

**ABORIGINAL EDUCATION WORKERS IN SOUTH
AUSTRALIA: TOWARDS EQUALITY OF
RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS ETHICS OF CARE
PRACTICES**

by

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Abstract

This thesis is focused on Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) who work with, support and care for Indigenous students in schools in South Australia. AEWs work in the ‘border zones’ (Giroux 2005) between the values of schools and the expectations of Indigenous communities. This thesis highlights how AEWs experience indirect discrimination in the workplace as a result of their complex racialised position. In particular, there is a general absence of recognition of AEWs’ caring role by non-Indigenous staff in schools.

AEWs are not only marginalised in schools, but also at an institutional level. While AEWs’ working conditions have improved, the ‘redistribution’ (Fraser & Honneth 2003, p. 10) of better working conditions has not eliminated indirect discrimination in the workplace. Furthermore, there is little research regarding AEWs in Indigenous education. Thus at three levels, namely school, Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) and academia, there is a cyclical pattern that perpetuates an absence of recognition of AEWs.

This thesis uses whiteness theory (Frankenberg 1993) as a theoretical framework to examine this lack of recognition and the consequent low status of AEWs in schools. The thesis emerges from research, experience working as a teacher in a remote Aboriginal school with AEWs, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 AEWs who are working in South Australian state schools. Standpoint theory (Collins 2004; Harding 2004) is used as both a method and methodology in order to understand and map AEWs’ position in schools. A common theme raised by all of the AEWs in the interviews is the absence of recognition of their work in schools by non-Indigenous staff and the consequent feeling of marginalisation in the workplace. In this thesis the site-specific contexts of the interviewees and the effects of whiteness are examined.

The findings that emerged from the in-depth semi-structured interviews with AEWs were concerned with Indigenous ethics of care models. The narratives from the

interviewees who were AEWs revealed how white ethics of care practices in schools de-legitimise Indigenous ethics of care. Furthermore, the discursive regimes that govern school policy and protocol often limit AEWs' ability to respond effectively to Indigenous student needs. This thesis highlights the complexities and contradictions of AEWs who are working in the border zones. As a result, AEWs often feel caught between school expectations and community protocols.

This thesis advocates equality of recognition of Indigenous ethics of care practices to address the indirect discrimination that AEWs experience. It concludes with a map for recognition of AEWs' care practices on an institutional level in relation to academia and DECS, and in schools in order to overturn the continual marginalisation of AEWs in South Australia. It argues for a values shift for non-Indigenous teachers and staff in schools and at the institutional levels in DECS and academia. In particular, this involves a values shift by non-Indigenous teachers, academics and policy makers towards an understanding of whiteness. Recommendations are provided in the concluding chapter that signpost possible moves towards equality of recognition of Indigenous ethics of care practices by non-Indigenous staff in schools.

Declaration

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

Bindi MacGill

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

- AECG Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups
- AEDP Aboriginal Employment Development Policy
- AEP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
- AERTs Aboriginal Education Resource Teachers
- AES Aboriginal Education Services
- AEU/ATU after 1993 the Australian Teachers Union became the Australian Education Union
- AEW Aboriginal Education Worker
- AIEW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Worker
- AnTEP Anangu Teacher Education Program
- APY Lands – Anangu Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Lands (previously known as AP Lands)
- ASIP Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program
- ASSPA Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Committee
- CPC Child Parent Centre
- DECS Department of Education and Children’s Services (this thesis only uses DECS in order to keep the nomenclature consistent)
- DEET Department of Employment, Education and Training
- NAEC National Aboriginal Education Committee
- PYEC Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Education Council
- QIECB Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body
- RDA Racial Discrimination Act, 1975, (Cth)
- SAAECC South Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee
- TAFE Technical and Further Education

Glossary of key terms

Anangu: A self-referential term for Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara people: it literally means 'person' or 'people' in the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara language group. Recently its semantic range has expanded somewhat to include some non-Aboriginal people as well, ie to denote a 'person' or 'people' generically, but this is only occasional.

Auntie/Uncle: an Indigenous woman or man who has the status of a person present in an Indigenous community who has influence over children; the equivalent being a *parent in situ* in nuclear family models.

Country: Land from which a person's ancestors and Dreamings came and with which kin affiliations and identity are associated.

Ethics of care: Ethics of care is concerned with the social practice of caring in families, schools and societies and includes 'attentiveness, responsibility [and] responsiveness' (Sevenhuijsen 1998, p. 83). Caring is a physical act but the act of caring and the manners of reciprocation of care are grounded in cultural practices.

