The Swan Nyungar Sports Education Program (SNSEP) is a five-year demonstration project commenced in 2002 to supplement school capacity to meet the special learning needs of Nyungar high school students in WA. This paper builds on two previous ASPC Workshop Papers on SNSEP that highlighted the importance of social enterprise in forging partnerships with stakeholders for sustainable change (2001) and the focus of the program as the development of a working relation among students, teachers, and parents (2003). This year’s paper, an abridged form of the final evaluation report for SNSEP, focuses on best practice strategies used by staff in building respectful relationships between staff and students. Selective ethnographic data collection by the Institute for Service Professions at Edith Cowan University was completed on key issues that make SNSEP effective in relation to:

- Acknowledgment by staff of students’ language, history and cultural markers
- Promotion of positive Nyungar identities
- Application of team spirit lessons learned on the sports field to classroom settings
- Increased levels of student choice and responsibility
- Engagement of parents.

Selective ethnography also identified learning, adolescent identity, indigenous identity, attendance, retention and respect as parts of the program that needed to be investigated for a deeper understanding of the systems and processes at work. The paper reports on data collected at both the classroom pedagogy and program levels with synopses of best practice, and recommendations for challenges facing SNSEP in the remaining two years of the project. Developments made to SNSEP to address challenges identified in previous evaluations will also be noted.

Introduction
This paper is an abridged form of the final evaluation report for the Swan Nyungar Sports Education Program (SNSEP) in 2004 and focuses on best practice strategies used by staff in building respectful relationships between staff and students. Selective ethnographic data collection by the Institute for Service Professions at Edith Cowan University was completed on key issues that facilitate those relationships.

The evaluation was based on three main data collection activities throughout a six-month period. The first set of activities entailed selective qualitative data collection and analysis focusing on key interventions and practice that make the program effective in relation to its specific goals and outcomes. Another set involved collating 2004 attendance data for all SNSEP and mainstream students in Years 8 to 10, and 2004 retention data for all SNSEP students in Years 8 to 10, provided by Balga Senior High School. Finally, standardised testing of literacy and numeracy for all SNSEP and mainstream students in Years 8 to 10 in Term 4, 2004, using the WA Department of Education’s standardised MSE tests.

The paper is in three sections. The first takes in a layer of ethnographic research from September 2004 to March 2005. The latter involved the observation and identification of practices that are effective in facilitating culturally sensitive relations between staff and students, SNSEP and non-SNSEP staff and the school and families of the students. This research also tracked attendance and retention rates. The ethnographic researcher, a participant observer, made regular on-site observations of the SNSEP classrooms, administered unstructured interviews, and analysed relevant documents. This data was examined to reveal the most effective strategies being employed by staff to intervene in relation to the following issues:

- Respect
- Adolescent identity
- Nyungar identity
- Behaviour
- Attendance and retention
- Learning
- Improved employment, tertiary education and training outcomes.

The purpose of the observation overall was to identify the ‘best practice strategies’ being used by SNSEP staff to improve the life choices of Indigenous youth.

A second section, which focuses on quantitative measurement, provides a brief overview of attendance and retention rates along with the literacy and numeracy achievement levels attained by the students with some analysis in comparison with the 2003 results. A brief concluding section identified some of the key challenges facing the program in the final year and a half of its operation. They possibly suggest the need for re-thinking the linkages between educational and pastoral responses, individual learning pathways and group cohesion, and retention and attainment.

**Ethnographic Research**

**The Context: Program Structure and Common Principles**

SNSEP focuses on maximising the students’ long-term life chances by accommodating differences and remaining responsive to student needs. The success of the strategies employed by the program to address student issues appeared to be based on a set of common principles and structural elements.

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*Final Report* Institute for the Service Professions Edith Cowan University.
• That staff be curious and accommodating of the cultural differences of their students

Five areas in particular required sensitivity to cultural differences and are, in fact, acknowledged in a number of adjustments that SNSEP staff accommodate the school context and experience for the SNSEP students. In relation to family responsibilities, the Nyungar kinship system expects that the whole community shares the nurturing of young people and that the children are not necessarily excluded from the adult world. Many of the SNSEP students have high levels of responsibility and freedom in their home environments. Many are late for school in respect of these family responsibilities. In addition, many students value teamwork and cooperation over independent work and competition. Since a high level of personal autonomy is present in the home life of many SNSEP students, they are not used to the formalistic nature of mainstream schooling. Furthermore, many students feel ‘shame’ engaging verbally due to previous experiences with mainstream systems finding their Aboriginal English unacceptable and inferior. Lastly, the home lives of most SNSEP students separate the roles, responsibilities and general interactions of males and females.

• That the program adapt its structure and environment to maximise student participation

In 2002, in the spirit of adapting the school environment to suit the need of students, the SNSEP timetable was collapsed so that there were fewer but longer lessons. This was done for a number of reasons. The move helped to limit the confusion and discipline issues caused by students moving around among different classes and teachers. It also gave more time for relationships defined by respect and trust to develop between students and teachers. It also allowed teachers the time needed to develop flexible and innovative lessons filled with diverse experiences.

The collapsed timetable has proven to be a major structural success for the program. Most of the staff remains pleased with the time it has given them to foster relationships with their students and actively manage behaviour. Some staff reported feeling occasionally stressed as the collapsed timetable consistently requires providing lessons with multiple topics and tasks to keep the students engaged. However, staff generally agreed that the benefits for the students outweighed the demands placed on them as teachers.

• That the program recognise the importance of fostering sporting interest and talent to maximise student participation

The program recognises sport as an area of interest and talent for many Indigenous students. Therefore, interest in sport is one of the criteria used in recruiting students. Sport is used as the conduit to educational engagement and achievement. The staff have noted that by finding pleasure in sport students are more likely to have commitment to and respect for education. Sports, along with fitness and nutrition, make up the physical education component of the curriculum. The topic of sport is also incorporated into various other educational elements of the curriculum, such as English, to connect with student knowledge and interest.

• That the program provide individualised, structured and consistent mentoring to encourage retention and improve these students’ long-term life chances

Mentoring by staff is an important part of the SNSEP pastoral care structure. Mentoring focuses on closely monitoring the educational and personal well being of all students.

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2 ‘Shame’ refers to shyness or embarrassment and was a word often used by the students in the classroom when they were asked to participate in activities at odds with their usual beliefs and practices.
The mentors acknowledge student needs and facilitate action, instead of simply resorting to rhetoric. The mentoring process is managed whereby each staff member is allocated a mentor case load. Student contact sessions are one on one and staff make contact with students at least once a week.

**Best Practice Strategies**

Various staff members orchestrated the program's underlying principles and structure to intervene in a number of key issues.

**Respect: acknowledgment by staff of students' language, history and cultural markers**

The field notes revealed many pieces of evidence that showed the building of respectful relationships between the SNSEP staff and students. Foremost, staff showed respect for their students by explicitly demonstrating their willingness to recognise social and cultural differences. Staff found that most SNSEP students have had negative experiences with the education process. A lack of consideration for Nyungar culture and 'ways' in the mainstream education system has in the past resulted in students having to compromise their beliefs and behaviours or risk being misunderstood and marginalised by their teachers and fellow students. Hence, they are understandably sceptical about showing respect for education, and don't automatically engage with the educational process. However, the teachers have come to realise that respect and engagement with the educational process is necessary for successful outcomes.

A number of best practice principles for teachers in relation to encouraging respect were identified. One of these was to consistently give active demonstrations of respect for cultural difference. A good example of a teacher respecting cultural differences can be seen in a willingness to change the conventions for sitting in a classroom. While SNSEP usually places boys and girls in separate classes for cultural reasons, in 2005 the Year 8s were placed in a mixed class due to timetabling issues. When the teacher arrived for his first class the boys had seated themselves at the desks which were arranged in rows. The girls were in a huddle at the door. When the teacher asked the girls why they were not seated with the boys the girls told him that it would be 'shame' to have to complete a lesson sitting next to them. The teacher immediately responded by having all the students rearrange the desks so that the girls were seated grouped on one side of the room with the boys on the other.

In return for the consideration of students’ needs and ways staff made it clear that they also had some ‘house rules’ and identified them through a process of explicit negotiation with the students. The rules included removing hats before a lesson begins, sitting properly on the chairs, using computers for school work only, avoiding the use of swear words and listening to others. However, the key in the application of the ‘house rules’ was the manner in which they were communicated to entire classes. For example, one teacher always made very clear the type of behaviour they needed to display in order to respect her classroom.

An additional best practice principle was the balancing of personal characteristics: being warm, stimulating and supportive of students, while also being responsible, challenging and systematic. The way teachers did or did not balance respect for cultural differences with adherence to house rules influenced students’ opinions of their effectiveness and hence their willingness to show respect. They were more likely to respond positively to teachers that had realistic academic standards and were systematic in their management of behaviour, stimulating, understanding, supportive, warm and friendly. For example, the successful teachers were the ones who appreciated that Indigenous students simply
were not accustomed to sitting for the usual periods of silence in addressing work. They required a more interactive and verbally communicating context in which to tackle work.

In summary, the essence of the best practice intervention for encouraging respectful relationships lies in the successful management of understanding each other's 'house rules' while maintaining a structured, challenging, warm and supportive environment. On the whole, the SNSEP staff stepped out of their mainstream mindset to understand and have regard for the cultural ways and differing life circumstances of their students.

Promotion of positive Nyungar identity

The SNSEP staff were convinced that a young person’s experience of belonging to or identifying with a particular culture or group enhances their resilience. Even the presence of other Indigenous students, as opposed to being a minority in a classroom, appeared to have a positive effect on the behaviour and self-identities of the students. Staff encouraged the students’ knowledge and sense of their own ‘cultural markers’ such as language, history and traditional practices. However, the staff were also aware that it was misleading to assume that all students aligned themselves with a definitive set of Nyungar attitudes, values and practices. Therefore, they did not force students to participate in particular activities if they did not feel comfortable doing so.

A number of best practice principles were also identified in building a positive Nyungar identity. The first was that the Program includes an Indigenous language and culture curriculum taught by appropriately trained Indigenous staff. The language and culture program for both the boys and girls included content that covers Nyungar language, history, traditional ways of living, traditional dance and song, kinship and child rearing practices. Initially, the girls were not as engaged in the language and culture program as were the boys. The issue was corrected by hiring a new Indigenous language and culture teacher for the girls and providing the teacher with the training and support for the delivery of a curriculum aligned program for the study of languages other than English. Both of the language and culture teachers look for ways for students to share their Nyungar language and culture with family, friends and others outside of the school. Students are encouraged to speak Nyungar with their friends during break times and with their friends and families at home. The boys program continues to be particularly effective by providing opportunities for students to perform traditional dance at community events.

The Program also values and accepts the importance of Aboriginal English in establishing students’ positive Nyungar identities. Teachers generally accepted the students’ use of Aboriginal English in most circumstances. It was recognised that constant correction of Aboriginal English could be interpreted by a student as racism and consequently reflect a failure to accept a student as an Indigenous person. This could result in the erosion of a sense of Indigenous identity and contribute to withdrawing from school. Standard Australian English is taught during English lessons and is viewed as an addition to the skills that students have, rather than a replacement. Even in English lessons students are encouraged to write free-form poetry using Aboriginal English.

A further principle in the promotion of a positive Nyungar identity called for the involvement of parents and Nyungar elders in the educational process. At this point in the Program's history, elders have become a fairly regular component in the overall support structure for the students. While parents have generally been present at the sporting events, it has been more difficult to encourage and engage them more fully in relation to the class related activities.
Behaviour: Application of team spirit lessons learned on the sports field to classroom settings

Along with adherence to common principles underlying the program and changes to the school environment, the staff have developed specific strategies to monitor and encourage good behaviour.

- The Program structure provides informal peer support

In order to motivate learning and encourage good behaviour some of the staff incorporated the team spirit learned on the sporting field into their classrooms. The decision to do so came about after discussions among staff at the beginning of 2005. In one class in particular children were encouraged to work individually as well as in a team. They were permitted to problem solve together and share their knowledge. Collaborative learning not only reduced the ‘shame’ involved in admitting that you don't know the answer by calling out and asking the teacher, but it recognised the group or community orientation of Nyungar culture. The students responded well to this type of set up and subsequently did not act out excessively.

However, the monitoring of students identified as being at risk, for whom the team spirit approach did not appear to be a sufficient source of motivation, was achieved by the implementation of daily behavioural performance sheets. They served as a reflective tool by helping students communicate how they are feeling. They gave both students and teachers an opportunity to stop, reflect and manage inappropriate behaviour and attitudes. Students who are having behavioural difficulties because they do not understand the content of lessons are put on to IEPs (Individual Education Plans). Students who are having persistent behavioural difficulties are put onto BMPs (Behaviour Management Plans). The students’ mentors manage these two individualised strategies when they are in place with the objective of preventing at-risk students from developing behavioural difficulties that would lead to exclusion from school.

In 2003, at the end of the second full year of the Program, the staff assigned a higher priority to the importance of informal peer support. Earlier in the year there had been moves to assimilate the Year 10 SNSEP students into the mainstream classes. SNSEP staff fought that decision as they believed that the presence of older students was essential for the well being of younger students. During 2004 the school administrators accepted the case made by the SNSEP staff and the Year 10 and 11 boys and girls remain within the program. Teachers have seen the older boys and girls provide peer support to the younger students by acting as good role models. The respectful relationships that are maintained between the older students and their teachers provide the necessary examples for the younger students of how to perceive the program and the staff, and how to behave.

In general, the students appear to have developed a respect for discipline and recognise the benefits of having a structured environment. Staff now feel that student attitudes to teachers as authority figures has changed since the students now realise that the teachers occupy their time in a worthwhile way and are investing in their futures.

Learning and Adolescent Identity: increased levels of student choice and responsibility

Learning
The curriculum and the teaching pedagogy of the program are continually being developed and adjusted to improve the students’ engagement in education. The teachers endeavour to provide meaningful educational experiences for their students in order to increase basic literacy and numeracy levels.
Again, a number of best practice principles were identified in improving learning outcomes. In general, they illustrate the importance of student directed learning, and each of them can be seen as a different dimension of that basic principle. For example, making learning experiences relevant by creating connections to students’ interests, culture and life experiences is strongly complemented by flexible curriculum delivery. Three examples of the latter included team work, highly structured tasks, and providing choice. In relation to the second tactic, most teachers found that the students were not good at attending to tasks that required longer periods of time for completion. They also did not have a good working knowledge of how to structure their attempts or research information. In response, lessons were broken up into smaller structured tasks that are achievable and that require students to apply a research process: look for, extract, and record information.

Learning contracts for students in general and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for at-risk students were two important strategies also employed as part of best practice. The contracts became highly effective in negotiating students’ engagement in learning. Student reflection sheets were part of the contractual arrangements and assisted in increasing students’ awareness of their engagement in specific tasks as well as in setting educational goals. The IEPs for at-risk students were usually modified versions of the curriculum that the other students followed. Teachers were encouraged to take the initiative to use shorter and less complicated texts combined with less intensive or complicated tasks and outcomes. In some instances, IEPs were used in relation to students that required extension. The latter were given tasks containing more advanced assignments requiring further information and research.

Complementary programs to ensure successful school to work transitions have also been recognised as an important component of the program, especially to sustain and carry forward positive outcomes achieved while at Balga Senior High School. Hence, the SNSEP program is committed to providing all eligible students access to vocational training and post school education programs. All 13 of the 2004 year 10 boys now form the 2005 Year 11 SNSEP cohort. This result compares well with the mainstream cohort where only three Indigenous students remain in Year 11.

Balga Senior High School has developed special programs to support the mainstream and SNSEP programs. All of the SNSEP Year 11 boys are participating in post school education in one of a number of programs. The Aspirations program offers students a bridging course to Edith Cowan University. Students spend 3 days at Balga Senior High School studying Curriculum Council subjects, one day doing structured workplace learning in the community, and one day at BSHS completing the bridging course. Students are also offered the opportunity to complete vocational studies in a variety of studies in a variety of methods such as traineeships, Curriculum Council subjects and some school-based subjects. The Balga Works program is a joint venture between BSHS and a private provider (MITS Victoria). Balga Works is a vocational program that aims to improve education and build employment skills for Year 11 and 12 students who are at risk of being alienated from education and the workplace.

Adolescent identity
Increased levels of student choice and responsibility and the identification of pathways from school to work take place within the more basic developmental process of adolescent identity. Most of the SNSEP teachers were mindful that, along with the families and significant role models of the SNSEP students, they along with the curriculum they provided were major influences on the development and maintenance of their students’ identities as adolescents. The Program has striven to provide learning experiences that would enable their students to formulate their own moral systems, to negotiate peer and family relationships, to develop skills for future adult independence, and to achieve realistic, stable, positive self-identities.
Hence, SNSEP mentors and teachers took seriously the responsibility of supporting and enhancing their students' positive self-concepts. Mentors provide a safe place for the students to reflect and seek counsel when experiencing emotions such as worry, doubt, and fear. Mentors also facilitate problem solving, goal setting and encourage the recognition of positive aspects of the self, especially when milestones have been achieved. The teachers also recognised the importance of acknowledging and rewarding students' achievements in the development of positive adolescent identities. A rewards program was established to encourage achievements and good behaviour. Raffle tickets are given to students for achievements such as good class work, attendance and adherence to behaviour management plans (BMPs). At the end of each week the entire SNSEP group meets to review the achievements of all the students entered in the raffle and then the winning tickets are drawn.

SNSEP staff were also aware of and avoided situations that could cause ‘shame’ upon individual students. ‘Shame’ was caused by the prospect of challenges such as being asked to express emotions publicly, give individual presentations of work and compromise cultural practices (eg. girls being asked to work with boys in groups). While it was recognised that ‘shame’ could negatively impact on a student’s self-esteem, it was also recognised that challenge was necessary to build one’s self-esteem. Teachers had to negotiate the choice of learning experiences with students carefully to ensure that an acceptable balance of challenge and comfort was achieved.

Training in stress management to facilitate skills in successfully dealing with inner conflict and conflict resolution was a further best practice principle in fostering a healthy adolescent identity. A stress management session was run by local general practitioners. Students, family members and teachers combined to form groups. As the sessions progressed the students became more comfortable in sharing their thoughts and feelings. At the end of the sessions with the girls in particular, they could make connections between issues in their environment (people shouting and fighting), physical symptoms (having a headache, heart beating fast) and emotional symptoms (feeling angry or sad). They also developed a range of positive coping skills to alleviate the symptoms of stress such as breathing techniques, reading, listening to music, going for a run, talking with a friend, or, if serious, going to the doctor.

**Attendance and Retention: engagement of parents**

The program identified specific strategies to intervene in the major obstacles to good attendance and retention rates. We have already seen how the Program has made extensive changes to the school environment to make it less alienating for the students by collapsing the timetable, focusing on sports and Indigenous language and culture, and ensuring flexible delivery of a curriculum that is relevant to the students’ culture and experiences.

The evaluation of the Program during 2004 indicated that these changes are having a positive effect and could be strengthened by additional best practice principles. One was simply that the Program consistently finds ways to make the school environment a more welcoming place for Nyungar students. Corresponding to this principle the SNSEP staff have also been vigilant in tracking attendance and retention and are unwilling to accept non-attendance and withdrawal from education as normal behaviour for Indigenous students. Tracking informs staff of lateness and non-attendance and helps identify students in need of support. It also sends the message to the students that their participation is valued.
Good attendance and behaviour is systematically rewarded. If attendance problems arise any rewards in place are removed, and certain privileges such as outings are denied. The removal of rewards in combination with intervention at family level is usually successful in re-establishing good attendance.

In 2004 when parents and carers were called about non-attendance the failure of the bus service was often brought up as an explanation. Hence, in 2005 an Indigenous bus service manager was employed. He has as part of his responsibility anticipating student issues regarding attendance and retention and facilitating problem solving. He aims to prevent issues from escalating into a situation where a student becomes disengaged from the program. The bus manager keeps in close contact with students having attendance issues, gives wake up calls and personally picks students up if they miss the bus. In addition, he also contributes to the effective case-management of at-risk students by informing the mentors of any enduring problems and difficulties affecting the students. In effect, the bus manager is acting as a vital link between parents and students and the school. The parents trust him and the students respect him. In this way, the hiring of an Indigenous bus manager has become a key tactic in engaging parental involvement and exemplifying the importance of a seamless and coordinated approach to student care.

Unfortunately, the levels of parental involvement continue to be low and limited to a small group of regular contributors. However, one of the teachers was particularly innovative in encouraging the involvement of parents. She regularly sent letters with a positive focus home to parents throughout the semester, reporting on progress and identifying areas targeted for future improvement. In addition, when she gave students homework, she occasionally contacted parents to discuss the nature of the task. Likewise, she also circulated take home books and encouraged the students to read for enjoyment and share with their families. She found that some of the students had begun to read to their younger brothers and other family members.

**Quantitative Measurements and Standardised Test Results**

**Attendance and Retention Rates**

On the whole at the end of 2004 it was evident that the SNSEP students were proud of their membership in the Program. As a group they were different from any other cohort within the school. Their Indigenous status and their willingness to try something different in order to succeed defined this difference.

All of the SNSEP students have been drawn from the general pool of Indigenous students and generally entered the program manifesting some of the symptoms of alienation from the school system:

- Lower attendance and retention levels than their non-indigenous class mates
- School behavioural problems
- Lower levels of literacy and numeracy
- Negative self-identity
- Lack of social coping skills
- Increased chance of participating in risk-taking behaviours
- Increased likelihood of unemployment.

This student cohort is at risk of continuing to accumulate the consequences of alienation from the education system and therefore risking their long-term life chances unless appropriate intervention is taken.
In 2002 and 2003 data for the SNSEP groups was collated from individual attendance records and did not include students who did not stay with the program. In 2004 data for the SNSEP and mainstream groups was collated from all enrolled students. Therefore, some slippage in the attendance rate of the SNSEP group is expected due to the inclusion of students who did not comply with the program and left part way through the year.

As was the case in 2002 and 2003, attendance rates from Year 8, 9, and 10 SNSEP students in 2004 compares favourably to the 2003 state average attendance rate for Indigenous students in secondary schools of 74.8%. Likewise, SNSEP attendance rates remain considerably higher than rates shown non-SNSEP Aboriginal students at Balga High School and are more in line with the rates shown by mainstream students at the school. The state average attendance rate for non-indigenous students in secondary schools in 2003 was 91.7%.

In 2003 the retention rates were lower than might be expected, ranging from 48% to 70%. In 2004 the retention rates improved and ranged from 53% to 100%. For students who left voluntarily the major reason cited by the SNSEP team was either a change of address outside the Swan District, difficulties coping with the time spent travelling to school, or reasons unknown. Half of the Year 8 girls who were not retained in the 2004 program were granted a scholarship but did not attend any classes. Explanations were sought by SNSEP staff, but not given by the students' family members. The one student who identified as being expelled from the program was asked to withdraw due to dissension within the family group.

In 2002 SNSEP had a retention rate of 71% with 17 of the original 24 students completing the year. Eight of those 24 boys carried on to Year 9 in 2003 giving a two-year retention rate of 33%. In 2003 a further 11 boys were recruited into Year 9. Eleven of those 19 boys (including the eight original students) carried on to Year 10 in 2004 and were all enrolled for Year 11 in 2005. As was mentioned previously, this is an unusually high rate of Year 11 participation for Indigenous boys.

Literacy and Numeracy Rates

For 2004, literacy and numeracy results require careful interpretation. Some strong individual growth scores were offset by drops in average scores in several of the year and gender groups. There were slight decreases in performance in most SNSEP and mainstream student groups, but only one of these differences was statistically significant. Since most students were much happier about taking part in school work than in the past, the lack of significant increases in academic achievement as measured by WALNA could be due to a lack of motivation to engage in individual academic assessment reflecting prior low expectations of, lack of experience and confidence with formal assessment.

Years 8, 9 and 10 SNSEP and mainstream students were assessed in Term 4, 2004 using a standardised test of reading and numeracy. The assessments used for Years 8 and 9 students were the ‘Reading’ and ‘Numeracy’ components of the 2004 Year 7 WALNA test battery. The 2004 Year 9 version of the MSE9 assessment was used for the Year 10 students.

Raw scores on these tests can be converted to scores on the Western Australian Monitoring Standards in Education (WAMSE) Scale. The WAMSE scale permits comparisons over time within a given learning area even though the students may have attempted different questions on different tests. The typical range of achievement on WAMSE scales varies between about 0 and 800. By using these tests any changes in student performance can be tracked over time. The results of the testing were examined
by three different methods: year group progress, school progress, and individual student progress.

**Year Group Progress**

**Year 8**
In 2003 Year 8 SNSEP boys were all above the state benchmark in literacy. In 2004 all students’ scores were below the benchmark level. In 2004 the highest student scores between the 75th and 90th percentile were less than the lowermost student scores in 2003.

In 2003 all Year 8 SNSEP boys were above the state benchmark in numeracy. In 2004 a majority of students scored below the state benchmark.

Although the change in scores from 2003 – 2004 for Year 8 SNSEP boys is negative in direction, this change may well be due to chance variation. Data over a longer period of time is needed to determine whether the pattern is real.

In 2003 approximately 75% of SNSEP girls were above the state benchmark in literacy, and in 2004 approximately 50% of them were above the state benchmark.

Results of the Numeracy assessment for Year 8 SNSEP girls show that in 2004 there was a greater distribution of high scores, but a smaller proportion of students were above the state benchmark than were in 2003.

Overall, there appears to be little directional trend between the Reading and Numeracy assessments for Year 8 SNSEP girls in 2003 and 2004. The students’ scores did not appear to be markedly better or worse.

**Year 9**
In 2003 over 80% of the Year 9 SNSEP boys were above the state benchmark in literacy. In contrast, in 2004 all student scores were below the state benchmark.

The results of the numeracy assessment show that in both 2003 and 2004, approximately half the Year 9 SNSEP boys were above the state benchmark.

The decrease in Year 9 SNSEP boys reading scores over 2003-2004 may be due to chance variation, environmental or motivational factors. Data over a longer period of time is needed to determine whether the pattern is real.

**School Progress**
The 2003 and 2004 results for both the SNSEP and mainstream groups were linked to analyse the progress of each cohort over time. The data show slight decreases in performance by most SNSEP and mainstream student groups in Reading. The data also show slight decreases in numeracy performance by the SNSEP student groups, whereas the mainstream student groups showed slight increases in performance.

A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was conducted on term 4, 2003 and term 4, 2004 scores for each group to test for statistical significance. Results from the analysis revealed that there was a statistically significant change in performance in reading between 2003 and 2004 for the Year 9 SNSEP boys and for the mainstream Year 10 boys. No other statistically significant changes in reading performance were recorded. None of the changes in numeracy performance for the SNSEP groups were found to be significant.
The general lack of improvement shown by the SNSEP groups in both reading and numeracy is of obvious concern. However, the decrease in performance was shown to be statistically significant in one group only, and analysis of the individual data shows that in most cases students whose scores decreased markedly offset good improvements made by others.

**Going Forward with the Best Practice Strategies**

The previous evaluation of SNSEP highlighted the need for a significantly enhanced pastoral commitment to bring the students to a point where they were ready to engage in the learning process. As different groups of the students progress through the Program, and because of the strong cohesiveness that each of the groups appears to develop, finding the best mix of pastoral and educational approaches will be required to ensure that the students support each other in wanting to achieve in the classroom as much on the sports field. The underlying issues here involve getting the right degree of collaboration between teachers and mentors and family support throughout the program. Hence, the positive attitude about and pride of the students in being a SNSEP student strongly suggests that pastoral needs are being addressed. Another indicator could be the very good retention rate of the Year 11 boys.

At this point in the implementation of the Program, however, we have to consider whether or not the time has arrived to place a comparable degree of emphasis on challenging the students academically and pushing for improved levels of attainment. On the one hand, the best practice strategies are providing a context that is engaging students respectfully. The adapted learning context represents a serious response to a challenge to take into account historical and cultural background issues. The evaluation reaffirmed that the cultural challenges have to be understood in relation to the students’ families as well as in relation to the students themselves. For example, a number of the students are carrying family responsibilities and living in home environments that place a number of limitations on their ability to participate fully in school. We have also seen how different pedagogies are required for successful student engagement in order to respect cultural differences in relation to learning.

The previous evaluation made three recommendations that are relevant to what has begun to emerge as a key challenge for the remaining year and a half of the Program. The Report recommended continued curriculum development as a priority in 2004 so that the curriculum can cater to the full range of student abilities. In addition, the Report recommended a greater focus on individual student needs by preparing Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and mentoring arrangements for all students in the Program. However, during 2004 IEPs were restricted to at-risk students, largely because they are so labour intensive to prepare and staff resources were already stretched.

The Report also recommended continued efforts to increase parental involvement in the Program. Hence, a major emphasis in continuing to build respectful relations between staff and students is how we can simultaneously respect the capacity of individual students for extension with the need for group cohesion, support and identity. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the key challenges that has come into sharper focus relates to good educational practice. Both the 2003 and 2005 Productivity Commission Reports on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage cited Year 10 and 12 retention and attainment as a headline indicator (SCRGSP 2003 and 2005). It is encouraging that the most recent report on SNSEP appears to be having a positive impact on retention. However, consistency in improving levels of attainment is still an area inviting further attention. While most of the drops in the literacy and numeracy scores during 2004 were statistically insignificant, they still provide an opportunity to raise a number of questions about how Program staff are balancing the parallel needs for cultural and personal development support with a range of challenges in the classroom and on the sports field.
The previous ASPC paper on SNSEP (Simons 2003) also suggested challenging students to higher levels of attainment would be taken up on the basis of differing assumptions about how learning occurs for Indigenous students. A major portion of that paper focused on the tensions between SNSEP and non-SNSEP staff at Balga Senior High School and the need for changes in the educational culture of the school to adapt the learning environment. At that time, it was also noted that these changes not only made good educational sense for the SNSEP students, but, in fact, made good educational sense for all students. The point was also made that such adaptations in the educational culture are more accurately viewed as stretching the students for enhanced educational outcomes rather than providing remediation for catching up.3

However, there are still a number of program design issues that have to be addressed in relation to effectively challenging the students to higher levels of attainment. Initially, we had anticipated mainstreaming students during Year 10. However, we have seen that the impact of moving ahead prematurely with mainstreaming, while meeting the learning needs of students who could benefit from extension, could also compromise the motivation and capacity of the rest of the group. The problems we have experienced in attempting to mainstream, as well as in coming to agreement on either when or whether it should continue to be part of the program plan, reminds us that we have not yet learned how to navigate the tensions between facilitating individual achievement and appropriate support and motivation for the group. In response, SNSEP staff argued strongly that mainstreaming be delayed so that the older students can remain with the group to provide positive role modelling and support for the younger students.

This response, however, presented us with another dilemma. One the one hand, we appear to have regained a strong sense of group support which is illustrated both attitudinally and in the very strong retention rate of the Year 11 boys. On the other, however, we have yet to discover how to challenge all of the students to achieve their personal best in a way that does not fragment the support they offer and receive from the group as a whole. While we want to be sensitive to the stronger community focus of Indigenous students, we also acknowledge research that has shown that the ‘class’ or group structure is not the best for allowing students to achieve at a pace suited to their capacities (Masters, 2005).4 Indeed, it can work against such learning.

It will be important to continue to monitor the interdependence between educational and pastoral priorities, challenge and support, individual learning pathways and group cohesion, and retention and attainment for the remaining year and a half of the Program. In the meantime, and until we have had the benefit of a comprehensive evaluation of the Program after it has run its course, it will probably not be possible for us to address a

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3Subsequently, I became aware of the YACHAD Accelerated Education and Work Readiness Project (YAEWR) that directly addresses the lack of education achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and their teachers in rural and remote areas of Australia. The Project aims to introduce accelerated education methods, in particular those developed in Israel at the Hebrew University Centre for Innovation in Education and the Sachta Rashi Foundation to three rural and remote pilot locations in Australia. Accelerated learning is a set of principles that guide pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and teacher professional development. The HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) Program is an example of the application of the principles. Rather than traditional approaches to Indigenous education that rely on remedial solutions to address educational disadvantage, the Accelerated School concept uses the principles of gifted and talented education. International evidence shows that this has been a successful approach (Langton, 2004).

4Geoff Masters, CEO ACER and Chair Australian College of Educators, in speaking at the Susatining Prosperity Conference in Melbourne in April 2005 noted that typically, curriculum is divided into grade-based packages in mixed ability classes in Australia. Students experience discontinuities between grades and stages of schooling/learning. Each new school makes a fresh start with little information being passed across boundaries between grades. Yet, research shows that teaching is most effective when it is targeted at an individual’s current level of knowledge, understanding and skill. Within any given year, within the present system the top students are 7 years ahead of the low-achieving students. The conveyor belt model is a very inaccurate reflection of what’s actually happening based on a one quarter million sized sample from the USA. We need to start grouping students according to their achievement levels, and not on the basis of a graded approach to a curriculum on offer.
number of related or underlying issues that are part of the challenge of improving the educational outcomes and life chances of the Indigenous students who are part of SNSEP. In addition, we will also have to set up a mechanism to track the post-school outcomes of the students at 5 and 10 year periods to be in a position to make a better assessment of the longer term effects of participating in the Program. It is probably only then that we will be able to refine the balance between the educational and pastoral components of the Program. On present indications, such a refinement will probably only become possible after we have been able to engage parents and families in the Program more broadly than we have been able to achieve at this point.
References


