

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY ISSUES

The inescapable conclusion is that family and social variables dominate the decision to stay on at school. The effect of the geography variable, representing proximity to educational institutions, is in general dwarfed by the influence of the local social and family environment.¹

The social context

3.1 A number of witnesses in the inquiry raised issues relating to Indigenous lifestyles and their interaction with education systems. These often focused on cultural inclusivity and the organisation of educational institutions. The evidence tended to centre, on the one hand, on the need for Indigenous people to adopt values and behaviours that would allow them to succeed in mainstream education and, on the other, on the need for education systems to find better ways of adapting to Indigenous lifestyles.

3.2 For Indigenous communities, altered socio-economic circumstances have affected schooling, the culture of childhood and adolescence, and have influenced the development of acceptable pedagogy. Some of these socio-economic circumstances have also altered the perceptions and attitudes of non-Indigenous decision makers and leaders. Generational change and social dislocation have also influenced educational outcomes. Running parallel to these changes have been political developments resulting in a reappraisal of the rights, responsibilities, and roles of Commonwealth, state and territory governments, as well as Indigenous bodies and communities themselves.

3.3 Socio-economic and cultural changes have brought both opportunities and problems to Indigenous communities. Indigenous people now experience a different level of complexity in their own lives and in their communities, which was not anticipated twenty years ago. These changes impact on education, presenting challenges to educators, parents, and students alike. *Learning Lessons* documents these changes as they affect the Northern Territory, but the Committee notes that the issues raised in that report were evident in site visits in other parts of the country.

There is now a far higher level of income available that has provided benefits, but also a growing level of welfare dependency that is sapping the strength and morale of Indigenous communities. Students are more mobile than ever before with consequent disruption to their education. Substance

1 B Hunter and R G Schwab, *The determinants of indigenous educational outcomes*, Discussion Paper No. 160/1998, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, p. vi

abuse and violence with the resultant family and community disorder are now far greater problems than they were twenty years ago.²

3.4 Health issues for children, and the implications for schooling, are explored in Chapter 8. However, in the broader community context preventable ‘lifestyle diseases’ are major contributors to early morbidity in adults. Early pregnancy and parental responsibilities contribute to young women leaving school. Even more telling is what is described as the ‘communications explosion’ experienced in remote communities.

The unchecked use of this form of entertainment [television and videos] was widely cited across the Territory by students, teachers, parents and home liaison officers as a significant cause of the sleep deprivation that impacts so negatively on school-age students and on their educational outcomes. Because the authority of parents over their children has continued to erode – a factor not confined to Indigenous families – the need for programs to be officered at the school to be relevant, interesting, enjoyable and challenging for students is greater now than it ever was.³

3.5 It is also worth noting at this point that the observation is often made that the relationship between children, even young children, and their parents is significantly different in Indigenous families and communities compared to most European families. Indigenous children, and particularly boys, enjoy a large measure of autonomy from a young age. Parental control is more limited and sanctions are seldom used. Children do not enjoy protection because of their immaturity, and learn from an early age to fend for themselves. This has serious implications for their acceptance of the discipline of learning and adapting to rules where the culture of the school reflects the dominant culture.

3.6 These cultural differences are not confined to remote areas. The Committee heard evidence of these aspects of culture on its visit to Cooktown High School. Because communities were relatively safe, children from a very young age make decisions as to when they will go out and where, when they will come home and what they will do in their communities. They tend to grow up quickly. Some of the boys have been independent from the age of ten, which made it difficult for them to conform to the ordered routine of school life. Schools were also restricted in the extent to which they could be flexible in dealing with these independent spirits.⁴ Research by Malin demonstrates the effect different child-rearing practices can have on behaviour in schools, and teacher perceptions.⁵

2 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons, An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, NTDE, Darwin, p. 28

3 *ibid.*

4 *Precis of Evidence, Cooktown*, 2 August 1999, p.7

5 Stephen Harris and Merridy Malin, *Aboriginal Kids in Urban Classrooms*, Social Science Press, Wentworth Falls, NSW, 1994, p. 78

The importance of kinship

3.7 Early in its visits to Indigenous communities the Committee became quickly aware of the central importance of kinship among Indigenous people. Kinship has been described as the basic organising principle of Indigenous society; more important to a person's life than 'getting on' and relying on ones own resources. It is not therefore surprising that education, as a process and a means of 'getting on' is accorded less value – often very much less value – than association with being a member of a particular family or social group.⁶ The report of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) into literacy among children in remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia observed that teenage attachments were to close relatives and to families with whom their parents and grandparents associated. These attachments were very important to the sense of identification of children and adolescents. 'Even major sporting offers may be turned down as less desirable than involvement with community members.'⁷

3.8 The importance of kinship and its effect on educational outcomes is recognised in the submission from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, which listed among factors contributing to poor educational outcomes among Indigenous children an unwillingness on their part to leave home. This affected secondary school and university attendance in particular. Students living in remote communities were deterred from attending schools and other institutions in the larger centres and capital cities by the lack of financial and emotional support.⁸ Given the scope for financial assistance under Abstudy, the Committee considers that community and emotional pressures are likely to be more significant than financial constraints.

Boys missing out

3.9 Informed observation and research point to differences in educational outcomes for boys and girls. The differences are particularly evident in the secondary years of schooling, but the trend begins early. It has been observed from pre-school through to post-secondary schooling that girls outstrip boys all the way. The stronger motivation among girls to continue their schooling may be attributed to their realisation that education provides a way to independence through a job. Girls are the workers of the family, helping to hold it together, whereas boys have fewer responsibilities in their childhood and adolescent years.

3.10 One commentator suggested that the traditional learning style of girls allowed them to adapt more readily to school learning. Girls are also thought to have more ability to relate their schooling and their English language skills to employment

6 National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, *Desert Schools*, SA Teaching and Curriculum Centre, University of Adelaide and University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996, vol. 2, p.77

7 *ibid.*

8 Submission No. 34, ATSIIC, vol. 5, p.141

opportunities in their communities.⁹ There are far more women teachers and teacher assistants filling these roles than there are men. As one comment to the National Language and Literacy Institute of Australia inquiry from teachers in Western Australia noted:

The women have the jobs eyed off – you ask the girls what they want to do – they want to be clinic sisters, AEWs (Aboriginal Education Workers) and store workers and there is nowhere for a man to go. Well, they're certainly not interested in the sort of work that's presented here – there's only a few that work here and they are from another place anyway. The oldest boy we have at the school is 12 years old. And he only goes if there is nothing else better to do, and he's the one who really had potential and he decided that it's just not the place for him.¹⁰

3.11 It is the common observation that boys drop out of school because of social pressure. They view school as an experience that belongs to childhood, and therefore to be dispensed with in early adolescence. Even bright and promising boys become indifferent to school about the time of their initiation. In Kalgoorlie, the Committee was told that young boys in traditional communities can only be taught by an elder after initiation.¹¹

Attitudes to education

3.12 Neglect of Indigenous education by governments finds its covert rationale, however indefensible this may be, in perceptions of Indigenous indifference to the benefits of education. These perceptions are not reflected in the activities of Indigenous organisations. The leadership groups in national bodies such as ATSIC and the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers have been vigorous advocates of Indigenous education, and there is strong evidence that parents across the country have become alarmed at the lack of progress that their children appear to be making. In some cases they may have enjoyed a better education than their children.

3.13 Nonetheless, there is an attitude among some educators and community leaders that little progress will be made until solutions are found to wider community problems that affect education. To combat the range of social problems that impede educational development, an holistic, community development approach involving those who are closest to the problems is imperative. At the school level, this means involving Indigenous parents in their children's schooling, achievements, and difficulties, as well as assisting them to understand that school attendance alone will not result in better outcomes. The Committee heard strong confirmation of the latter point at its Alice Springs hearing. The Principal of Yirara College explained:

9 National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, *Desert Schools*, SA Teaching and Curriculum Centre, University of Adelaide and University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996, vol. 2, p.79

10 *ibid.*, p. 80

11 Kalgoorlie Site Visit, 14 September 1999

The world view is that education is something that other people do for Indigenous people. It is provided to be there when they want to make use of it and they do not see it as a commitment. For Aboriginal students the hard slog of day in, day out doing something in the classroom, not just sitting there and absorbing as they would in a traditional culture, is also a problem. Many parents see if students come to school and sit in those classrooms they will learn, but it is hard to get through to students and parents that the students actually have to do the work and have to do it on a regular basis to get the outcomes that the government and others are looking for.¹²

3.14 The Committee believes it is the responsibility of schools to inform parents and students about how schools operate and learning occurs, where this is required. It is a fundamental right that parents receive feedback from schools on all aspects of a child's education and progress. As a first and vital step to facilitating a community development approach to problem solving, the role of the school staff is critical. *Learning Lessons* identifies good practice in this regard at the Barunga Community Education Centre, where Indigenous and non Indigenous staff visit parents one afternoon a week and develop a partnership approach to student progress. This partnership approach extends to the community council's involvement in monitoring student attendance.¹³

School attendance

3.15 The perception that Indigenous cultures and lifestyles were a contributing factor to low educational outcomes was reflected in the submission from Yirara College in the Northern Territory.

The main underlying reason for many of the 'failures' in the field of Indigenous development is simply that the Indigenous people have a different cultural agenda from that of mainstream Australia.¹⁴

3.16 This comment was most frequently made in relation to levels of attendance. Some of the reasons for the extremely low levels of attendance in the Northern Territory were said to be cultural factors, including the relationship between Aboriginal parents and their children, and the impact of transient lifestyles.

Aboriginal parents cannot force their young people to do much of anything because, as good parents, they do not want to make their children sad or unhappy. ... The world view is that education is something that other people do for Indigenous people. It is provided to be there when they want to make use of it and they do not see it as a commitment.¹⁵

12 Mrs Fay Genuth, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p.252

13 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons, an independent review of indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, NTDE, Darwin, 1999, p. 45

14 Submission No. 9, Yirara College, vol. 1, p. 79

15 Mrs Fay Genuth, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 252

3.17 There is no argument about the contribution of absenteeism to the failure of schools to make headway in achieving improved educational outcomes among Indigenous children. As the submission from the Northern Territory Department of Education notes:

The single most pressing obstacle to any achievement of compulsory school-age Indigenous students in education is attendance at school. There are a multiplicity of factors for overall low participation rates in schooling. The relationship between low, sporadic or irregular attendance, including a high mobility between schools and outcomes from schooling is very real.¹⁶

3.18 The submission from the Northern Territory states that attendance rates for students from non-urban (predominantly Indigenous) schools are consistently 13 to 16 per cent lower than those of urban (predominantly non-Indigenous) schools. Despite attention given to this problem at both school and system level attendance rates have declined over the past twenty years.¹⁷

3.19 A number of communities are taking positive steps to raise attendance levels. Communities in Central Australia are reported to use a number of strategies for improving attendance. These include certificates and prizes for good attendance, food supplements, the right to go on excursions, and admission tickets to community facilities like roller-skating rinks.¹⁸ The Committee heard that in other communities elders were often employed for the purpose of rounding up children from their homes in the morning. Sometimes a number of teachers were regularly engaged in this routine. In many cases the cause of absenteeism was simply lack of sleep: usually the result of watching late night television or video programs. There were also links to poor diet.

3.20 Another factor contributing to absenteeism is the increased mobility of Indigenous kinship groups. Attendance at initiation ceremonies, football carnivals and funerals are often given as a reason for children being absent from school.¹⁹ The Committee heard evidence of the extent of the problem at its hearings in Brewarrina. The principal at the central school reported that in 1998 there were 116 enrolments during the year and 57 departures. Families go back and forward between Brewarrina and Goodooga, and others head south to Dubbo, Bathurst and Mildura. It is very difficult to track students unless the schools to which they re-enrol contact Brewarrina Central for the student records. If families head for Sydney it is unlikely that their children will attend school because they are often too frightened to use public

16 Submission No.33, Northern Territory Department of Education, vol. 5, p. 9

17 *ibid.*

18 National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, *Desert Schools*, SA Teaching and Curriculum Centre, University of Adelaide and University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996, vol. 2, p. 290

19 National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, *Desert Schools*, SA Teaching and Curriculum Centre, University of Adelaide and University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996, vol. 2, p. 74

transport. Eventually they come back to Brewarrina, but by then they may have gaps in their education extending up to 12 months and beyond.²⁰

3.21 New South Wales schools in the western region have activated an Aboriginal mobility project to track students in and out of the public schools. Computers and facsimile machines make this easier, although it falls down with cross-border movements and sometimes with enrolments in non-government schools. Nor, for reasons which the Committee was not told, did it work with movement to Sydney, possibly because parents do not attempt to enrol their children in metropolitan schools.

3.22 Almost all locations experienced problems related to high levels of mobility in the Indigenous population. The issue of transience was linked to issues of attendance and truancy, and was as much an issue of teaching practice and organisation as curriculum. At Geraldton, it was emphasised that education systems needed to adapt more to transient lifestyles, and that this was an area few education systems had dealt with successfully to date. Some practical examples of the use of technology to deliver education to transient peoples were found in Geraldton, the Goldfields region and north-western NSW. These involved the use of tracking systems to provide information to schools on Indigenous students. (These systems are described in more detail in the section on technology.)

3.23 In discussions with staff at Jessica Point School in the Napranum Community in Far North Queensland, the Committee was told that absenteeism is mainly a problem in the wet season when some of the roads are closed. There is also a problem in the 'dry', however, because the roads are open, allowing communities to move about. Suggestions to the Queensland Education department that the school year be organised in such a way as to suit the seasons, have not been received enthusiastically. It appears that large-scale bureaucracies cannot easily cope with regional variations and that there are problems with negotiating changes with the various unions covering staff.²¹

3.24 Some witnesses pointed to the need for Indigenous people to take control of educational issues such as attendance and truancy. Some witnesses also suggested that it might be necessary to take punitive action such as withholding welfare payments in order to improve levels of attendance.

I go back to my point: unless the Aboriginal communities come on board and do stuff for themselves, nothing will ever change.²²

3.25 Staff at Jessica Point told the Committee that community elders were taking the problem of absenteeism seriously and had formed a justice group to consider

20 *Hansard*, Brewarrina, 26 July 1999, p. 12

21 *Precis of Evidence*, Weipa, 3 August 1999, p. 1

22 Mary Blaiklock, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 262

appropriate sanctions to enforce school attendance. Discussion was currently underway on community-levied fines of the order provided for under Queensland departmental regulations. Kowanyama community was reported to have applied these penalties successfully for a number of years, with fines of \$350 for a first offence. In the first year of its operation there was a 100 per cent improvement in attendance. Numbers fell in the second year when the fines were not enforced. It was enforced in third and subsequent year with good results.²³

3.26 Other witnesses were strongly opposed to the idea of punitive action. The suggestion was described as ‘bizarre’ by one witness, who argued that punitive action would only serve to divide Indigenous parents and their children.²⁴ Some witnesses also suggested that high rates of truancy had more to do with culturally inappropriate schooling. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of witnesses, while not necessarily supporting punitive action, continued to maintain that Indigenous people needed to take action themselves, particularly in the area of attendance. This view was expressed strongly by Professor Paul Hughes from the Yungorrendi First Nations Centre in Flinders University.

... we have to have a lot more discussion amongst our own communities in terms of, firstly, the responsibilities of parents and individual students to be involved and participate in programs, and, secondly, for our community to understand that, unless they are involved in actually working together with schools and programs, they will not actually get out of the programs, study or systems the sorts of things that they wanted in the first place.²⁵

3.27 Obviously, there is a wide divergence in opinion among Indigenous communities about the seriousness of school absenteeism. The Committee heard of strenuous and successful efforts made to get children to school. Also revealing was evidence from Cooktown High School teachers who related that in discussing the problem it was decided that a bus pick-up was not the best solution. The employment of an attendance support worker from the community was more promising, so long as the school was not seen as intruding on the community in order to get the children to school! The Committee notes that such reticence was not commonly reported to it.²⁶

3.28 Irregular attendance is disruptive to the whole teaching and learning process in the classroom. It almost requires the running of parallel classes because irregular attendees are usually lagging behind the others. Irregular attendees require more remedial assistance as well as the right kinds of encouragement to improve their attendance record. This becomes a finely-balanced exercise in student management and may be beyond the skills of the inexperienced teachers who are more likely to be sent to remote areas.

23 Precis of Evidence, Weipa, 3 August 1999, p. 1

24 Site Visit, comment by Simon Forrest, Geraldton, 13 September 1999

25 Professor Paul Hughes, *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 328

26 Precis of Evidence, Cooktown, 2 August 1999, p. 8

3.29 The *Learning Lessons* report on Indigenous education in the Northern Territory cites an instance of tacit acceptance of high rates of absenteeism by some elements within the system administration and in some schools. One case study describes how the energetic work of a home liaison officer resulted in so many children attending school that the resources of the school were seriously overstretched. The Northern Territory Department of Education refused to provide additional resources, in particular specialised teaching areas, on the grounds that attendance would eventually decline in the dry season – an historically accurate prediction of enrolment fluctuations - to a point where additional resources would be unnecessary. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy as children lost their enthusiasm in the overcrowded conditions of the school. The principal of the school reported that the additional enrolment of 200 children gave the community a 95 per cent school attendance figure, but any more than a 50 per cent level resulted in nervous breakdowns for teachers in the classrooms as they coped with fighting children and added stress.²⁷

3.30 The Committee also heard evidence of a problem related to attendance: the view that attendance was seen by some as an end in itself. As Professor Paul Hughes related:

Because of their own lack of understanding of education and the background of education, there is a feeling that if you send kids to school, or somebody rolls up at a TAFE college or enters another education program and turns up now and then, that has to be good enough, and that people will professionally do that. It has to do partly with people's lack of understanding about the need for consistent involvement and participation in those sorts of things, as much as a lack of understanding of the detail of the processes you have to go through in education to actually succeed. That is one bit; the need for our own community to be educated a bit more about the importance of being involved, the need for consistent attendance and the little things like homework and doing the bits and pieces that need to be done. If you do not do the work, you do not get the outcome.²⁸

3.31 The Committee believes that educational institutions could do much more to accommodate Indigenous lifestyles. This seems to be an area where they have performed poorly in the past. The Committee was encouraged by the efforts of educators in such locations as Geraldton, Kalgoorlie and Brewarrina to develop innovative approaches to dealing with issues such as transient lifestyles. The provision of support in terms of staffing and resources, and a strong focus on achieving good educational outcomes were critical features. The Committee also acknowledges the observation that issues such as attendance are ultimately a community responsibility. The Committee is not, however, persuaded that punitive action is an appropriate response on the part of Government. Such action runs the risk of dividing Indigenous

27 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons, an independent review of Indigenous education*, NTDE, Darwin, 1999, p. 65

28 *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 329

communities and families. The Committee also believes that the presence of appropriate support structures, at all levels but particularly in post-compulsory education, is essential in enhancing the cultural relevance of educational institutions for Indigenous people.

3.32 The Committee is aware of the work currently being undertaken by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs to develop a national Indigenous school attendance strategy.

Recommendation 8

3.33 The Committee commends DETYA for the development of a national Indigenous school attendance strategy and recommends that all necessary resources be supplied as a matter of urgency to enable its prompt implementation.

Racism

3.34 Racism is a reality for Indigenous people, according to ATSIIC.²⁹ Overt racism in the form of abuse and vilification, or the experience of being treated as an inferior or in a patronising manner is one aspect of racism. There is evidence that this is a continuing problem in schools. In the course of its inquiry the Committee became familiar with what has been described as ‘systemic’ or ‘institutional’ racism. Its most common form is the failure to acknowledge the presence of Indigenous students and their culture in an educational setting, or to value their worth.

3.35 The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, which has conducted a number of studies on Indigenous education in recent years, says that clear empirical data on racism and cultural insensitivity are scarce, although these appear to be important factors influencing decisions by some Indigenous students to abandon school. A discussion paper produced by the Centre reports 1995 research suggesting that a significant number of early school leavers claim to have felt de-personalised and to have lost self-esteem under the pressure of racial harassment. This included racial abuse and vilification from teachers, negative comments about families, prejudicial treatment, and negative personal comments about ‘extra money’ and ‘special benefits’.³⁰

3.36 The Committee received some evidence and informal anecdotal information relating to racist behaviour, institutionalised or systemic racism and cultural insensitivity. In Adelaide, recent research commissioned by the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) on the South Australian Certificate of Education completion rates of Indigenous students suggested that the racism factor was significant.

29 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 142

30 M. Grey, B. Hunter and RG Schwab, *A critical survey of Indigenous education outcomes, 1986-96*, Discussion Paper No. 170/1998, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Canberra 1998, p. 18

Racism was an enormous factor in terms of inhibiting Indigenous people in the successful attainment of educational outcomes. It was a consistent theme that came right through the research. Although institutional racism was mentioned sporadically by informants, students consistently commented on racial harassment from peers and students. In addition, students' perceptions of teachers as racist was compounded by a perceived lack of support from schools in addressing racism.³¹

3.37 At Coolgardie Primary School the Committee heard comments from the staff about racial taunts from bus drivers on the secondary school run from Coolgardie into Kalgoorlie. A witness in Townsville told the Committee that racism was far more of a problem in urban areas where Indigenous students were a minority than in the communities run by Indigenous people where their language and culture prevailed.³²

3.38 On the issue of cultural insensitivity, the Committee heard in Kalgoorlie of the determination of the local district office of the Education Department of Western Australia to ensure that all staff, including principals, attend cultural awareness workshops. This was resisted, unsuccessfully, by a small number of principals. An Alice Springs witness, the secondary school Indigenous education officer, explained systemic racism as evidence that local Indigenous children felt uncomfortable in the school environment because the way schools were organised reflected a western cultural orientation.³³ This extended to language and behavioural expectations. Such self-critical labelling may be unjustified in this broad generalisation. The western orientation of schools would in most respects find supporters in the Indigenous community, although they would also expect schools to be welcoming and accepting of cultural differences.

3.39 More serious is the type of racism described as 'racism theory': the belief that Indigenous knowledges are not articulated, are seldom documented, and therefore do not exist. One witness in Adelaide gave evidence of resistance on the part of white children and their parents to Indigenous studies subjects in localities with large Indigenous populations. Non-Indigenous students often refuse to learn about Indigenous cultural and historical subjects. They argue that if they are to learn about this, then why not about other cultures as well. This indicates a poor perception about Indigenous people and their culture. Teachers have to break down stereotypical attitudes before progress can be made, and this is very difficult if only because conflict resolution is not something which teachers are trained to undertake.³⁴

31 Mr Lester Rigney, *Hansard*, Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 123

32 Mrs Dorothy Savage, *Hansard*, Townsville, 4 August 1999, p. 167

33 Ms Gillian Totham, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 257

34 Mr Lester Rigney, *Hansard*, Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 132

Family life

3.40 The close kinship and other social ties which are at the core of Indigenous community life have masked the disrupted and troubled nature of family life in many communities. Alcoholism, substance abuse and domestic violence have been endemic problems for some years. The effect of this disruption on the education of children has been described in a statement to the NLLIA report on English language and literacy among remote Aboriginal communities:

The incredible social disruption, lack of sleep, the very unpredictable nature of life from day to day, the lack of routine, not very often being sure whether you're going to get meals or not meals, whether your parents are going to be there, whether there's fights going on; I mean some of the children, particularly the teenagers; I'm thinking of young girls, some very often under threat of being married to someone they don't want. There's quite high levels of violence, of rape going on, all sorts of things I think are extremely traumatic and which the European teachers are often (though not always) totally unaware of, the experiences the children are going through, the children have all sorts of things to distract them from matters like learning to read and write.³⁵

3.41 The home environment of many Indigenous students is also an issue. According to the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research there is ample evidence that Indigenous Australians suffer poorer quality and more crowded housing than do other Australians and that this is linked to poverty. Overcrowded households poorly equipped with domestic amenities are associated with poor school attendance rates, particularly for boys.

It is likely that crowding affects attendance in many ways. Crowded houses are often noisy and disruptive. Clothing necessary to attend school is shared and sometimes disappears, books are lost, there is little room to study, and people come and go, disturbing sleep patterns. Older siblings are frequently required to baby-sit younger children. Tired children often fail to engage with learning and grow frustrated and disappointed with the educational experience. This, in turn, contributes to experiences of failure and further increases the likelihood of non-attendance.³⁶

3.42 An earlier section in this chapter dealt briefly with the importance of kinship. Children quickly achieve a relatively high degree of independence with an extended family. One witness spoke of the importance of school authorities strengthening the hand of grandmothers because, at least in Alice Springs they were observed to exercise a great deal of influence.

35 National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, *Desert Schools*, SA Teaching and Curriculum Centre, University of Adelaide and University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996, vol. 2, p. 75

36 B Hunter and R B Schwarb, *The determinants of Indigenous educational outcomes*, No. 160/1998, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Canberra, 1998, p. 14

With the majority of younger children in transition to grade 3 who are regular attendees, the factor determining their regular attendance is very much the grandmother. Whether it is because of previous experiences... at the mission schools or whatever... the grandmothers give the impression that they are reasonably comfortable coming to school and bringing the little tackers along. Maybe we ought to be looking at ways of incorporating them into the school on a more regular basis, whether it be grandmother's day once a week or something. The grandmothers are significant people in the local community. Again, it is a value judgement on my part, but the grandmothers seem to hold the society together.³⁷

3.43 The Committee noted that grandmothers and other extended family members had been involved in some schools and educational institutions for a number of years. Generally, the Committee found support for homework centres, although some schools preferred to use this funding for in-school tutorials. These schools found it more beneficial for students to have specialised support during school hours. The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) was said to have had a beneficial effect for students from difficult home environments.

Crime and imprisonment

3.44 It is well-known that arrest and incarceration rates for Indigenous people are many times those for European Australians. From this Committee's viewpoint another statistic is just as serious and revealing. The experience of arrest reduces the probability of attending school by 26 per cent and 18 per cent for males and females respectively. Living in households where others have been arrested reduces the probability of attending school by an additional 23 per cent and 20 per cent for males and females respectively.³⁸

3.45 Hunter and Schwab give several reasons why arrest has an adverse effect on educational achievement. The first is that detention in either a youth detention centre or a jail directly interferes with the process of human capital formation (education, training and social development) by removing individuals from familiar surroundings. Secondly, while people in detention have more time to study, they often have less motivation to do so, particularly if their educational attainments are already low, as they generally are. The experience of arrest and imprisonment significantly reduces employment possibilities and further diminishes the incentive to continue their education in detention.³⁹

37 Br Paul Gilchrist, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 271

38 B Hunter and R G Schwab, *The determinants of Indigenous educational outcomes*, No.160/1998, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Canberra, 1998, p. v

39 *ibid.*, p. 7

Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

3.46 The involvement of Indigenous people with the criminal justice system has been the subject of a number of reports, the most important arising from concern at the high incidence of deaths in custody of Aboriginal people during the 1980s. The Commonwealth, States and the Northern Territory appointed a Royal Commission headed by Commissioner Elliott Johnston, QC, to investigate the deaths of 99 Aboriginal people in police custody, prisons and juvenile detention centres. The Royal Commission operated between October 1987 and April 1991 at the end of which time a comprehensive five volume national report and numerous regional reports were presented.⁴⁰ Indigenous education issues were dealt with in some detail and a number of recommendations made which have much wider application than the justice system.

3.47 The Commission noted that, of the 99 Aboriginal people who died in custody, eight had no formal schooling, 20 had some primary school education, 12 had completed primary school, 50 had some secondary schooling, two had completed secondary school, two had some technical or other vocational education, while only one had completed vocational training.⁴¹ The Royal Commission found that non-participation in school was likely to result in young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders being introduced to the juvenile justice system at an early age.⁴²

3.48 Improving the educational opportunities of Indigenous children and adults was seen as one way of trying to reduce the high incarceration rate of Indigenous people. However, lack of education was considered not only a factor in the greater likelihood of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people offending, but also a factor in their likelihood of re-offending.⁴³ It was therefore also important to provide comparable educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the prison system. The Royal Commission stated that imprisonment 'offers an opportunity for prisoners to develop skills and attitudes able to assist their re-integration into society.'⁴⁴ Accordingly, the Royal Commission recommended that corrective service authorities ensure that Indigenous prisoners be given the opportunity to undertake courses in self-development, skills acquisition and vocational education and training, and to perform useful work.⁴⁵

40 Recommendations related to Indigenous education are contained in the following chapters of the *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*: Chapters 11 (rec 55) and 16 (rec 72) (Volume 2); Chapters 22 (rec 110) and 25 (rec 185) (Volume 3); and Chapter 33 (recs 289-299) (Volume 4)

41 *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* vol. 3, p. 339. The educational attainment of the remaining four people was unknown.

42 *ibid.*, p. 338

43 *ibid.*, p. 340

44 *ibid*

45 *ibid*, p. 353

3.49 While noting the overall increase in availability of courses in correctional facilities and participation in these courses by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the Royal Commission recommended that the Commonwealth education department develop a national strategy designed to improve education and training opportunities for those in custody. The Royal Commission recommended that state education departments and correctional service authorities, along with adult education providers, in particular the independent Indigenous-controlled providers, should also be involved in this strategy of devising suitable education and training programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders.⁴⁶ The objective of this strategy was to extend the aims of the Indigenous Education Policy and Indigenous Employment Development Policy to Indigenous people in prisons.⁴⁷

3.50 Assuming that the rehabilitation of offenders should be a goal of all correctional service authorities, the Royal Commission recommended that Indigenous prisoners who undertake education or training courses during hours when other prisoners are involved in remunerated work, should receive the same level of remuneration.⁴⁸ The Royal Commission stated that providing prisoners with appropriate forms of employment and the opportunity to develop skills that will lead to employment outside prison is essential.

3.51 Despite the Commission's first recommendation that Aboriginal organisations should be involved in the implementation of the Commission's inquiries, and despite the support given by the Commission to those independent Aboriginal education providers that made a submission to its inquiry, the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers advised the Committee that since then 'not one of these providers has been specifically approached by the Commonwealth or the relevant State and Territory government agencies to ascertain whether the "local implementation" of the relevant recommendations of the Commission accorded with their expectations.'⁴⁹ The Federation undertook its own evaluation of progress on the implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations during 1997.

3.52 In relation to recommendations on Aboriginal prison education, the Federation stated that 'evidence from the Aboriginal controlled-providers themselves is that these recommendations have not been properly addressed'.⁵⁰ In one state, correctional authorities were not prepared to provide the necessary resources required by independent providers to deliver the programs, turning instead to the TAFE system. This was despite the preference of Aboriginal prisoners to have the independent Aboriginal education providers involved.⁵¹

46 *ibid.*

47 *ibid.*, Recommendation 185, p. 353

48 *ibid.*, Recommendation 186, p. 357

49 Submission No. 15, Mr Jack Beetson, vol. 1, p. 151

50 Submission No. 15, Mr Jack Beetson, vol 1, p. 199

51 *ibid*

3.53 Again, contrary to Royal Commission Recommendation 192, a pilot program aimed at evaluating the impact on recidivism of pre and post release education and training programs for Indigenous prisoners was put out to tender and won by the state's own correctional services education division. Only one Aboriginal community-controlled organisation, Tauondi College, was invited to take part in the pilot program.⁵²

Report of the Senate Inquiry into Education and Training in Correctional Facilities

3.54 In its 1996 report on prison education, the Senate References Committee on Employment, Education and Training commented on education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners.

3.55 The Committee noted various state government efforts to have Aboriginal tutors and teachers deliver education programs to Indigenous inmates in response to Royal Commission recommendations but observed that implementation had been slow.⁵³ The Committee recommended Aboriginal prisoners have access to education programs conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.⁵⁴ In response, the Commonwealth Government expressed its support for the Committee's recommendation. It advised that state or territory institutions, or persons providing post secondary education or researching or advising on education, could apply for funds under the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP). While it was the responsibility of those persons or organisations receiving the funds to employ Indigenous teachers to deliver programs to Indigenous prisoners, the Commonwealth advised that employing Indigenous people wherever possible was a formal condition of the contract between the Commonwealth and funding recipients.⁵⁵

3.56 The Committee also recommended that the Commonwealth Government convene a meeting of state and territory ministers responsible for correctional services to sign the National Memorandum of Agreement on Education and Training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Custody, which was at the draft stage at the time of the Committee's inquiry.⁵⁶ The Committee considered that 'such a Memorandum must be expedited and the implementation of the Strategy must be accorded the highest priority'.⁵⁷ The Commonwealth Government, in response to the Committee's report, advised that the draft of the Memorandum would be considered at

52 *ibid*

53 Senate References Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education and Training in Correctional Facilities*, Canberra, 1996, p. 44

54 *ibid.*, p. 45

55 Government response to Senate References Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education and Training in Correctional Facilities*, 5 February 1997, pp. 8-9

56 Senate References Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education and Training in Correctional Facilities*, Canberra, 1996, p. 47

57 *ibid.*

the next Corrective Services Administrators' Conference.⁵⁸ The Committee understands that this memorandum has been signed by all relevant state and territory ministers since June 1999, albeit with an amendment to the effect that it applies only to adult prisoners.

Conclusion

3.57 The weight of evidence provided to the Committee confirms the finding that 'family and social variables dominate the decision to stay on at school'.⁵⁹ Some people will argue that this means there is limited scope for government action to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous people. This is not the position of the Committee. Social policy has to take into account the cultural condition of people and the pace at which they find change to be acceptable. Self-determination may be seen as a process through which Indigenous people, in their widely varying social environments, make decisions about the extent to which they will interact with other Australians in the economic life of the dominant culture. This chapter has dealt with social factors affecting education which must be understood but which do not offer much prospect for improvement without action across a range of fields.

3.58 Indigenous lifestyles interact with and affect education systems. While some of these issues are a matter for Indigenous communities to determine, others require the attention of governments in consultation with Indigenous people. Education systems themselves can do much to improve aspects of schooling which affect student outcomes. This includes the way in which schools interact with Indigenous lifestyles. The Committee saw some examples of the ways in which schools and other educational institutions are attempting to deal with issues such as highly mobile populations and absenteeism. These examples are described further in the chapters on curriculum and diversity. The Committee also believes schools have a role to play in dealing with broader community issues such as racism. While these issues require broader community action, educational institutions can do much through leadership and commitment.

3.59 Another serious social problem relates to the high rate of imprisonment. The Committee does not have criminology in its terms of reference to this inquiry, apart from its relevance to education. However, it fails to understand why there has been a less than adequate commitment to many of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. There is surely scope for some degree of self-determination in addressing this serious problem. The effect of crime reduction would have a highly beneficial effect on educational outcomes.

3.60 There is also a need for ATSIC and the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA) to play a more pro-active role in the

58 Government response to Senate References Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education and Training in Correctional Facilities*, 5 February 1997, p. 9

59 B Hunter and R G Schwab, *The determinants of indigenous educational outcomes*, Discussion Paper No. 160/1998, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, p. vi

monitoring and reporting of the National Commitment. The National Commitment for Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Services for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders was signed by all governments (Commonwealth, state and territories, and local governments) in 1992, and endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments. The Committee believes this will promote both continuous improvement across portfolios, and a whole of government approach to the diverse programs and services governments provide Indigenous people. It may also increase opportunities for self-determination.

Recommendation 9

3.61 The Committee recommends that MCEETYA facilitate discussions with Commonwealth and State agencies to coordinate initiatives to improve the participation rates and educational outcomes of Indigenous communities.