is the value parents place on schools and education. Two teachers assumed that parents who don't become involved do not value education. One teacher remarked,

"These parents don't seem to be interested in their children's education."

Two further teachers contended that education is not important to Aboriginal people. In the words of one teacher,

"As a culture they don't regard school as important because their absentee rate is high."

Thus, four of the nine teachers believe that some or all Aboriginal parents do not value schools and education and are therefore unwilling to become involved in schools.

Another frequently perceived reason for limited parental involvement is the parents' view of school. As with the administrative staff, an underlying assumption made by the teachers is that parents have had an unpleasant past experience with schools and as a consequence may feel threatened in the school environment. There is also the inference that this is not within the teachers' field of influence. One teacher expressed it thus,

> "They see school as threatening and are too nervous to see that it's not the
>
> same."

Comments like these indicate that teachers believe that school is no longer threatening and the responsibility for overcoming the reluctance to be involved lies with the parent. Four of the nine teachers gave the parents' view of school as a factor influencing Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

One reason given by teachers that was identified by just one administrator is that of the parents' commitment to other priorities. Four of the nine teachers perceived that parents might have other commitments that restrict their ability to become involved in school activities.

The type and degree of contact desired by the parents is another frequently given reason for limited Aboriginal parental involvement. Three of the nine teachers believe that Aboriginal parents have their own reasons for limiting their involvement with schools. Two believe that the choice not to be involved is because the parents are shy, while the other suggested that parents simply choose not to be involved. This teacher stated,

"It can depend on what contact they want. Some parents don't want to see

you and it's not just Aboriginal parents."

The teachers gave several other reasons for limited Aboriginal parental

involvement in schools that were also given by the administrative staff. However,

of the nine teachers, one only suggested that cultural issues influence parental

involvement, compared to three of the six administrative staff. Thus, teachers are

likely to be less aware of cultural issues than administrative staff.

One teacher who was comfortable with the levels of parental involvement

indicated that there is considerable contact with the parents of the Aboriginal

children in her class. This teacher is Aboriginal, with children of her own

attending the school and is a member of the school ASSPA committee. This role

on the ASSPA committee, her willingness to contact people in the community

rather than at school, and the fact that she is known and trusted by the Aboriginal

community are some of the reasons given to explain the high level of contact with

the parents. One aspect of her explanation that differs from that given by the other

teachers is the ownership of the solution. This teacher did not believe that

overcoming the reluctance of parents to be involved is outside her field of

influence.

From these results it can be seen that in general, teachers have similar perceptions

to administrative staff in regard to Aboriginal parental involvement in school, with

two exceptions. Teachers are more likely than administrative staff to

acknowledge that parents have other priorities and administrators are more likely

than teachers to acknowledge cultural issues as important factors explaining the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement in their children's schools.

5.2.3 Valued Parental Involvement

In spite of the difficulties perceived by the teachers in encouraging parents of Aboriginal children to become more involved in their children's education, they all believed that Aboriginal involvement in schools would benefit Aboriginal children. The types of involvement they valued ranged from providing support for school behaviour to serving on decision-making groups, with many teachers making broad statements such as,

> "The most valuable involvement is where people are very comfortable with
>
> what they are doing."

Table 6 displays the types of parental involvement identified by teachers as having value. As some teachers reported more than one form of involvement as being valued, all responses were collated, categorized, and reported under thematic headings. The responses have also been categorized according to Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology of parental involvement.

Table 6 <u>Aboriginal Parental Involvement In Schooling Valued By Teachers.</u>

Epstein and Dauber (1991) Type of Involvement	**Valued Involvement**	**n=9**
	All levels of parent involvement are important	4
Type 5	Participation in decision making groups	3
Type 3	In- school involvement	3
Type 1	Valuing education	1
Type 1	Working with school for a happy relationship	1

The viewpoint most frequently expressed by teachers is that all levels of parental involvement are valuable. However, the expressions of frustration reported earlier indicate that some behaviours are valued above others. Frustration was expressed when some forms of involvement were not evident to teachers. These behaviours usually related to Epstein and Dauber's (1991) type one involvement (the basic obligations of families). Such behaviours included encouraging regular attendance; maintaining standards of dress and cleanliness; providing children with fruit to share at fruit-time; providing lunch before lunch time; the provision of other school requirements; and having children collected by an adult. The frustration expressed at the absence of such behaviours provides evidence that teachers value this level of involvement. Further evidence of the value placed on the basic obligations of families can be seen in Table 6, where two forms of this level of involvement are identified by teachers as valuable.

Participation in decision-making groups is the most frequently valued level of involvement expressly identified by teachers. However, this was usually followed by qualifying comments such as,

> "It depends on the person and is a step by step process."

or statements such as,

> "Decision making is essential but you must have background knowledge to
>
> base decisions on so get involved in the basics first."

Such comments indicate that although participation in decision-making groups is valued it may not be expected of all parents.

Another type of involvement expressly identified by three teachers is in-school involvement. One teacher valued participation in the classroom on the parent help roster while the other two teachers did not specify the in-school involvement they valued.

Therefore, using Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology, the responses provided by teachers indicate that they value three types of involvement. These are type five involvement in decision making; type three involvement at school; and type one involvement of basic obligations of families.

However, one teacher who indicated that there is a high level of parent involvement in her school discussed involvement that fulfills Epstein and Dauber's type two involvement: the basic obligations of schools. Type two involvement includes the ways in which schools communicate with families and report on the school's programme and the child's progress. This teacher

recognized the basic obligation of schools as a level of parental involvement and identified ways in which she fulfills these obligations. For example, this teacher does not require parents to make appointments to see her, but rather makes herself available at the time parents want to speak to her and will also make home visits. Additionally, whatever provision is made for the children by the parents, is accepted and there is flexibility in the absence of some type one involvement. This teacher expressed satisfaction with the level of parental involvement in her class. Although she acknowledged that there are many issues associated with involving parents of Aboriginal children, her cultural awareness resulted in a higher level of acceptance and she did not express any level of frustration.

Thus, the teachers in this study most frequently valued levels one, three and five of Epstein and Dauber's typology of involvement. However, one teacher who expressed satisfaction with the level of parental involvement, also demonstrated the value she placed on the basic obligations of schools (level two).

5.2.4   Other Issues Raised

Throughout the discussions with the teachers, three issues were raised. The first was the importance of the role of the AIEW. All nine teachers acknowledged the work of the AIEWs as an important part of school strategy when dealing with the parents of Aboriginal children. Seven of the nine teachers indicated that the AIEW was part of the process for dealing with concerns relating to Aboriginal children. AIEWs were also seen by some, to be important in the school's strategy

for involving parents in the education of their children; for the day to day communication with parents; and for providing positive role models and cultural inclusiveness.

The second issue was the importance of verbal communication above the use of newsletters. Eight of the nine teachers indicated that the most effective way to communicate with the parents of the Aboriginal children in their class was through face to face, verbal communication. Although three teachers indicated that they used the telephone on some occasions to communicate or to follow up newsletters, this was considered a less reliable form of verbal communication that was more likely to result in difficulties.

The final issue that was raised was a perception of inequity over the focus on Aboriginal children. One teacher indicated that non-Aboriginal families were questioning her as to why there appeared to be different expectations for Aboriginal families and found the apparent double standard to be a source of frustration. This teacher gave the following example,

> "Duty of care says preprimary children are not to be picked up by siblings,
> but I allow siblings and other parents to take Aboriginal children home. Is
> this a double standard? Other parents are asking, would you accept that
> behaviour from me?"

It was a question she felt uncomfortable answering and an issue she was unsure of how to handle. Two other teachers also struggled with this issue, but indicated that it was a personal struggle since they believed this situation to be inequitable. The comments made by these teachers included,

"Aboriginal children are not different. Other children need it [assistance] just as much. Aboriginal children get more help than white children with the same sorts of problems."

"How often can you have things for Aboriginal children and not for non-Aboriginal children?"

Therefore, three of the nine teachers indicated that there is a perception of inequity for non-Aboriginal families facing similar circumstances to those of Aboriginal families.

5.3   Summary

Most teachers in this study are experienced early childhood educators with limited training in Aboriginal education. However, one teacher is Aboriginal and two others have taught in Aboriginal kindergartens for several years. Thus three of the nine teachers are experienced in Aboriginal education. One teacher only, has participated in any formal cross-cultural studies and three only are knowledgeable about the content of government documents on Aboriginal education.

In answer to research question 2, early childhood teachers believe that schools are doing much to encourage Aboriginal parental involvement. However, eight of the nine teachers believe that involvement remains limited. In addition, six of the nine teachers feel frustrated at trying to overcome the perceived reluctance of parents to be involved and most believe that the source of the reluctance lies outside the school's area of influence. However, three believe that this reluctance is not restricted to the Aboriginal population. Six of the teachers perceive that

Aboriginal parents do not recognize the importance of attendance at school. Four question whether they value education at all.

In spite of these difficulties, all of the teachers believe that Aboriginal children benefit from Aboriginal participation in schools and that all levels of involvement are valuable. However, the level of basic obligation of families is believed to be the first step to parental involvement. One teacher who recognizes type two involvement: the basic obligation of schools, reported greater parental involvement and lower levels of frustration over the absence of type one involvement: the basic obligation of families. In order to achieve increased Aboriginal parental involvement, the teachers identified the role of the AIEW and the need for face to face verbal communication to support any written communication. However, some teachers reported a perception of inequity of service provision between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal families.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ASSISTANTS AND ABORIGINAL & ISLANDER EDUCATION WORKERS

6.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study gathered from interviews with fifteen teacher assistants from five participating schools. The findings are reported in two sections. The first section reports the findings from Part A of the interview schedule and provides background information on the assistants and their experience in early childhood education. These findings provide valuable insight into the assistants' experience as early childhood educators.

The second section reports the opinions of the assistants relating to Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. These findings are reported from Part B of the interview schedule and respond to the second general research question dealing with the opinions of early childhood educators concerning the value of, and opportunities for, Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

6.1 Part A: Background of Assistants

Fifteen assistants were interviewed. These included three primary school AIEWs, six preprimary assistants and six kindergarten assistants. Eight assistants were of Aboriginal descent and seven were non-Aboriginal teacher assistants.

All fifteen assistants had over three years' experience in education with twelve having more than five years' experience. One assistant had a four-year qualification from overseas as a childcare worker. Seven of the fifteen assistants had five or more years' service in their current school.

The non-Aboriginal assistants all reported that they did not have any experience with Aboriginal children prior to their current employment situation. However, three of the seven had been in their current situation for more than six years and reported that they were aware of issues relating to Aboriginal education. Therefore, three of the non-Aboriginal assistants had over six years' experience in Aboriginal education.

Two of the seven non-Aboriginal assistants indicated that they had completed some cross-cultural studies in their training, and three of the eight Aboriginal assistants acknowledged cross cultural training provided by their education district office at AIEW meetings. However, the remaining ten assistants (66%) indicated that they had received no cross-cultural training. Five assistants reported that they had participated in some cross-cultural professional development at school. Like teachers and administrative staff, cross-cultural training was limited, although the assistants were more likely than teachers to have participated in cross-cultural studies.

Two of the fifteen assistants demonstrated knowledge of the content of government documents relating to Aboriginal education. However, three were unaware of the documents and others knew of their existence but did not seek them out. Most assistants were not motivated to make themselves familiar with government documents, as they did not see this as part of their role. In the words of one Aboriginal assistant,

"None of that interests me. That's like politics. I just ask [the teacher]"

Therefore, it can be seen that most assistants had over five years' experience in education and of the seven non-Aboriginal assistants, three had more than five years' experience in Aboriginal education. Some assistants had participated in limited cross-cultural studies. As with teachers, access to government documents on Aboriginal education was limited and in most cases was not actively sought.

6.2 Part B: Opinions of Assistants

6.2.1 The Extent of Parental Involvement

Like the teachers, all the assistants indicated that they believed attendance at their centre was beneficial to the Aboriginal children. Also like the teachers, there was a level of uncertainty about the extent of home engagement in school matters. However, assistants were more likely to believe that Aboriginal parents did discuss school activities with their children, as ten of the assistants perceived that some or all of the parents discussed the children's schooling with them.

Every assistant believed that their school encouraged the parents of their

Aboriginal children to participate in school activities, although one kindergarten

assistant said,

> "Yes, but not in this centre because it is off site."

This response indicates that although she believed the school as a whole

encouraged the involvement of the parents of Aboriginal children, in the

kindergarten there was a sense of isolation from the whole school situation.

The school strategies that were being implemented to encourage Aboriginal

parental participation in schools, as identified by the assistants, were in keeping

with the strategies identified by the teachers. Table 7 displays the strategies

identified by the assistants as those used by the school to encourage Aboriginal

parental involvement.

Table 7 Strategies Identified By Assistants And Aiews For Encouragement Of Aboriginal Parental Involvement.

Strategies	n=15
National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration [NAIDOC] activities	8
Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness [ASSPA] meetings	7
Social events such as morning teas and barbecues	6
Homework group	6
Aboriginal cultural activities and guest speakers	6
Access to Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker [AIEW]	2
Liaison with parents	2
Newsletters	2
Aboriginal Studies	1
Assembly	1
Dance group	1
School open house policy	1
Encourage parents to view children's work in their own time.	1
Meet with parents out of school time and space	1
Meet with parents on individual basis	1
Offer a personal invitation for parents to help out	1

The two most frequently identified strategies were NAIDOC activities and the formation of an ASSPA committee. Other strategies included social events, Aboriginal cultural events, and the establishment of a homework group. These activities were also included in the strategies most frequently identified by

teachers. However, the strategy most frequently identified by teachers was access to AIEWs, which although identified by two non-Aboriginal assistants, was not identified by any of the Aboriginal assistants. Instead, they identified the aspects of their role of liaising, meeting, and encouraging parents. Therefore, although they were less likely than teachers to explicitly identify the employment of an AIEW as an important strategy, many assistants identified aspects of the role assumed by the AIEW as important for involving Aboriginal parents.

As with the teachers, the assistants noted that not all these strategies resulted in increased parental participation. However, NAIDOC day and sports day, were the events most commonly reported as resulting in high parent participation. Other activities reported as resulting in a high response from parents related to child performance events such as the end of year performance or Aboriginal guest speakers and Aboriginal culture. Again, this is consistent with the findings reported by teachers.

Also consistent with the reports of teachers, is the perception by all assistants that in spite of the perceived encouragement, Aboriginal parent participation in school activities is limited to a small group of parents. Three assistants suggested that the low level of participation is not restricted to the Aboriginal population, but that non-Aboriginal parents were equally reluctant to participate.

6.2.2 Explanation of the Level of Parental Involvement

Two non-Aboriginal assistants did not give any reason for the small number of parents participating in school activities. The remaining thirteen assistants gave a variety of reasons, which have been collated, categorized and reported under thematic headings in Table 8.

Table 8   Reasons Perceived By Assistants And Aiews For Limited Aboriginal Parental Involvement In School.

Reason	n=13
Parents' commitment to other priorities	8
The type and degree of contact desired by the parents	5
The parents' view of school	4
The parents' view of skill level	4
Cultural issues	3
The parents' value of schools and education	2
The level of parents' education	1
Child development issues	1

As with teachers and administrative staff, most assistants gave more than one reason for the limited parental involvement and reported a degree of uncertainty as to why parental involvement was limited. However, there were important differences in the perceptions of the two sections of staff. Table 8 demonstrates that the parents' commitment to other aspects of life was the reason most frequently given by assistants for limited Aboriginal parental involvement.

Although teachers also offered this reason, the assistants were more likely than teachers to acknowledge other priorities in the parents' lives. In addition, fewer assistants questioned the parents' value of education. Therefore, the assistants were less likely to assume that lack of involvement in school indicated a lack of interest in their child's schooling on the part of parents.

A new category that emerged was that of child development issues. One Aboriginal kindergarten assistant believed that parents were aware of the influence their presence had on the behaviour of their children and made decisions relating to involvement based on concern for the development of their child. This assistant gave the following example,

> "One Pop wouldn't come in because the kids would want to go with him.
>
> He would listen from a distance."

The assistant believed that the parent was concerned about his child's development, but was aware that his presence might interfere with that development. This assistant was the only staff member to identify a parents' awareness of child development issues.

Other reasons given by the assistants were congruent with those given by teachers and administrators. They included the type and degree of contact desired by the parents, the parents' view of school, the parents' view of their own skills, cultural issues and the level of the parents' education. Therefore, these results show that although there are similarities in the perceptions of all staff members, it is more likely that the assistants will recognize other priorities and commitments of parents.

They are also less likely than teachers to believe that parents do not value schools or education. In addition, an Aboriginal assistant was the only staff member to suggest that child development issues may influence parental involvement.

6.2.3 Valued Parental Involvement

All assistants agreed that greater participation by Aboriginal people would benefit Aboriginal children. The ways in which they believed children would benefit all related to self-esteem, Aboriginal identity and the provision of positive role models in supporting school. However, seven of the fifteen assistants did not specify the level of participation they considered to be of most value. Table nine displays the types of involvement discussed by the eight assistants and AIEWs who did comment on the type of parental involvement they valued. As with other staff members, most assistants reported more than one type of involvement as being valuable and all responses were collated, categorized and reported under thematic headings emerging from the data. Additionally, they were categorized into the types of involvement identified by Epstein and Dauber (1991).

Table 9 Types Of Parental Involvement Valued By Assistants And Aiews

Epstein and Dauber (1991) Type Of Involvement	Most valuable involvement	n=8
Type 5	Participation in decision making groups	6
	All levels of parent involvement are valuable	4
Type 3	Help at school	4
Type 1	Support teachers	2
Type 4	Support learning	1
Type 1	Instill the importance of education	1
Type 1	Provide for health and hygiene	1
Type 3	Extend visit times	1
Type 3	Attend child performance events	1
Type 3	Share culture	1

From Table 9 it can be seen that the most frequently given response of assistants was participation in decision-making groups. Six of the eight assistants reported that participation of parents in decision-making groups was the most valuable form of involvement. However, all six also suggested that other levels of involvement are equally important and three of the six suggested that the value of being on the decision making group depends on the individual. Therefore, although participation in decision making was valued, it was not expected of all parents and other types of participation were considered to be of equal value.

Similar to teachers, four of the eight assistants who responded indicated that they valued many levels of involvement. Their responses included,

"Parental involvement should include a combination of everything."

"Any, it doesn't matter what."

"Every level is important"

"I don't know which would be better, both (decision-making and in-school involvement) are important."

One of these four assistants went on to add that being supportive of teachers is the most important and another indicated that being on decision-making groups would not be appropriate for every parent. Therefore, although they expressed value of all levels of parental involvement, as with the teachers, they believe that there are circumstances when some levels are more important than others.

The next most frequently valued type of parental involvement expressly identified by assistants was helping at school. This category included helping on parent roster and helping out for a short while when parents have available time. Using Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology, these activities can be categorized as Type 3: involvement at school. Other activities valued by assistants that also fit the category of involvement at school, include parents extending the time they stay and visit; attending child performance events; and sharing their culture with the whole class. Thus, seven of the eight assistants who identified types of involvement they valued, believe that involvement at school is important.

Therefore, according to Epstein and Dauber's typology, Type 3: involvement at school is the type of parental involvement most frequently valued by assistants.

Type 5: involvement in decision-making and governance, is the next most frequently valued type of parental involvement. The remaining responses by assistants fit Epstein and Dauber's Type 1: basic obligations of families and include supporting teachers, instilling the importance of education and providing for health and hygiene. One exception to this was the response of one assistant who identified activities from Epstein and Dauber's (1991) Type 4: involvement in learning activities at home. This assistant believed that participating in activities such as reading and cooking at home was a valuable form of parental involvement.

Consequently, it can be seen that using Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology, the assistants value the same types of parental involvement as teachers. That is Type 1: basic obligations of families; Type 3: involvement in school; and Type 5: involvement in decision-making. An exception was found in the response of one assistant who was the only staff member to report Type 4: involvement in learning activities at home to be of value.

6.2.4   Other Issues Arising

Assistants raised many issues but only three were common to at least three assistants. The most frequently raised issue was the importance of teachers and non-Aboriginal staff having sound knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and life situations. Two Aboriginal assistants expressed the need for teachers to be aware of the differences between their own background and the life

style of the Aboriginal families with whom they were dealing. One of these assistants believed that teachers did not know enough about Aboriginal people and their families and relayed this anecdote,

> "A lot of teachers here had a secure life. There is no questioning their intelligence and teaching because they are here to teach but they don't understand that kids can't come to school because they don't have shoes. If a kid's only claim to fame is his Nikes and his cousin borrowed them, he can't come to school."

Two of the non-Aboriginal assistants also raised the importance of cultural awareness for non-Aboriginal staff. These assistants believed cultural awareness to be important in overcoming misunderstandings and inappropriate practices. In the words of one assistant,

> "Cultural background is important because some people are ignorant and just don't understand."

A more positive reflection by a third Aboriginal assistant also addressed the importance of acceptance and cultural awareness. This assistant reported that the key to her involvement in her own children's schooling was the attitude of a pre-primary teacher. This teacher took time to get to know her and encouraged her each step of the way. Therefore, for five of the assistants, teacher knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal families is an important key to Aboriginal parental involvement.

Three assistants from one school raised the issue of the parents' desire to become involved in schools. They suggested that the desire to participate must come from

the parents. These assistants believe that schools are doing enough and that as individual parents are ready to become involved, they will. One assistant commented,

"A lot is within themselves to come in."

suggesting that the motivation to be more involved must be intrinsic and the influence of extrinsic motivation is limited.

A final issue raised by three assistants was the time and effort it takes to achieve greater Aboriginal parental involvement. One assistant believes that progress is being made, but slowly. Another expressed the belief that there is a progression that parents move through from involvement in the classroom through to involvement in decision-making groups. The third assistant shared her own experience reporting,

"Being familiar is important and it always takes me a while to get used to
something."

This assistant noted that as a parent she had not participated in the ASSPA committee until she was actually coming to the school and that she had been empowered to become more involved in the education process due to the encouragement given to her by her child's teacher. In the words of this assistant,

"Getting more parent involvement is a long and hard road to travel."

6.3 <u>Summary</u>

This study found that most assistants had over five years' experience in education and three of the seven non-Aboriginal assistants had more than five years' experience in Aboriginal education. Participation in cross-cultural studies was limited, with ten of the fifteen assistants indicating that they had not received any cross-cultural training. In addition, some assistants were not aware of the existence of government documents relating to Aboriginal education and most did not seek to access these documents.

In answer to research question 2, the results of the study show that assistants are more likely than teachers to believe that the parents of Aboriginal children support their children's education at home. All of the assistants believe that parent participation in school activities is limited to a small group of parents. The reasons given for the limited parental involvement are similar to those given by other staff members. However, assistants are more likely to recognize that parents have other priorities and commitments and are less likely to assume that parents do not value education. The most frequently valued types of parental involvement include the basic obligations of families, involvement at school, and decision-making.

An important issue raised by the assistants was the need for teachers and non-Aboriginal staff to have sound knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and lifestyle. Assistants commonly raised two further issues. These included the belief that the desire to become more involved in the education process must come

from within the parents, and that increased parental involvement in the education process takes time and effort on the part of schools.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PARENTS

7.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study gathered from interviews with fifteen parents of Aboriginal children from five participating schools. The findings are reported in two sections. The first section reports the findings from Part A of the interview schedule and provides demographic information on the parents. These findings provide valuable insights into the circumstances of the families, which influence the parents' participation in their children's schooling.

The second section reports the opinions of the parents relating to Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. These findings are reported from Part B of the interview schedule and respond to the first general research question dealing with the attitudes and opinions of the parents of Aboriginal children concerning the value of, and opportunities for, Aboriginal parental involvement in schools.

7.1 Part A: Background of Parents

Fifteen parents, including ten Aboriginal and five non-Aboriginal parents participated in this study. Four of the five non-Aboriginal parents were born in Australia, although one was of Greek ethnic origin. The fifth non-Aboriginal parent was born in Singapore and was of Malaysian ethnic origin.

Of the fifteen parents, one was the non-Aboriginal father of the preprimary child and two were not biological parents of the child, but Aboriginal family members. Of the two guardians who were not the child's biological parent, one was the child's aunt who had taken on the role of guardian because the child had been abused. This participant also had the guardianship of another sister's three children. The other was a cousin to the biological mother of the preprimary child. This child's parents were alcoholics and the child had been in her grandmother's care until the death of the grandmother.

These and other demographics have been tallied in Table 10, identifying factors acknowledged by Anderson and Smith (1999) as impacting on parents' ability to be involved in school programmes. They include cultural and ethnic diversity, single parent households, non-traditional families and outside-of-home employment. Also included in Table 10 is the number of other dependent children. This was a factor identified by participants as impacting on their ability to become involved in school activities.

Table 10 Demographics That Impact On Parents' Ability To Participate In School Activities.

Participant	Aboriginal descent	Other ethnic descent	Single parent	Non-traditional family	Outside-of-home employment	Other dependent children
1	√		√			√ 4
2	√					√ 6
3	√		√	√		√ 3
4	√				√	√ 1
5	√				√	√ 1
6	√		√	√		√ 1
7	√				√	
8	√		√		√	√ 1
9	√		√			√ 3
10	√				√	
11			√			
12			√			√ 1
13		√	√			√ 1
14			√		√	√ 1
15		√	√		√	
TOTAL	10	2	10	2	7	11

From Table 10 it may be seen that eleven of the fifteen parents have other dependent children who impact on their ability to participate in school activities. Ten are sole parents and seven have work commitments that need to be considered. Every Aboriginal parent has to overcome cultural differences in addition to other factors that impact on their ability to participate in school activities. However, it is also evident that the non-Aboriginal parents of this study face at least one factor that influences their ability to participate in school activities.

Four of the Aboriginal parents with work commitments represented families with two income earners. The remaining three parents with out-of-home employment were sole parents working part-time. Typical employment of the participants and their spouses included positions such as the trades, trades assistants and sales assistants, although one Aboriginal participant was employed in theatre, as an actor and model.

A phenomenon that emerged in the study from information volunteered, but not expressly asked for, is that of exposure to abuse. Eight of the fifteen participants indicated that they had been exposed to alcohol or drug abuse by family or friends. Three indicated that the kindergarten or preprimary child in their care had been the victim of abuse or neglect. Two of the parents indicated that they had been abused or neglected as children and two indicated that they were abused as adults. In all, nine of the fifteen parents volunteered information with regard to exposure to abusive behaviour and some discussed exposure to more than one form of abuse.

Another phenomenon that emerged in the study as a result of volunteered information not expressly requested, was that of the impact of what has been referred to as the "stolen generation". The "stolen generation" refers to past government policy that resulted in Aboriginal children being taken from their natural parents and placed in institutions or foster care. Two of the participants identified themselves as having been taken from their parents as children and made wards of the state, and two identified the child's father as having been taken from his parents and made wards of the state. All four of these participants spoke

emotively about the experience and attributed current attitudes and behaviours to that experience.

Thus, this study presents the opinions of the parents of Aboriginal children who come from a diverse background of circumstances from single income, multiple-sibling, one-parent families to double-income, no siblings, two-parent families. However, there are some features common to many of the families, which include the presence of other dependent children, sole parenthood, and the need to accommodate outside-of-home employment. Other issues that the Aboriginal families of this study commonly deal with are the impact of exposure to abuse and the impact of the "stolen generation".

7.2 Part B: Opinions of Parents

7.2.1 The Extent of Parental Involvement

All parents believed their child was enjoying and benefiting from attendance at their kindergarten or pre-primary centre, with the exception of one. Although this parent was not convinced of the benefits of current kindergarten attendance for her child, she acknowledged the benefits of kindergarten and pre-primary attendance for her older children, including a preprimary child. Her concern for her child currently attending kindergarten related to that child's reaction to one of the kindergarten staff members. She believed she could provide appropriate activities

at home. However, she also reported that she might not be as consistent in the provision of the activities as she would like to be and that older children had come home from kindergarten and pre-primary with knowledge they would not get from home. Therefore, every parent believed that children generally benefited from attending kindergarten and pre-primary.

Additionally, every parent indicated that they felt comfortable and welcome to participate in school activities. They also felt free to discuss concerns with the class teacher and were happy with the way the school dealt with concerns. However, five parents indicated that they had not always felt as comfortable in schools. Four of these five parents credited the behaviour and attitude of school staff with making the difference in how welcome they felt at school. One parent said that she had approached twelve schools before making a decision as to which school she would send her children. Her final decision was based, not only on the classroom environment, but also on how she was treated by the staff.

Although the behaviour and attitude of school staff clearly played an important part in making parents feel welcome, two of the five parents who indicated that they had not always felt comfortable in schools, said the difference was, at least in part, due to changes in their own attitudes. One expressed the difference in the following way,

"I've developed and matured. I'm not intimidated like I used to be."

The other parent also believed that she had matured, but for her this included the development of a more balanced approach, as well as feeling less intimidated. Her words were,

> "My approach is different. When you are young you are hot headed. Also when you are older you have an advantage because you are older than most of the teachers and you can look at them straight and they tell you what is going on."

These two parents acknowledged their own attitude as influential in how comfortable they felt at school.

From these responses, it can be seen that parents do feel welcome at school. Some acknowledged the influence their own attitudes and behaviour had on their level of comfort, while others indicated that teacher attitudes and behaviour influence their feelings of comfort at school. These findings support the perceptions of the school staff, who reported that the schools do encourage Aboriginal parental involvement. However, they also indicate that parents do not always feel welcome at school. The school characteristics frequently reported by the parents as being important features for encouraging their involvement included a friendly, open atmosphere, staff who took time to talk to parents, and staff who knew everyone.

Although perceptions of school staff and parents match with regard to the benefit of attendance at kindergarten and preprimary, and with regard to the encouragement offered by schools for greater parental involvement, there are some differences in perceptions. Previous chapters revealed that many of the school staff members were uncertain about the support Aboriginal parents gave to

their child's education and some questioned whether they valued education at all. However, the responses given by the parents indicate that these parents do support their child's learning at home and that they do value education.

Although some parents believed that they did not do a great deal to help their child learn, every parent listed activities that they believed supported their child's learning. For example, one parent reported,

> "There is a little, not much. When [the child] gets home he wants to go and
>
> play. It is too early to jam things into him."

but went on to add,

> " When he was four, he knew the alphabet and counting but now I lay off.
>
> We sit with books occasionally. He's got his writing boards and stuff.
>
> Other older children come and do things with him."

This statement reveals that the child has been provided with a play environment, which supports learning, even though the parent considers it to be minimal. All responses from the parents have been collated, categorized and reported in table 11. The categories identified come from the parents, as no prompting was given concerning the type of activity that represents a learning experience.

Table 11 <u>Activities Done At Home To Help Children Learn</u>

The Activity	n=15
Reading books	10
Math activities (Such as, counting, colour, shape, size.)	9
Writing activities (Such as, blackboard, busy box, writing name)	7
Reading activities (Such as, environmental reading, alphabet, phonics)	5
Language activities (Such as, talking to child, speech activities)	4
Answer questions initiated by the child	4
Specifically discuss school activities	3
Painting	3
Reinforce Aboriginal culture	2
Singing	2
Participation in domestic chores	2
Reinforce social skills	2
Reinforce health and hygiene	1
Cooking	1
Use of the encyclopedia set as a reference tool	1

For many parents, the activities discussed were an informal part of the everyday child-parent interactions. The following statements by Aboriginal parents highlight the informal nature of the activities they perceived assisted in their child's learning. One stated,

"I have to ask her how school was, everybody does that."

Another said,

> "It is mostly verbal, alphabet and numbers and when she was younger, the
>
> days of the week and colour. There is no sit down showing her stuff, that's
>
> why I send her to kindy, to get that."

Another clearly articulated the informal role played by parents in their

children's learning by saying,

> "It's natural that you are always teaching."

However, for some Aboriginal parents the learning activities identified are a pre-

determined effort to provide educationally for their children. As stated by one

parent,

> "I started early on phonics, alphabet and counting. Also, my children have a
>
> drawer and busy box."

This Aboriginal parent expressed concern for the educational outcomes for her

children and is determined to provide support that will assist her children to reach

their full potential.

Therefore, from the responses given, it is apparent that Aboriginal parents

perceive that they have a role in their child's learning, with every parent

identifying ways in which they support their child's learning. However, it is also

apparent that some parents see their role as separate from the role of the school.

Thus, they may not consider that schools and parents can work together to achieve

learning outcomes for their children.

In addition to perceiving that they have a role in their children's learning, ten of the fifteen parents made statements throughout the interview, indicating that they value education. The following statements regarding education are typical of the statements made.

"More Aboriginal people need education."

"I had to leave (school) to work so younger ones could go to school. Look where it got me! I wouldn't mind going back."

"She's got to have an education! She is not going to have a baby at 15"

Therefore, although some staff are uncertain of the support Aboriginal parents provide for their children's education in the home, all the parents in this study reported the provision of activities that support their children's learning and most expressed a belief in the value of education.

In addition to supporting their children's education, thirteen of the fifteen parents believe that Aboriginal children do benefit from Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. However, two parents indicated that it could be beneficial but that it depends on the suitability of the parents. Neither of these parents could see any benefit to their own child if they became more involved at school. Although they were the only parents to articulate these opinions most parents reported limited involvement in school activities. This can be seen clearly in Table 12, which shows parent responses to the question "Do you ever come to the school to help out or to see what is happening?"

Table 12 <u>Parent Responses To The Question "Do You Ever Come To The School</u>
<u>To Help Out Or To See What Is Happening?"</u>

	Yes	Yes, but not to help out	Sometimes, but not often	No
Aboriginal Parents	4	1	4	1
Non-Aboriginal Parents	1	2	1	1
TOTAL	5	3	5	2

It can be seen from Table 12, that seven of the fifteen parents either did not

participate, or infrequently participated in school activities and three others limited

their participation to activities where they were observers rather than helpers.

Additionally, one of the five parents who was prepared to help out mentioned that

she had no desire to become involved in decision making groups, but preferred to

help out in activities where she could observe her child from a distance.

Therefore, eleven of the fifteen parents had limited their participation in school

activities, even though they all felt comfortable in their school and most believed

that parent involvement benefited children.

7.2.2 An Explanation for the Extent of Parental Involvement

Parents gave a variety of reasons why they were not more involved in school

activities, including the parents who were highly involved, as they articulated the

process they went through to become involved at school. Although some parents

gave more than one reason, the parents offered fewer reasons than the school

staff. The reasons given include similar categories to those reported by the school staff, although some categories were more likely to be given by parents, while others were more likely to be given by school staff. All responses given have been collated, categorized and reported under thematic headings in Table 13.

Table 13 Reasons Given By Parents For Limiting Involvement At School.

Reason	n=15
Commitment to other priorities	10
The type and degree of contact desired by the parents	6
Child development issues	3
Greater involvement has not been requested	2
The parent's image of school	1
The parent's image of their own skills	1

From Table 13 it can be seen that the most frequently given reason for limited school involvement is the parents' commitment to other priorities. Typical comments include,

"Younger children prevent me from doing more."

"I haven't been on an excursion yet because I've been working."

However, two parents identified survival issues as taking a higher priority. Both were sole parents who had indicated that they did not receive the help and support from their families that they hoped for. One of these parents was not the biological parent of the kindergarten child and also had responsibility for three

other children, none of whom were her children. She was considered by the teacher to be a parent who viewed kindergarten as childcare. This parent reported that relatives from the country often call in on her and expected that she should cater to their needs, in spite of the fact that she has Ross River Virus and is herself unwell. In response to the question "Do you come to school to help out or to see what is happening she replied,

"No, I can't find the time. I think I'd rather go to sleep but I don't know."

The other parent who identified survival issues had helped out on excursions and was considered by the teacher to be a reliable parent. She reported that she did get some help from two of her sisters, but that family support varied, depending on the condition of their relationship. There were times when she preferred to keep some distance between herself and other family members. Some of the difficulties in their relationship stemmed from differences of opinion as to whether or not she should be working or staying at home to care for her new baby. In addition, she had suffered from post-natal depression after the birth of her first child and was taking steps to reduce the effects should it re-occur with this baby. This parent reported that she would have one or two "blue days" a week, but that the blues were not as severe as they were with her first child. In response to the question "Do you come on parent roster?" She replied,

"I would like to get involved with that but I have to be in the right mood.

Sometimes I have sleepless nights and I get grumpy."

The responses by these two parents indicate that survival issues, such as getting enough sleep and coping with illness, may be prevalent in both hard to reach families and families who have a positive relationship with the school staff.

Whether just striving to survive, or attempting to provide for the needs of the whole family, most parents indicated that although they believed there should be more parental involvement at school, their commitment to other priorities means that greater involvement at school is too difficult for them.

The next category most frequently cited by parents relates to the type and degree of contact desired by the parents. Some parents indicated that they make a conscious choice about the extent to which they are involved in school activities. Typical explanations included,

> "You can be remote at assemblies and sports carnivals."

> "I think being my first year I sit back to see how things go."

> "I am not interested in being on the ASSPA committee. They were back-
> stabbing and bitching and I couldn't be bothered. I told them, "You can
> have my support but don't expect me to have a say." I live next door to
> people on the committee, they can tell me."

These explanations support the perceptions of some staff (10) who also reported that the type and degree of contact desired by the parents, influences the extent to which they become involved.

The third most frequent category of reasons given by the parents for limiting parental involvement is related to concern for child development. This concern was expressed by one parent who commented,

> "If I come on duty [the child] will take advantage of me. At the canteen I
> get to see her."

Another stated,

> "I can't see the sense of me in the classroom, I'd only be distracting him."

These parents expressed concern that their presence in the classroom would distract the child from behaving appropriately and did not allow them to learn what they needed to learn. The concern of a third parent related specifically to the child's social development. This parent said,

> "I don't stay because [the child] didn't use to let me go before I came here
>
> and I wanted her to know I was coming back."

Although three of the fifteen (20%) parents gave child developmental reasons for limiting their involvement, just one of the thirty (3.3%) staff members perceived that parents are concerned about their child's development. Therefore, this is an area where parent and staff perceptions are unlikely to match.

Other reasons offered by parents include a new category relating to staff requests for involvement. For example, one parent said,

> "I wouldn't say no if I were asked. I feel if I ask, I would be bothering them
>
> [the staff]."

This category did not emerge in the reasons perceived by the school staff for limited involvement. However, one of the issues identified by teachers, was the need to use verbal communication, indicating that some staff members recognize the need to make personal requests.

The remaining reasons given by parents for limiting involvement in schools included the categories of the parent's view of school (1), and the parent's view of

their own skills (1). These categories were also represented in the staff responses. However, parents are less likely than school staff to offer such explanations.

An area where parents' perceptions and staff perceptions were very different is in the effect of past school experiences on parents' current willingness to become involved in their children's schools. Many of the school staff believe that parents' past negative experiences at school account for low levels of parental involvement. However, no parent offered past negative school experiences as a reason for not being involved in school activities, despite eight of the fifteen parents reporting that their own school experience had been very unpleasant. Rather, one parent stated that her own school experience was the reason she is involved in her child's schooling. This parent chose to help out in activities where she could observe her child. In responding to the question 'What was your school experience like?' she remarked,

> "I didn't enjoy it. That is why I am up here all the time. Because I know what I went
> through."

This parent also alleged that past negative experience is the reason so many Aboriginal parents are frequently in and out of the school grounds on the pretext of bringing lunches or other items required by their children. Her final comment before terminating the interview was,

> "That is why you see parents around all the time, because we know what we
> went through."

This statement is in contrast to statements by the teacher who expressed concern at the lack of parental involvement. For this parent, the unpleasant memories of her own school experience is reason for being involved in her child's schooling. In addition, she identified parental involvement that the teacher did not acknowledge.

Thus, the responses of this parent indicate that it may be due to past negative experience that parents value certain types of involvement.

Therefore, it can be seen that parents reported that they limited their involvement in schools, although most perceived they should be involved in their child's schooling. However, parents are more likely than school staff to cite other commitments or child developmental issues as important influences on their participation in school activities. Additionally, some parents indicated that past negative experience is the reason they are involved at school, while school staff perceived that past negative experience is the reason parents limit their involvement in school activities.

7.2.3 Valued Parental Involvement

As already reported, most parents believe that involvement in their child's schooling is beneficial to the child. However, many also indicate that their involvement in school activities is limited. Table 14 reports parents' responses to the question 'What do you think is the most important thing Aboriginal people can do to help their children succeed at school?' The responses reveal the types of involvement that are valued by the parents. As most parents gave more than one response, all responses have been collated, categorized and reported under thematic headings that emerged from the data. Responses have also been categorized using the five types of involvement identified by Epstein and Dauber (1991).

Table 14 <u>Types Of School Involvement Valued By Parents</u>

Epstein and Dauber 1991 **Type of Involvement**	**Most valuable involvement**	**n=15**
Type 5	Participate in decision making groups	7
Type 3	Attend child performance and special events	6
Type 1	Encourage and support learning	5
Type 3	Share culture and help out in class or school	4
Type 1	Just be on the school grounds, watch and protect.	3
	Anything	3
Type 1	Encourage attendance	2
Type 2	Discuss child's progress with the teacher	1

The most frequently valued form of involvement is participation in decision-making groups. In what appears to be an inconsistency, seven parents indicated that decision-making groups were important even though four of these parents chose not to get involved themselves. One parent who regularly attended ASSPA meetings said,

"ASSPA is for our children, that's why it holds a higher priority."

However, another parent captured the general view of the parents who chose not participate in decision-making committees when she responded,

"I guess it is important but it is something that I don't really want to go into.

I have responsibilities at home already. Information is provided so if I get a

newsletter of what funds are needed I will provide. I do my part like that."

These findings indicate that although some parents choose not to participate in the decision-making groups, the role played by these committees is valued by many

Aboriginal parents, many of whom contribute and become informed by liaising with others.

Attending child performances and special events is the next most frequently valued form of involvement. One parent explained the importance of attending such events in this way,

> "If [the child] has to do a play, talk, whatever, I'd like to be there for that. She knows her mum is there. If I wasn't there and other mums were she'd be upset."

Additionally, another parent explained that these events allow her to be involved in her child's schooling while remaining remote, whereas a third parent reported that he was happy to attend assemblies and school dances because,

> "It is good to sit back and watch your kid do that"

Therefore, it is apparent that parents may prefer this form of involvement for a variety of reasons. The frequency with which this category is valued by parents is congruent with the reports by school staff that such activities result in high parent participation.

Encouragement and support of the child is the third most frequently cited category of involvement given by parents. This category included praise and encouragement to build the child's self esteem as well as encouragement in support of school activities. As expressed by one parent,

> "Encourage them. Praise their work when they bring it home. Talk to them about it."

The above comment is not only representative of the view held by other parents in this study, but it is also important because this parent represents a family considered by the class teacher as hard to reach. Therefore, although the teacher reported that she was uncertain as to whether or not this parent valued education and suspected that there was little interest in school involvement, the parent does in fact make a conscious effort to develop a positive attitude towards school in her child.

Four parents reported that it is important to share their culture, although two parents indicated that this would depend on the parent feeling comfortable and confident with sharing their culture. In addition, one suggested that Aboriginal parental involvement could be in the form of providing suggestions as to who could come and share Aboriginal culture with the children. Sharing culture was considered to be important in building the self-esteem of Aboriginal children and in educating all children about the Aboriginal culture. Three of these parents also considered helping out in the classroom to be important. Helping out in the class was considered important for building the self-esteem of their own child and for providing the parent with the opportunity to know what is going on. One parent also considered it an opportunity for her to be seen in a positive light by others.

All other involvement reported by parents to be important related to supporting and encouraging their own child. Therefore, most of the involvement valued by parents was involvement that impacted directly on their own child. There is little

evidence to indicate that parents are willing to be involved for the good of all children.

Analysing the data according to Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology reveals that Type 1: basic family obligations is the most frequently valued type of parental involvement. School staff also reported valuing this type of involvement. However, the focus for staff members is on compliance with school ideals, such as valuing education, supporting teachers and providing materials, while the focus for parents is on encouraging the child, protecting the child and building the child's self esteem. Of the ten parents who valued type one activities, eight related to activities for the purpose of encouraging and supporting their child's learning, while just two related to encouraging regular attendance at school.

Another frequently valued type of parental involvement using the Epstein and Dauber (1991) typology is type three: in-school involvement. However, it is important to note that this type includes child performance and special events as well as in-school volunteer help. In explaining their reasons for limiting involvement, six parents expressed the view that they were unable or unwilling to participate in volunteer help, but that they do attend child performances and special events. Therefore, in understanding the data, it is more appropriate to divide type three involvement into the two types of in-school involvement of in-school performances and special events, and in-school volunteer activities. When this is done, it can be seen that in-school performances and special events are more frequently valued than in-school volunteer activities. In addition, type 5:

involvement in decision-making is more frequently valued than both in-school performances and special events and in-school volunteer activities. However, it must be remembered that four of the seven parents who valued involvement in decision-making groups are themselves unwilling to directly participate in such involvement. They prefer to limit their involvement to being informed and liaising with those parents who are on the committee.

Therefore, the parents' purpose for involvement is focused on maintaining their child's sense of security and confidence and is best summed up by the statement of the parent who said,

> "I want him to know that I will be involved in school and that I am always
> there if he needs me. Involvement is so that he knows I am there."

However, no matter what typology is used, it is apparent that although parents more frequently value some types of involvement over others, there is diversity among Aboriginal parents as to what type of involvement suits their needs.

7.2.4 Other Issues Arising

The last two questions of the interview schedule were open ended questions allowing parents to raise issues they regarded as important when considering Aboriginal education and Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. Table 15 reports the issues raised by the parents. Responses were collated and reported under thematic headings.

Table 15 <u>Issues Raised By Parents Relating To Aboriginal Education And Parental Involvement.</u>

Issues raised	n
It is important for schools to support Aboriginality	10
It is important to communicate and develop a relationship with parents	5
It is important to encourage and support Aboriginal children	4
The role of the AIEW is important to Aboriginal parental involvement	3
It is important for teachers to be aware of Aboriginal issues and culture	2
ASSPA is important to Aboriginal parental involvement	2
Some parents can not and should not be involved at school.	2

From Table 15 it can be seen that the most prominent theme that emerged from the parents' comments is the importance of supporting Aboriginality. This theme included not only learning about traditional Aboriginal culture, but also, learning about the history of Aboriginal people since the arrival of European settlers to Australia. Comments with regard to supporting Aboriginality include,

"Things to do with Aboriginality should be learned and talked about."

"More of the history should be taught to everybody, not just the Aboriginal kids."

"Bring role models in. That should be a priority. Not just once or twice a year but on a regular basis."

One parent articulated her feelings this way,

"I feel ripped off that I have only just started learning my history in the last

five years. Things would have been different if it had been taught. When I

was growing up I didn't admit to being Aboriginal. I told them I was Maori.

I was too ashamed to admit to being Aboriginal."

For this parent, knowing her history would have given her something, other than

an undesirable image, with which to identify. This parent talked about the need

for Aboriginal children to be proud of their Aboriginality and not ashamed of it.

In addition to the ten parents who expressed the need for schools to support

Aboriginality, two parents expressed the belief that it is important for teachers to

be aware of Aboriginal history and culture so that they have some understanding

of the issues with which Aboriginal people have to deal. As one parent said,

"History has affected our people."

She believes that if teachers are aware of Aboriginal history, they will be more

understanding of the situation that Aboriginal people find themselves in. As she

explained,

"Everything needs to be taught. The 1905 Act, the stolen generation, the

massacres and the land being stolen. So that when they [the teachers] walk

down the street and see Aboriginal people, they don't dismiss them as just

another Aboriginal drunk. [The teachers] need to be aware that influences

of past history have been passed down from generation to generation. Be

more understanding."

The need for staff awareness of Aboriginal issues is also a common theme

amongst other participants, as most of the administrative staff and some of the

assistants raised the issue. Teachers are the only group of participants who did not

raise the issue of the need for non-Aboriginal staff to be aware of Aboriginal culture and the issues faced by Aboriginal families.

Another issue that emerged from the comments made by the parents is the importance of communication and developing a relationship with Aboriginal families. This is another issue raised by other participants in the study. Most teachers noted the importance of verbal communication and the administrative staff discussed the need to develop a trust relationship with Aboriginal families. The parents expressed similar thoughts in the following comments,

> "There should be open communication with the family so that it almost
>
> becomes personal – become friends"

> "It has a lot to do with the teacher. A lot of teachers do encourage involvement but
>
> teachers need to encourage and educate parents."

> "Be approachable and relaxed."

For one parent, trust is a major issue. Her reason for getting involved in her children's schooling is so she can be aware of the environment to which her children are exposed. At one point she mentioned that she found it difficult to leave the children at school. When there was a concern she quickly approached the teacher. The teacher of her child is Aboriginal and this parent expressed satisfaction with the way her concerns were dealt with by the teacher. But at the conclusion of the interview she stated,

> "It is hard for me to express my opinions as an Aboriginal. My husband
>
> was brought up not to trust white people, I was brought up to trust them."

This comment demonstrates the diversity of Aboriginal opinions as well as the dilemma in which some Aboriginal people find themselves. It confirms the need to build trust and reinforces the need for school staff to know the families with whom they are dealing.

The third most frequently raised issue by parents is the desire of parents to see their children encouraged and supported. This view was clearly expressed by a parent who said,

> "Encourage them [the children]. Talk to them. Say they are doing well.
>
> When they [the children] are upset or angry, just be there for them."

Three of the four parents who articulated this view were non-Aboriginal parents of Aboriginal children. Although only one Aboriginal parent articulated the need to have their children encouraged and supported at school, others articulated the need to watch and protect their children. For example, one parent was concerned that racism remained an issue for her children and maintained that although it is not as open as it was in her time at school, it is still carried out "on the sly". This parent believed that her presence at school reduced its occurrence. Therefore, although it was mainly the non-Aboriginal parents who articulated the need to see their children encouraged and supported, there is evidence to show that this is also important to Aboriginal parents.

The issues raised by parents that relate specifically to Aboriginal parental involvement in schools support the strategies already used in schools for increasing Aboriginal participation in schools. These parents discussed the importance of the role of the AIEW and the ASPPA committee.

Three parents discussed the importance of the role of AIEWs. One parent was

very proud of the work being done by the AIEWs. In her words,

> "I love the idea of the AIEW. Such a good step. I'm very proud of our
>
> AIEWs even if I don't know them, they are in there making a difference,
>
> especially if they are properly trained."

This parent later commented,

> "People like [the primary school AIEW] make more of a change to society
>
> than any politician can."

Another parent was concerned that the right person be employed in the position of

AIEW. In this school there were Aboriginal people from a variety of regions,

including those who had come from the country to settle in the Perth metropolitan

area. Therefore, there are differences within the Aboriginal population of the

school. This parent expressed the need for Aboriginal people to forget their

differences and the need for the AIEW to be able to deal appropriately with all

Aboriginal parents. She believed that,

> "The AIEW must be a strong person."

The third parent who discussed the role of the AIEW, indicated that it is important

for schools to,

> "make proper use of the AIEW."

This parent believed that schools should be accessing AIEWs and other

Aboriginals for consultation when dealing with Aboriginal issues in the school.

Two parents also discussed the importance of ASSPA. One parent was concerned that although she believed that ASSPA should take high priority, other parents did not support ASSPA in the same way. However, she acknowledged that other parents may have different priorities. Another parent praised the work of the ASSPA committee in the school saying,

> "At this school the ASSPA group go around and talk to the parents. This is
>
> a good school"

In addition to the comments made by parents that specifically discussed the role of the AIEW and the ASSPA committee, six parents commented that they believed the school is doing a good job. One of these parents and four others also indicated that it is now up to the parents to become more involved. Therefore, most parents expressed support for the work already being done by schools to involve Aboriginal parents.

However, two parents suggested that schools need to accept that not all parents should be, or want to be, involved in school activities. One of these parents was a non-Aboriginal parent who expressed the belief that the involvement of some Aboriginal families would be undesirable for his son although he would be more than happy for other families to be involved in his child's schooling. The other parent expressed the need for parents to get help themselves before they could do anything for their children. In expressing this view she said,

> "Parents have to get fixed up first. That's all there is to it. That's what it's
>
> like in my place and I know that's what it is like in most mission peoples
>
> cases. I think schools are doing pretty good."

This parent had earlier shared her desire to overcome the effects of having been taken from her natural mother and placed in an institutional home where she felt she was told to hide her Aboriginality. She believed that the experience had caused her to become reluctant to be involved in anything and that she needed to modify her own attitude.

Therefore, the issues raised by parents are similar to those raised by other participants, although the desire of parents to see their children supported was largely overlooked by school staff.

7.3 Summary

The results of part A of the interview schedule reveal that Aboriginal children come from a diversity of circumstances, ranging from secure two parent, double income families, to less secure and changing family circumstances. However, it can also be seen that there is a high representation of single parent families with two or more children. Also, many of the parents and some of the children have been exposed to abuse, while some parents have been directly affected by past government policy that required Aboriginal children to be removed from their natural family situation. In addition, two of the participants were not the children's biological parents but were relatives who had taken on the role of guardian.

The parents' responses to part B of the interview schedule answer research question 1 of this study and reveal that the parents believe that their children

benefit from attendance at kindergarten and preprimary. Parents feel comfortable at school, value education and report that they do participate in activities that help their children learn, although their involvement at school is limited. Like the school staff members, parents believe that Aboriginal parental involvement in school benefits Aboriginal children, but then gave a variety of reasons for their limited involvement. The reason most frequently cited by parents is their need to deal with other priorities. Parents also frequently indicated that they made deliberate choices regarding the type and degree of involvement they were seeking, with one parent reporting that past negative experience is the motivation for the type of involvement sought. Concern for the development of their child was also offered as a reason for limiting the level of involvement at school.

The most frequently valued type of parental involvement is in decision-making although many parents report that their personal involvement in decision-making groups is limited. While this appears to be an inconsistency, the value placed on decision-making groups is reinforced by the appreciation spontaneously expressed by parents of the work of the ASSPA committee. Thus, although individual Aboriginal parents may choose not to serve on the ASSPA committee, they still believe it to be important for Aboriginal parents to have a voice in decisions regarding the education of their children in schools. Attendance at school special events and child performances is the next most frequently valued type of parental involvement, because it boosts children's self esteem and supports the school, while allowing the parents to remain inconspicuous. In addition, encouragement and support of the children's learning was the next most frequently valued type of

involvement, while other reasons also included supportive behaviours. Therefore, most parents placed higher value on involvement that was supportive of their own child specifically rather than activities that were for the benefit of children generally, or that require parents to act as agents of the school.

The issues most frequently raised by the parents include the need for schools to support Aboriginality and the need to develop a relationship with Aboriginal families. Other issues raised included the importance of encouraging Aboriginal children and the need for teachers to be aware of Aboriginal issues and culture. Therefore, most parents considered intercultural relations to be important to increased Aboriginal parental involvement in schools and improved outcomes for Aboriginal children. However, parents expressed appreciation of the work of AIEWs and the ASSPA committee in achieving these ends. Some parents believe that schools have appropriate systems in place and that it is now up to the parents to become more involved, although two parents felt strongly that it is unrealistic to expect every parent to become involved at school.

The results reported in this chapter, whilst answering research question 1 of this study, also point to some important comparisons between the perceptions of school staff and the perceptions of the parents of Aboriginal children. Chapter eight will discuss these findings further in relation to research question 3 of this study.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION

8.0 Introduction

This study has endeavoured to report the extent to which Aboriginal parental involvement is occurring in the education process and to discover reasons behind the current level of Aboriginal parental involvement at school. Additionally, it has identified forms of parental involvement that are valued by the participants and issues that arise for participants in the implementation of greater Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. The discussion in this chapter will focus on the comparison of results between parents and school staff in answer to research question 3 of this study which investigates similarities and differences of opinion between parents and educators concerning opportunities for, and value of, Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process. How these results fit with other research and commentaries found in the literature will also be discussed.

The format of the discussion will remain as in previous chapters. First, the results of Part A of the interview schedule relating to the background of the participants will be discussed, followed by the results of Part B of the interview schedule. Part B relates to the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement; reasons for the level of parental involvement; valued forms of parental involvement; and other issues arising, in answer to research questions 1 and 2 of this study.

8.1 <u>Background</u>

8.1.1 School Staff

The evidence from all sectors of the school staff is that very few staff members participated in any pre-service cross-cultural training and that professional development in this area is limited. In particular, teachers are the least likely to have participated in cross-cultural studies. Although the teachers in this study were placed in schools with a significant Aboriginal population, not one teacher had undergone any Aboriginal cross-cultural training prior to taking up their current position. Although there is evidence to suggest that some schools and individuals are taking steps to increase their knowledge with regard to Aboriginal education, other demands on school staff are assigned higher priority.

Generally, Aboriginal children in the metropolitan school districts will be in a minority (Partington and McCudden, 1992) and therefore, not given priority by school staff. Even when teachers perceive the need to increase their cultural knowledge, teachers in this study indicated that the everyday demands of teaching hinder their ability to gain that knowledge. Concern about the priority given, and opportunity for, teachers to participate in cross-cultural professional development has previously been expressed by Aboriginal educator Beryl Carmichael (1993) when she stated,

> "We keep hearing about consultants running inservices on these new
>
> curriculum and teachers not being able to attend because their schools have

> decided there are more important things to do with their inservice money."

(p14)

It appears that this situation remains and the priority assigned to professional development in cross-cultural studies at school level is limited.

Even in schools where Aboriginal children are given priority, there is limited cross-cultural training. Three of the centres in the study were Aboriginal kindergartens, with the majority of the students being of Aboriginal descent. None of the teachers in these centres had participated in cross-cultural training in Aboriginal education prior to their placement in Aboriginal kindergartens. Thus, even in schools that have been set up to provide a culturally inclusive programme, where the Aboriginal child is a priority, it is likely that the programme will be set by a teacher who has limited cross-cultural knowledge.

In the words of Carmichael (1993)

> "You can't expect teachers to have much idea of how to teach Aboriginal students effectively or to implement Aboriginal pedagogy and philosophy for the benefit of all students, if they have no idea of Aboriginal cultural differences and have no idea of Aboriginal learning styles and have never even heard of Aboriginal education philosophy." (p14)

The lack of cross-cultural training by school staff and the limited opportunity for improving that situation once teachers begin service in schools, highlights the need for pre-service cross-cultural training to be a mandatory component of teacher training. Although not every teacher will teach in schools with a significant population of Aboriginal children, most will teach an Aboriginal child

at some stage of their career. As these individual experiences are important to the big picture of Aboriginal education, it is important that all teachers have an understanding of Aboriginal culture and pedagogy. In addition to pre-service training, it is imperative that opportunities for school staff to participate in cross-cultural studies be assigned high priority by schools.

8.1.2 The Parents

The diversity of situations from which Aboriginal children come, is noted in the findings of this study. Such a finding cannot be overlooked, as it highlights the need for teachers to be aware of the individual student and their family. It cannot be assumed that all Aboriginal children share the same personal circumstances. Neither can it be assumed that every Aboriginal parent holds the same values and opinions.

Shimoni and Baxter (2001) emphasised the need for professionals to know the family and to be aware of the family as a system. Knowing families intimately requires commitment on the part of school staff, but as Anderson and Smith (1999) state,

> "Teachers work most effectively with parents when they are knowledgeable
>
> about family circumstances." (p159)

In addition to being aware of the diversity of situations found in Aboriginal families, school staff must also be knowledgeable about the common trends within the community in which they are working. This study identifies some trends

common amongst the participating Aboriginal families. These trends are important to consider in the light of literature suggesting that not all families are able to participate in school activities (Lareau and Shumar, 1996; Anderson and Smith, 1999) and that not all families should participate (Lareau and Shumar, 1996; Cooper and Mosely, 1999).

Every family represented in this study faces issues relating to one or more of the social trends identified by Anderson and Smith (1999) as impacting on parental involvement in school activities. As all these families deal with circumstances that are likely to influence their ability to participate in school activities, any lack of involvement at school cannot be automatically interpreted as a lack of interest in their children's education. The alternative to this assumption is to acknowledge the social trends that impact on the ability of families to be involved at school and to provide ways in which families can be empowered to participate in their children's education.

A trend that deserves further comment is the role played by extended family members. Two parents in this study are not the biological parents of the kindergarten or preprimary child, creating what may be considered a non-traditional family. The roles played by these two extended family members are consistent with commentaries suggesting that Aboriginal families maintain the traditional kinship system and the traditional ways of operating to varying degrees (Heitmeyer & O'Brien, 1992; Bourke, 1993). In the case of these two participants, the roles they play is made obvious because of the absence of the biological

parent. However, the role of extended family members may be important, even when the biological parents are present. Therefore, it may be that other Aboriginal families operate in ways that are considered non-traditional by the mainstream society. School staff must be aware of and remain sensitive to, the extended family ethos that is likely to operate in Aboriginal families (Howe, 1999).

Two other factors that emerged as important influences in the lives of the Aboriginal families in this study, are the impact of exposure to violence and the impact of past Government policy, resulting in the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents. The presence of these phenomena provides empirical evidence that such circumstances have a long-term impact on these Aboriginal families. Therefore, school staff must be aware of the impact these circumstances have on families, and make themselves knowledgeable about identification and support of families dealing with such issues. In addition, the frequent identification of exposure to abuse suggests that there may be children who remain in abusive situations and whose parents would be amongst those not recommended for involvement in school activities (Cooper and Mosely, 1999).

Thus, the demographics of the families are important to consider. The diversities of circumstance and the parents' perspectives must be acknowledged and accommodated. This study suggests that many Aboriginal families do indeed face circumstances that limit their ability to participate in school activities. Additionally, there may be some family situations where parental involvement at school is not in the child's best interest. Therefore, when developing parental

involvement strategies, schools must acknowledge and accommodate these issues, endeavouring to consider the parent's perspective and empower greater involvement in the educational process, while maintaining a safe and nurturing environment for the child at school.

8.2 The Extent of Parental Involvement

In identifying the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement, there was some consensus among participants as to the level of Aboriginal parental involvement at school. However, significant differences are also revealed, particularly in discussions relating to the extent of home engagement. Both matches and mismatches of perception are discussed in the following paragraphs.

8.2.1. Matching Perceptions

This study found that most Aboriginal parents were comfortable in schools, although some parents reported that this has not always been the case. These parents noted that teacher attitude and behaviour influenced their approach to the school. Although two parents also indicated that some of the barriers they experienced with schools had been overcome as they changed their own attitudes, the importance of teacher attitude and behaviour remained constant. Therefore, it is apparent that the behaviour of school staff can have an impact on parental involvement.

However, like another recent Western Australian study conducted by Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (1999), this study found most Aboriginal parents and school staff believed that schools are taking steps to encourage Aboriginal parental involvement at school. In spite of this, participants also commonly reported that Aboriginal parental involvement remains limited. Some school staff in both studies, suggested that limited parental involvement is an issue for the whole school population, not just the Aboriginal population. However, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, the limited levels of parental involvement are highlighted in the frustrations expressed by school staff, who articulated difficulty in understanding the limited parental involvement at school, in spite of their efforts.

It must be acknowledged that both this study and the study by Harslett, et al. (1999) were implemented through the school system, thereby reducing the likelihood of participation by parents who are not comfortable at school. Therefore, it may be that other parents do not feel as positive about the school environment as those who participated in these studies. However, the acknowledgement by parents that they limit their involvement at school, even though they are comfortable in that environment, is in conflict with the assumption that parents will become involved at school when they feel comfortable. The demographic information gleaned in Part A of this study suggests that the existence of circumstances that impact on parental involvement as identified by Anderson and Smith (1999) provides a better explanation for limited parental involvement. Therefore, while it is commendable that schools are

making the effort to encourage parental involvement it appears that these undertakings may be limited by the ways in which they are able to involve parents. Thus, the challenge becomes one of endeavouring to find ways in which parents not only can, but would like to be involved in their children's schooling. Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli and Slostad, (1999) suggest some strategies that can assist school staff in developing parental involvement programmes. These include networking with school staff who have implemented successful parental involvement strategies; finding opportunities to experiment with and monitor existing parental involvement; and engaging in training or professional development relating to parental involvement. Whatever strategies are used, knowing families well and initiating contact in ways that acknowledge and accommodate their perspective, must become a primary goal when developing parental involvement programmes.

Activities that were most frequently reported in this study as resulting in high parental involvement included NAIDOC events, social activities and child performance events. Again, this finding is in keeping with those of the study by Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (1999) and provides insight into the types of involvement that parents are willing and able to engage in. These types of parental involvement relate specifically to perceived benefits for their own child's self-esteem and cultural identity, or as a means for the parents to observe their child's progress. Thus, parents are more willing to provide support specifically for their own child, than to become involved in activities for the benefit of children in general. With both parents and school staff reporting high

levels of involvement in activities that support Aboriginality, or enable parents to observe the performance of their own child, such events must be acknowledged as an effective step toward involving parents in the education process. Given that most parents want to monitor the experience of their own child, events that allow this to occur are likely to result in high rates of participation.

8.2.2   Mismatches of Perceptions

Not only do parents want to monitor their child's experience at school, but it is also evident from this study that parents support their child's learning to some degree in the home. Even in families where survival issues are predominant, this was found to be true. Furthermore, most parents participating in this study believe that their involvement in schools is beneficial for their children. This confirms the literature suggesting that most parents, including parents from low income, minority groups, do support their children's learning (Epstein, 1987; Coleman and Churchill, 1997; Lazar and Slostad 1999; Anderson and Smith 1999). However, most school staff were either unaware of the level of home support, or perceived that little or nothing was done to support the children's learning at home. Such a finding highlights the inaccuracy of the perceptions held by the school staff and points to the need to look for and acknowledge the ways in which the parents are supporting their children's learning. School staff can confidently assume that Aboriginal parents intend to support their child's education. However, the comments made by the parents, also provide evidence that educators can empower more effective involvement, if they provide a focus for the parent's involvement.

Some parents believed that they did not do much at home, but then went on to list several activities. These parents would benefit from knowing that they were providing a supportive environment and being encouraged to continue such efforts. Other parents see their role in their child's education as completely separate from the role of the school and would profit from knowing how parents and schools can work together to benefit the child. Still others indicated that they made a deliberate effort to provide an educational environment for their children, with many focusing on phonics, alphabet and number. These parents would benefit from being made aware of the benefits of play in early childhood and how they can support their child's learning through play and everyday family activities. Thus, school staff may empower more effective parental involvement when they assume that parents are interested in supporting their children's education and seek to assist them in this role.

Further evidence pointing to the need for school staff to acknowledge the parental involvement that is already occurring is seen in the views expressed by school staff at one school. In this school, the principal and one teacher expressed pride in the level of Aboriginal parental involvement, while another staff member expressed frustration at the level of Aboriginal parental participation in the same school. The question must then be asked, "Why are two school staff members comfortable with the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement, while another is frustrated?"

The answer to this question may be seen in the discussion of the two staff members who were comfortable with the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement. Both identified ways in which some school staff made the initial approach to parents, rather than waiting for the parents to approach the school. They worked with a definition of parental involvement that included activities such as chance meetings in the community and planned home visits. Greenberg (1989), supports such informal meeting places suggesting that teachers meet parents at less threatening and more convenient places than school. These two staff members also noted the positive response received from parents when the approach came from the teachers, and expressed the opinion that they believed Aboriginal parents valued education. In addition, they drew attention to some Aboriginal parental involvement that was occurring in their school that they had not experienced in other schools. By contrast, other school staff limited the way they communicated with parents; limited their definition of involvement to in-school involvement only; and focused on parental involvement that was not occurring.

This insight into staff perceptions of the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement confirms the importance of acknowledging parental involvement that is occurring. Finding effective ways to communicate with parents and flexibility in fulfilling the basic obligations of schools, are strategies used by staff in one school to successfully facilitate Aboriginal parental involvement in the education process.

8.3 An Explanation of the Extent of Parental Involvement

School staff and parents offered many of the same explanations for the limited

Aboriginal parental involvement at school. However, some reasons most likely to

be given by parents are less likely to be given by school staff, and other reasons

most likely to be given by school staff are less likely to be given by parents.

Therefore, there are both similarities and differences in the explanations given for

the extent of Aboriginal parental involvement in the schooling of their children.

8.3.1 Matches of Perceptions

Responses frequently given by the parents that were also frequently given by the

school staff include the parents' commitment to other priorities and the type and

degree of contact desired by parents. Both school staff and parents indicated that

parents are unable, or do not desire to be more involved. This finding provides

some support for those who question the appropriateness of mandating parental

involvement (Laureau and Shumar, 1996). Edwards and Warin (1999) expressed

the concern that parental involvement requiring parents to act as agents of the

school actually places the disadvantaged in double jeopardy, as they are the

families least likely to be able to be involved at this level. Therefore, the

perspective of the Aboriginal families must be considered when endeavouring to

involve parents in the education process. Parental involvement programmes that

require Aboriginal parents to participate at school in ways in which they are

unable or unwilling to participate, cannot address the educational disadvantage

that Aboriginal children are found to be facing. Thus, schools must acknowledge

the parental involvement that is occurring, and empower parents to participate at their desired level. An example of such strategies can be seen in the school where staff approached parents in the community and actively sought the opinions of parents who were unable to attend the meetings of the decision-making group.

The sector of school staff whose responses were most likely to match the responses offered by the parents is that of the teacher assistant. Teacher assistants are more likely than other staff members to acknowledge that parents may have other commitments that influence their level of involvement and less likely to perceive that parents do not value education. In addition, an assistant was the only staff member to perceive child development issues as influencing the parent's level of involvement at school. Thus the teacher assistants were more likely than other staff members to hold a perception in keeping with the perception held by parents. This may be due to the role of the assistants, which can be less formal and often more personal, or because assistants are also more likely to be Aboriginal. However, it confirms the belief that assistants should be acknowledged as a valuable resource, with access to knowledge that can be important to other school staff members. It verifies the importance of the role played by assistants and suggests that other school staff need to access their knowledge which includes specific knowledge gained from liaison with Aboriginal families and their general knowledge and experience in building relationships with Aboriginal families.

8.3.2 Mismatches

It has already been noted that both parents and school staff frequently perceived that parents' commitment to other priorities and the type and degree of involvement sought by the parents, have an impact on the level of parental involvement at school. However, school staff were also likely to assume that parents were not involved at school because of their past negative experience with schools, or because they didn't value education, or because they did not believe they had appropriate skills to become involved at school. These explanations are not always in keeping with the evidence provided by the parents.

The parents' view of school is an explanation frequently offered by the administrative staff and teachers for a lack of involvement by Aboriginal parents in their children's schools. Few parents discussed how their view of school influenced their involvement in their child's schooling, but those who did, identified the types of involvement they were engaged in because of past negative experience. Therefore, a mismatch of perception can be seen in that parents perceived themselves to be involved in their child's schooling when they participated in activities that they believed allowed them to assess their child's school experience. The parents' past negative experience of schools was cited as the reason for this type of involvement. In contrast, the school staff focused on activities in which the parents were not involved, and attributed their past negative experience to that non-involvement.

The literature addressing the influence that past negative experience has on parental involvement also focuses on the parents' limited involvement and recommends that educators work to overcome this barrier (Coleman and Churchill 1997; Anderson and Smith 1999). The reports of parents in this study confirm that many parents did have a negative experience at school in their childhood. Thus, there may be a need to overcome barriers that exist due to past negative experiences. However, the responses given by parents also indicate that recognition must be given to the activities they are already engaged in for the purpose of monitoring their children's experience at school. In addition, the evidence presented by parents who discussed the influence of past negative experience on their involvement at school, suggests that when parents know the environment is safe for their children, they can move on to more meaningful involvement in their children's schooling. Therefore, acknowledging and supporting activities that allow parents to know their child is safe and happy at school, can be an important step toward other levels of involvement and must be considered an essential element of any parental involvement programme.

A further explanation frequently given by school staff for limited parental involvement is that Aboriginal parents do not value education. This explanation was particularly frequent amongst teachers. It is contrary to evidence of previous research investigating Aboriginal parents' value of education (Glover, 1994) and contrary to the evidence presented by parents in this study. Parents who participated in this study provided evidence of support for their children's learning. In addition, most volunteered statements indicating they valued

education. These statements arose in general discussion rather than in response to a direct question on the value of education. Parents making such statements included one perceived by the teacher to be sending her child to kindergarten primarily for baby sitting purposes. Carmichael, (1993) emphasised the need for educators to be informed of the concern Indigenous people have about the educational outcomes for their children. It remains apparent that there still exists a need to inform educators of the value Aboriginal parents place on education.

The parents' view of their own skills and the parents' level of education were two other explanations given by school staff that were less frequently given by parents. No parent referred to their own level of education as a reason for limiting their involvement at school, while just one parent identified her feelings of inadequacy as a reason for limiting the types of involvement in which she engaged. It is likely that parents are not motivated to express their feelings of inadequacy and the inclusion of one parent who did identify her lack of skills as a reason for limiting involvement suggests that it may be a valid explanation for some parents. The absence of comment regarding their education and skill level by other parents may be because these parents do not perceive their skills or educational achievement to be influencing their involvement in their children's schooling, or it may be due to unwillingness to expose a lack of education and skills. Further investigation is necessary to ascertain whether these parents perceive that their level of skills or academic achievement influences their involvement in their children's schooling.

Therefore, mismatches between staff and parents' perceived reasons for the extent of parental involvement point to the tendency by some school staff to focus on activities that are not resulting in parental involvement, while overlooking the parental involvement that is occurring. It highlights the importance of acknowledging and supporting activities that allow parents to monitor their children's school experiences. In addition, this study continues to expose the need for educators to be informed of the value that Aboriginal parents place on education.

8.4 Valued Parental Involvement

Using Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology to identify the types of parental involvement frequently valued by parents and school staff there appears to be much common ground. However, further analysis of the results reveals that the form of parental involvement that is valued within each type is different for parents than for school staff. Therefore, there are both matches and mismatches of perception regarding parental involvement that is regarded as valuable.

8.4.1 Matching perceptions

The literature relating to indigenous education places high value on Aboriginal parental involvement in decision-making groups. This is considered by many to be an essential element of educational programmes aimed at indigenous children (Harris 1993; Wooltorton 1997; Government of Western Australia 1997; Heslop 1998). The results of this study reveal that Aboriginal parents and school staff

value this level of involvement for Aboriginal parents. However, the parents and staff who participated in this study also indicated that it is not a level of involvement that suits all parents. Over half of the parents who indicated that participation in decision-making groups is important, also indicated that they were unable or unwilling to be involved at this level. Like the parents, the school staff who valued participation in decision-making groups, also indicated that it does not suit every Aboriginal parent and added that involvement at other levels is equally important. Therefore, the role played by decision-making groups is valued, although the practicality of participating, and the willingness of parents to serve as committee members on the decision-making group is limited.

The value placed on the role of decision-making groups suggests that it is important to maintain them. However, it may also be appropriate to use these groups as a springboard for other ways in which to facilitate Aboriginal parents' participation in the decision-making process. Such an example was observed in one school. The administrator indicated that it is school policy to involve parents in decisions relating specifically to their own children, as well as to broader issues such as the content of their Aboriginal studies programme. This school does not wait for the parents to come to the school, but actively seeks parental input, allowing for less formal means of contribution. The account by the administrator is supported by the report of a parent at this school who indicated that the members of the ASSPA committee frequently communicate with the parents to ascertain their opinions and feed them back to the committee. Therefore, the value placed on Aboriginal parental involvement in the decision-making process

reinforces the importance of schools working towards effective inclusion of all Aboriginal parents in the decision-making process. This may involve flexibility and innovation in the decision-making procedure and should not rely solely on attendance at school-based meetings.

A further perception that is common to teachers, assistants and some parents is that all parental involvement is valuable. Current literature acknowledges that there is value in all levels of involvement. However, the perception that any form of involvement is desirable, ignores evidence suggesting that parental involvement is not always beneficial (Powell 1989; Edwards and Warin 1999; Cooper and Mosley, 1999) and that intervention by parents is not more beneficial than intervention that does not involve parents (White, Taylor and Moss, 1992). It also ignores concerns expressed by Lareau and Shumar (1996) about the lack of investigation into the negative effects of parental involvement and the trend by schools to overlook the perspectives of some parents. The expression of frustration at the perceived lack of involvement by both parents and school staff does not acknowledge the perspective of some parents. Neither does it acknowledge literature reporting that families will move from one level of involvement to another as it suits their needs (Hepworth Berger, 1995). There is an expectation that all parents should be involved at school. Therefore, it is apparent that there is a need for both parents and school staff to be better informed in all aspects of parental involvement. Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli and Slostad (1999) also noted the need for school staff to receive systematic training in parental involvement.

Thus, the matching perceptions with regard to the types of parental involvement that are valued, demonstrate the importance of decision-making groups such as ASSPA and the need for developing ways to empower Aboriginal parents to contribute to the decision-making process. However, they also demonstrate the need for parents and school staff to be informed about all aspects of parental involvement.

8.4.2 Mismatching perceptions

At first analysis, when using Epstein and Dauber's (1991) typology of parental involvement as a guide, it appears that both parents and school staff agree that the most valued levels of involvement include type 5: decision-making; type1: basic obligations of families; and type 3: involvement at school. However, a mismatch of perception becomes apparent when the analysis is taken further.

The basic obligations of families valued by parents focuses on the child's emotional needs such as encouraging and praising the child. The basic obligations of families valued by school staff focus on activities to meet school requirements such as providing fruit for snack time and maintaining the school dress standard. The involvement at school that is most frequently valued by parents includes participation in activities where parents are spectators of their children's performance, or where parents can unobtrusively observe their children at school.

However, the involvement at school that is most frequently valued by school staff includes volunteer help at school, or parents sharing their Aboriginal culture.

In both types of involvement, the parents value involvement for the purpose of supporting their child's emotional needs and protecting their child, while the school staff value the forms that require parents to act as agents for the school and support the resources required by the school. There is a difference in focus. This difference in focus must be acknowledged and endeavours made to accommodate the parents' perspectives. It has already been noted that asking parents to act as agents of the school places disadvantaged children in double jeopardy as their parents are the ones least likely to be able to comply (Edwards and Warin, 1999). Starting from this point where parents cannot comply can only result in frustration and a sense of failure for both parents and schools. However, as it is parents who value involvement that supports their child's emotional needs, it is reasonable to conclude that programmes encouraging such involvement would result in a positive response from parents. From this point, relationships can be built and parents encouraged to participate in other forms and levels of involvement.

The difference in focus also highlights the need for future research to distinguish between parental involvement that supports the child's emotional needs and parental involvement that supports the school's resources and to investigate their relationship to student outcomes.

One type of involvement that was not expressly valued by participants, but that became evident as being valued in one school, is type 2: basic obligations of schools. A teacher and an administrator from one school demonstrated that they valued this level of involvement and used a variety of ways to approach parents and ensure that they were informed of school requirements and children's progress. Two alternative approaches of this school included meeting with parents outside school on a formal and informal basis and a willingness to be available to parents at their time of need rather than requiring a pre-arranged appointment. The response by parents from the school confirmed that they valued the efforts made by these school staff members to keep them informed.

The school staff who demonstrated in practice that they valued the basic obligations of schools did not express the same frustration with Aboriginal parents as did other school staff members. While others appeared to recognise the basic obligations of schools, the evidence of this study is that in practice there is an expectation that parents will make the effort to communicate with the school if they have questions or concerns. This places the obligation back on parents, rather than with the school. However, when one school reached out to parents and was innovative in the ways in which they kept parents informed, it elicited a positive response from parents. This finding is in keeping with literature emphasising the need for schools to reach out to families in ways that acknowledge and accommodate the parents' perspectives (Hepworth Berger, 1995; Shimoni and Baxter, 2001; Lareau and Shumar, 1996; Anderson and Smith, 1999). It provides empirical evidence that schools can make a difference when

they endeavour to fulfill the basic obligations of schools to inform parents without putting the obligation on parents to remain informed.

Therefore, the disparity between parental involvement valued by parents and parental involvement valued by school staff highlights a difference in focus by parents and some school staff. It identifies the need for the parent's perspective to be acknowledged and accommodated. Additionally, it identifies the need for future research to distinguish between parental involvement for the purpose of supporting the child's emotional needs and parental involvement for the purpose of supporting the school's resources.

8.5 Other Issues Arising

As the issues raised by participants were pertinent to each participant, this section will not be divided into matches and mismatches of perception, but instead will discuss common issues that emerged.

An issue that was frequently raised by administrators, assistants and most parents is the need for school staff to be culturally aware and for schools to support Aboriginality. This encompassed being supportive of the Aboriginal children, supporting Aboriginal families and including Aboriginal history and culture in the school curriculum for all children. The disclosure of this study that few school staff have received cross-cultural training does not match the value placed on cultural awareness. Of the school staff, teachers had the most limited cross-

cultural training and were the least likely to identify cultural issues as significant. This evidence suggests that teachers are unaware of their lack of cultural sensitivity, which may be linked to their lack of cross-cultural training. Harslett Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (1999), reported that overcoming the challenges to intercultural dynamics is the key to greater Aboriginal participation in the education process. Therefore, cultural awareness and cross-cultural training must become a priority, particularly in the light of recent research suggesting that one of the conditions assisting Aboriginal students to remain at school is culturally aware teachers (Russell, 1999).

The need to develop a relationship with Aboriginal parents and members of the Aboriginal community is an issue that was raised by administrators. Other participants also discussed aspects of this issue. For example, parents discussed the need for more personal communication and a desire for staff to be friendly and approachable, while teachers indicated that verbal face to face communication elicited greater responses than less personal forms of communication. One parent reported that trust is an issue, while others articulated the need to watch and protect their children. Evidence that supports the value of building strong school-family relationships is seen in the reports by two administrators that levels of Aboriginal parental involvement improved as a result of efforts to build a trusting relationship with the Aboriginal community. Such efforts have also been proven in overseas models of indigenous education (Stiles, 1997). Therefore, building a trust relationship with Aboriginal families and community members must remain a priority for schools.

In discussing the need to develop a trusting relationship with the Aboriginal community, administrators acknowledged the importance of the role of the AIEWs. Additionally, teachers and parents discussed the importance of the role of the AIEW. Every teacher acknowledged the role of the AIEW in their liaison with the parents of Aboriginal children, reporting that it was a primary strategy for involving Aboriginal parents in their child's schooling. This finding is supported by similar findings in the study by Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (1999). Furthermore, Russell (1999) found that the appointment of Aboriginal Education Workers was the most significant school factor in the retention and attainment levels of Aboriginal students. Thus, it is clear that the employment of AIEWs is a valued strategy for engaging Aboriginal parents in the education process, with a positive influence on student outcomes.

However, the parents' discussion of the role of the AIEW varied from pride in the work of specifically nominated AIEWs in the school, to concern that the school select the AIEW carefully and utilise their time effectively. The concerns expressed by parents demonstrate that the choice of person and the tasks they are required to undertake in their role as AIEW can also influence the response of Aboriginal parents to the school. Therefore, schools must carefully consider the choice of AIEW and develop their role with care. Consultation with the Aboriginal community on these issues can help to ensure that appropriate choices are made.

A further issue raised by participants of this study is that involving Aboriginal parents in schools is a process that will take time. Administrators stated that it is unrealistic to expect an instant fix, while other staff members stressed the long term effort required for involving Aboriginal parents at school. The reports by parents and Aboriginal assistants of the process they encountered before participating in all levels of involvement, confirmed that schools can empower parents towards meaningful involvement in their children's education, but that it takes time. Thus, recognition must be given to the long-term nature of engaging parents in the education process. Such recognition will prevent unrealistic expectations for immediate change and acknowledges that with every new parent, the process begins again.

An administrator raised another issue relating to unrealistic expectations. This administrator suggested that it is inappropriate to expect that all parents must be involved in their child's schooling. He believed that the school's higher priority is to provide a nurturing environment for the children while they are at school. Support for this point of view is evident in the concern expressed by two parents that it is not desirable to involve all parents at school. Although just a few participants raised this issue, it was common to both school staff and parent participants. In addition, current literature suggests that there are occasions when parental involvement is not in the best interests of the child and it becomes the school's responsibility to assess this situation (Cooper and Mosely, 1999). One such situation is where abuse exists. Therefore, the frequency with which exposure to abuse was reported is important to this issue. Although no participant

in this study suggested that their child was currently being abused or neglected, the reports of exposure to abuse provide a reminder of the frequency of its occurrence. It highlights the need for educators to identify and appropriately support children and families dealing with abuse. This includes recognising that it may not be in the child's best interests for the parents to be involved in school activities.

An issue articulated primarily by teachers, is the perceived inequity of treatment for those non-Aboriginal children who are in similar situations to Aboriginal children. Although just a few participants articulated this perception, many others noted that the issues being discussed are relevant to the whole school population and not just the Aboriginal population. However, three teachers clearly articulated the difficulty they had in dealing with what they perceived as inequitable treatment. The implication of this finding is that some school staff require a greater understanding of the social justice issues that are being addressed in the implementation of some practices relating to indigenous education. This may be a reflection of the limited cross-cultural training by school staff, as well as a misunderstanding of social justice issues. However, the reality is that school staff are required to address questions and complaints by non-Aboriginal parents who perceive they are being unjustly treated. Therefore, professional development that provides school staff with information that will assist them in understanding the social justice issues relating to indigenous education would assist staff members to respond appropriately to complaints received.

Thus, the issues raised by the participants confirm the need for school staff to engage in cross-cultural training including social justice issues and ways to build relationships with Aboriginal parents and community members. The importance of the role of school AIEWs and the need for schools to carefully consider who is selected and how the role is developed are highlighted. Also identified is the need for recognition that involving Aboriginal parents in schools is a long-term process and that schools may need to assess how beneficial it is to involve parents at school.

8.6 Summary

This chapter has discussed the results of the study. The discussion relates to the influence of the background of the participants and recommends that school staff participate in cross-cultural training. In addition, it is suggested that school staff should be aware, not only of the common influences on Aboriginal families, but also of the uniqueness of each family.

The participants' perceptions regarding Aboriginal parental involvement in schools were compared, identifying the need for school staff to empower parents to meaningful involvement and to participate in training relating to understanding families. In addition, the importance of the school's obligations to parents and the need for school staff to acknowledge and support involvement that is occurring, were identified as important starting points in the development of parental involvement programmes.

Also discussed were some issues that were raised by the participants relating to Aboriginal parental involvement in schools. These included the importance of cultural sensitivity; the inclusion of Aboriginal studies in the school curriculum; the need to develop a trust relationship; and the importance of the AIEW. In addition, it is suggested that it is unrealistic and undesirable to expect every parent to participate in school activities, and there is a need to develop awareness of the social justice issues that are relevant to Aboriginal education.

Chapter nine provides recommendations for educational pratice and further research arising from the discussion of this chapter and draws final conclusions from this study.

CHAPTER NINE

RECOMMENDATIONS

9.0 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the results of this study and the implications arising from these findings. This chapter will present recommendations arising from the research evidence. Systemic recommendations are made, as well as recommendations for school administrators, teachers and assistants and future research. Finally, a closing statement concludes this study.

9.1 Recommendations

Throughout the discussion of the previous chapter, conclusions were drawn from the evidence provided and reference was made to the literature where appropriate. These conclusions are represented in the following recommendations.

9.1.1 Systemic Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- the highest priority be assigned to understanding Aboriginal pedagogy and providing cross-cultural training for every teacher, supported by appropriate resources;

- priority be given to maintaining and developing the role of AIEWs;

- teacher training and professional development include Aboriginal studies, family studies and developing family-school relationships; and

- mandates concerning parental involvement acknowledge the time required for this process and the limitations of parental involvement.

9.1.2 Recommendations for school administrators

School administrators should:

- allocate time for all staff members to increase their cross-cultural knowledge, including understanding Aboriginal pedagogy and the value placed on education by Aboriginal parents; Aboriginal history and the impact of past government policy; social justice issues arising from past history; and the development of an Aboriginal studies curriculum;

- allocate time for all staff to receive training relating to family studies and developing family-school relationships;

- acknowledge the frequency with which abuse occurs and allocate time for professional development relating to the identification and support of children and families dealing with abuse;

- develop a whole school parental involvement philosophy with all staff members;

- identify social trends present in the school Aboriginal community and ensure that the whole school parental involvement philosophy accommodates these trends;

- give priority to developing a trust relationship with the Aboriginal community and be an advocate for two-way communication with parents;

- continue to support activities that result in high rates of Aboriginal participation at school;

- advocate meeting the basic obligation of schools and encourage innovation in keeping parents informed;

- provide a variety of forums for Aboriginal parents to participate in the decision-making process without relying solely on school-based meetings;

- promote an open door policy that welcomes input from Aboriginal parents;

- consult with the Aboriginal community when choosing AIEWs, ensuring that the person chosen and the role they assume meets the needs of the local Aboriginal community;

- consult with AIEWs when planning, implementing and evaluating contact with Aboriginal families or parental involvement programmes;

- engage Aboriginal guest speakers and artists on a regular basis; and

- acknowledge the process and time required for effective parental involvement.

9.1.3 Recommendations for teachers and assistants

Teachers and assistants can make a difference by:

- actively seeking cross-cultural training and professional development that gives greater understanding of issues relating to Aboriginal education;

- actively seeking professional development relating to knowing families and developing family-school relationships paying particular attention to Aboriginal issues;

- including AIEWs and assistants in class planning and evaluation processes so that their knowledge is recognised and utilised;

- being friendly and initiating contact with parents;

- following up on written communication with less formal face to face verbal communication.

- maintaining a positive approach toward Aboriginal parents and assuming that they value education and are involved in their children's development and learning;

- recognising the school's obligation to keep parents informed;

- experimenting with ways of keeping parents informed including activities that do not rely on school-based meetings;

- acknowledging diversity and respecting Aboriginal parents' perspectives;

- being an advocate for the respect of all parents' perspectives;

- re-assuring parents of the well being of their child and supporting parental involvement that allows them to confirm this;

- providing a caring and nurturing classroom environment;

- displaying genuine care for Aboriginal children;

- conducting action research to investigate the parental involvement that is occurring and use this information to empower further involvement;

- providing a variety of opportunities for parents to participate in their children's schooling and experimenting with new ideas that take into consideration Aboriginal families' circumstances and values; and

- acknowledging the process and time involved in engaging parents in their children's schooling. With every new parent, the process begins again. One individual effort can make a difference in another individual's process.

9.1.4 Recommendations for future research

Future research should:

- distinguish between in-school parental involvement designed to support school resources and in-school parental involvement for the purpose of supporting and monitoring the children's development, when investigating the relationship between student outcomes and parental involvement.

- ensure that investigations address possible negative outcomes of parental involvement;

- consider the impact of parents' views of their own education and skills on their involvement in the education process; and

- investigate the parent's perspective regarding the impact of their past negative experience at school on their current involvement in their children's education.

9.2 Conclusion

In line with national and state government documents recommending Aboriginal parental and community involvement in the education process in early childhood (See 2.4), this study has established that the first tentative steps have been taken along the road towards effective involvement of Aboriginal parents in their children's early education.

However, an examination of the similarities and differences of perceptions between school staff and parents, provides evidence that the two challenges to parental involvement identified by Coleman and Churchill (1997) are relevant to Aboriginal parental involvement in Western Australian metropolitan schools. That is, parental involvement in the education process means different things to different people and the school values may not always be congruent with the home values. The recommendations offered in this study address these challenges and support strategies that both acknowledge and accommodate the Aboriginal parents' perspective.

Certainly, the schools participating in this study have implemented various strategies in an endeavour to increase Aboriginal parental involvement, but priority was rarely assigned to promoting Aboriginal pedagogy. If educators are serious about improving outcomes for Aboriginal students they will acknowledge the limits of their expertise in this field and undertake to improve their awareness and understanding of Aboriginal education and related issues. Aboriginal students will more often than not remain a minority group in urban schools. Therefore, it is

inappropriate to excuse limited professional development in Aboriginal education for the reason that Aboriginal students do not represent the school's greatest area of need. Instead, Aboriginal education and empowering Aboriginal parents to participate in the education process must remain a priority in every school and for every teacher because, as stated by Partington (1998),

> "Although they represent a small proportion of the total school population, Indigenous students are important in the broader picture of education in Australia." (p23)

Appendix A

The questions in brackets are the prompts used when necessary

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

PART A

1. What is your teaching experience?

2. What is your experience with Aboriginal children?

3. What Government documents on Aboriginal Education are you aware of?

PART B

4. What is the school philosophy on Aboriginal parent involvement?

5. What is the school situation? (What about Aboriginal parents?)

6. What are the practical issues related to Aboriginal parent involvement? (Helps and hindrances)

7. What is the most important thing Aboriginal parents can do to help their children succeed at school?

8. Can schools help achieve this?

Appendix B

The questions in brackets are the prompts used when necessary

STAFF GUIDED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

PART A

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your teaching experience?

(What is your position in the school? What training have you completed? Do you have early childhood qualifications? What is your teaching experience? Have you had any formal cross-cultural training? Are you aware of Government documents on Aboriginal Education?)

Years Experience	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	>20

PART B

Preprimary

1. <u>What do you think are the benefits of pre-primary attendance for Aboriginal children?</u>

(What do they gain by attending? How do they re-act to the school environment? Can you identify reasons for their reaction? Do they attend regularly?)

Concerns

2. <u>If you were concerned about the progress/behaviour of an Aboriginal child, with whom would you discuss it? Explain.</u>

(What procedure would you go through? What are your reasons for using that procedure? Do you think concerns are dealt with effectively? How do you help children when they are worried?)

Home Engagement

3. <u>What contact do you have with the Aboriginal caregivers?</u>

(How often would you communicate with the caregivers in a term? How is this done? For example, face to face, newsletter, telephone.)

4. <u>Is there any indication that the parents of Aboriginal children talk about school at home with their children?</u>

(Do the parents discuss with you what they do at home with their children? Have the children brought things from home to show you? Do children tell you about the things they do at home with their families?)

School Involvement

5. <u>Do Aboriginal parents participate in school activities?</u>

(In what ways? What activities result in the most participation? Can you identify any reasons for the level of participation?)

6. <u>Does the school do anything to encourage Aboriginal parent involvement?</u>

(What do they do? Could they do anything else? Are there any challenges in getting Aboriginal parents involved?)

7. <u>Do you think that Aboriginal involvement in schools will help Aboriginal children? Why/Why not?</u>

(What types of involvement are most valuable? How? Is there anything else that would help improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children? What about decision making roles?)

8. <u>Is there anything else you would like to say about Aboriginal involvement in schools?</u>

(What can you tell me about Aboriginal involvement in schools?)

Appendix C

The questions in brackets are the prompts used when necessary

<u>PARENT GUIDED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</u>

Part A
<u>Can you tell me about yourself? Anything that will help people understand you.</u>

(Do you work outside the home while your child is at school? Are there any other children besides your pre-primary child that you care fore? Do you have a partner to help you? How long have you lived in this house/area? What was your school experience like?)

PART B

Preprimary

1. Why do you send your child to preprimary and how do they get there?

(What do you think they will get out of it? Do they like coming? What do they like/dislike?)

2. Do you feel comfortable in the pre-primary centre?

(Do you go inside often? Do you feel welcome?)

Concerns

3. If you were worried about how your child was doing at school, would you talk to someone about it?

(Who would you talk to? Why/ Why not? Do you think the school handles concerns properly? How do you help your child when they are worried?)

Home Involvement

4. Do you do things at home to help your child learn?

(What things do you do at home with your child? Do you teach them things that the school does not?)

School Involvement

5. Do you ever come to the school to help out or to see what is happening?

(Why/Why not? When do you come? What sort of things do you do? What would you like to be doing? Would you like to come more often?)

6. Some people think that it helps to have Aboriginal parents doing things at school, do you agree? Why/Why not?

(What should be happening? What things are helpful? How are they helpful? Who should be doing them?)

7. What do you think is the most important thing that Aboriginal people can do to help their children do well at school?

(Do they need to be on committees, do parent roster, come to assembly etc.? Is it important to do things at home together? Should they be sharing traditional or other skills with the whole class? Can schools help them?)

8. What do you think is the most important thing schools can do to help Aboriginal children do well at school?

(If you could change something about the school, what would you change? Is there anything the school could do that would make it better for your child?)

9. Is there anything else you would like to say about Aboriginal involvement in schools?

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