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
I would like to thank Dr Christine Nicholls and Dr Kay Whitehead for their role as supervisors. I would also like to thank the staff at Yunggorendi, including Daryle Rigney, Tracey Bunda, Faye Blanch, Bevin Wilson and Simone Tur for advice and their ongoing intellectual and emotional support. I am also grateful for Lester Irabinna Rigney’s insight during his initial role as co-supervisor for this thesis. Thank you to the interviewees, particularly the AEWs who were interviewed, as without their contribution this thesis would not have reached its full potential. (Please refer to Appendix A in respect of my appreciation of the interviewees). Thank you also to Margaret Davies for our meeting regarding equality of recognition. I am grateful to the staff at the Student Learning Centre for their ongoing support. In particular, thank you to Sandra Egege regarding her advice about the theoretical framework and Dominic Keuskamp for his support in formatting the thesis. Thank you also to Julia Miller for proof reading the bibliography. I would also like to thank family and friends for their support, particularly Sue Anderson, Sue Rankin, Lucy MacGill, Peter MacGill and Kirsty Davies. Finally, thankyou to my husband Mark Rankin and my children, Zoe and Sasha.
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.