The system of compulsory education is failing

Assimilation, mobility and Aboriginal students in Victorian State schools, 1961-1968

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which the mobility of indigenous people in Victoria during the 1960s enabled them to resist the policy of assimilation as evident in the structures of schooling. It argues that the ideology of assimilation was pervasive in the Education Department’s approach to Aboriginal education and inherent in the curriculum it produced for use in state schools. This is central to the construction of the state of Victoria as being devoid of Aboriginal people, which contributes to a particularly Victorian perspective of Australia’s national identity in relation to indigenous people and culture.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper utilises the state school records of the Victorian Department of Education, as well as the curriculum documentation and resources the department produced. It also examines the records of the Aborigines Welfare Board.

Findings – The Victorian Education Department’s curriculum constructed a narrative of learning and schools which denied the presence of Aboriginal children in classrooms, and in the state of Victoria itself. These representations reflect the Department and the Victorian Government’s determination to deny the presence of Aboriginal children, a view more salient in Victoria than elsewhere in the nation due to the particularities of how Aboriginality was understood. Yet the mobility of Aboriginal students – illustrated in this paper through a case study – challenged both the representations of Aboriginal Victorians, and the school system itself.

Originality/value – This paper is inspired by the growing scholarship on Indigenous mobility in settler-colonial studies and offers a new perspective on assimilation in Victoria. It interrogates how curriculum intersected with the position of Aboriginal students in Victorian state schools, and how their position – which was often highly mobile – was influenced by the practices of assimilation, and by Aboriginal resistance and responses to assimilationist practices in their lives. This paper contributes to histories of assimilation, Aboriginal history and education in Victoria.

Keywords Curriculum, Victoria, Education, Mobility, Assimilation, Aboriginal history

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Just over 100 kms east of Melbourne in the rolling hills of West Gippsland is the small township of Rokeby. In 1965, the annual entry into the Inspector’s Report Book for Rokeby State School includes comments from the district inspector on the school grounds and buildings, the teacher’s instruction, and the organisation of the classrooms and students. The report also includes a discussion of the students’ progress and their classification into grades. In 1965, there were 61 students enrolled at the school, several of whom were Aboriginal children. Of their progress, the Inspector wrote, “it seems the system of compulsory education is failing for them”. In June of the following year the Inspector’s Report found cause to comment again on Aboriginal students and identified in particular a student in Grade 3 whose “schooling, in the past, has been subject to interruptions […] his attendance this year has been satisfactory, but his educational attainment is meagre in the extreme”. The student he was describing was a nine-year old, whom I shall call Frank Linden. In 1966, Frank had been enrolled at Rokeby State School on five separate occasions over a seven-year period[1].
This paper tells the story of Aboriginal children, like Frank, and their experiences of schooling in Victoria in the era of assimilation. It argues that the mobility of Aboriginal children such as Frank was influenced by the pressures of assimilation, particularly government practices relating to housing. Yet that mobility was central to the way in which many Aboriginal families responded to and resisted assimilative practices and the attacks that assimilation made on family and kin networks. Also highlighted are the experiences of Aboriginal children in schools governed by the Victorian Education Department which, I contend, developed curriculum documentation and resources – in particular The School Paper – which transmitted a particularly Victorian consciousness of Aboriginality which was made distinct by the Aborigines’ Protection Act 1886 (Vic), and reinforced by the articulation of the policy of assimilation in the Aborigines Act 1958 (Vic) (Victoria Parliament, 1886, 1958). The construction of the idea that Victoria was a state with no Aboriginal people contributed to the broader work of the assimilation project in building a national consciousness of Australia’s identity from which Indigenous presence was to be excluded (Haebich, 2000, pp. 132-137; Rowse, 1998, pp. 107-109).

Emerging from the field of settler-colonial studies is a new area of scholarship on indigenous mobilities that pays attention to the many ways in which Indigenous people were mobile and what that meant for their experience of and resistance to settler colonialism (Carey and Lydon, 2014; Banivanua Mar, 2015; Ellinghaus and Healy, 2018). This paper draws on such scholarship to examine the ways that many Aboriginal Victorians were persistently mobile during a time when the assimilation policy sought to control social mobilities through institutions such as schooling and housing.

Assimilation in the state of Victoria
The rapid settlement of the Port Phillip District, and the impact of diseases and violence as settlers pushed for land was devastating for Aboriginal people in Victoria. Those who survived were placed onto reserves until, under the 1886 Act, the government began to close these and declared that individuals of “mixed descent” were not Aboriginal. Those who were categorised in this way were excluded from the remaining reserves and faced restrictions when they attempted to return. These families were denied support and children were removed from families (Haebich, 2000, pp. 147-152, 164-168; Broome, 2005, pp. 185-199). In Victoria, the ideology enshrined in the definitions of the 1886 Act – that there were very few if any “real” Aboriginal people in the state – was pervasive in the official approaches of the authorities, and of the public consciousness – for decades to come. It was a difficult time for many Aboriginal people. The long hard years “under the Act”, meant living in camps on riverbanks, in the bush, or in the inner-city areas of Melbourne, getting work where and when they could and doing their best to maintain their connections to kin and culture. Many Aboriginal families attended schools throughout this period, while others avoided it altogether (Broome, 2005, pp. 259-60; Campbell and Proctor, pp. 163, 203-205).

In 1958, the Victorian Government passed a new Aborigines Act. This Act was based on information sourced from local police and the incomplete survey of Aboriginal people living in Victoria undertaken by a retired chief stipendiary, Charles McLean. The Act reframed the aims of the 1886 Act under the term “assimilation”, and a new Aborigines Welfare Board was formed, charged with “promot[ing] the moral intellectual and physical welfare of aborigines”, including “any person of aboriginal descent […] with a view to their assimilation into the general community” (Victorian Parliament, 1958). This meant that families who, under the 1886 Act, had been defined as not being “Aboriginal”, and had been mostly living away from the interference of the government, were now under the gaze of the Board.

Nationally, assimilation had become the dominant trend in Aboriginal policy in the post-war period, yet it was a concept without a single definition and was interpreted in
various ways, as shown by historians Russell McGregor (2002, 2005, 2011), Tim Rowse (2005) and Anna Haebich (2000). In Victoria, the concept of assimilation set forth in the 1958 Act included the targeting of families who had been receiving no government support and had often been excluded from local labour markets and housing and were living in difficult circumstances on the outskirts of rural towns such as Shepparton and Orbost (Broome, 2005, pp. 258-268). The government was dedicated to assimilation, and refused to acknowledge that in spite of the dire living conditions and poverty experienced by many living in fringe camps and on river banks, Aboriginal communities and families remained committed to staying together and to maintaining their Aboriginal identity (Broome, pp. 258-261, 278-285; Manning, 2002, p. 166, 2004, pp. 195-196; see also Fay Carter, p. 180 and Wayne Atkinson, pp. 182-184, in Jackomos and Fowell, 1991). While many Aboriginal people expressed the desire and need for improved housing, as well as access to education and better training and employment opportunities, they were not prepared to pay the price of independence, identity and freedom demanded the Victorian government.

The Board’s practices came to focus on disrupting these communities through the implementation of a housing programme, based on the belief that Aboriginal residents would aspire to the behaviour and values of their white neighbours if they were living in standard housing in small country towns. Many families wanted to move into the houses offered by the Board and sought improved living conditions, yet the Board did not have enough houses for those who needed them and prohibited the sharing of houses[2]. The use of housing as a tool of assimilation has been examined most notably by historians Corrine Manning and Heather Goodall who have explored the connection between housing programs and assimilation, and Aboriginal resistance to such programs (Manning, 2004, 2005; Goodall, 1995, see also Haebich, 2004). They show that the concept of standardized housing to operate as a normative social institution had several aims, including the focus on nuclear family units, and the performance of housekeeping standards. The Board’s housing policy also provided the means to control Aboriginal mobility. By locking tenants into a lease requiring regular rental payments, the Board’s aim was to encourage regular employment, and permanency of tenancy in line with the expectations of white society. A corollary of permanent residency and employment of parents was that children would attend the same school regularly and for the duration of their schooling, thereby assimilating into the social institution of mass, compulsory schooling common to modern school systems (Whitehead and Peppard, 2006, p. 177, 182). Aboriginal families resisted the Board’s regulation of housing by sharing houses, refusing to pay rent, refusing to leave accommodation and forfeiting houses in small isolated towns in order to be closer to their kin (Ellinghaus and Healy, 2018; Manning, 2004, pp. 199-200).

The assimilationist pressures placed on Aboriginal families included what became an increasingly public focus on children’s education and regular school attendance throughout the 1960s. The Board, and the government, often spoke publicly of the imperative of education and school attendance to the assimilation project, a Board member stating that “We are concentrating a lot on the children […] we must inculcate the desire and will to progress and succeed” (Morwell Advertiser, 7 June 1965). Members of the Board believed that houses and schools were ideal spaces through which they, and white society, could exert pressures conducive to the assimilation of Aboriginal Victorians. Parents were fined for truancy, and the Board was in close contact with the Education Department’s Attendance Officers, ready to intervene or to place sanctions on families who were not maintaining regular attendance[3].

The movement of Aboriginal children through schools was often based on their parent’s decisions, but also broader factors such the availability of work and housing. The Aborigines Welfare Board, focussed as they were on assimilation, wanted families to remain in standard houses, and for their children to regularly attend school and to make
sequential progress on par with their white peers. The institutional expectations of schooling, including regular attendance and regular progression, were directed at Aboriginal parents, but much of this weight was borne by their children in the daily experiences of the classroom. In addition to the Board’s aggressive pursuit of assimilation, the Education Department’s view on Aboriginal education appeared to be firmly grounded in the ideology perpetuated by the 1886 Act, that as there were so few Aboriginal children in the state, special provisions for their schooling were not required. But the role of the Education Department extended further than refusing to consider the needs of Aboriginal students and to develop a policy for their learning and education. The construction of Victoria as a state without Aboriginal people was reinforced, over and over, by the curriculum and the materials that the Education Department produced; by the omission of representations of Aboriginal people in Victoria, and through narratives which reinforced the myth that all “real” Aboriginal people in Victoria had disappeared soon after white settlement.

The curriculum and *The School Paper*

Although the Victorian government was intent on increasing the number of Aboriginal children regularly attending school, the Education Department did not acknowledge them once they were there, nor indeed did any of the material it produced acknowledge contemporary Aboriginal society in Victoria. The Department’s Course of Study for Primary Schools: Social Studies contained just one reference to Aboriginal people in Australia. The second topic for the Grade V course was titled “The Australia Our Ancestors Found”, and it is in the articulation of how to approach this topic that teachers were instructed that “The aborigines should be treated as in their natural habitat: comparison with the life of the aborigines to-day will be left to the discretion of the individual teacher (Education Department of Victoria, 1954).” This establishes quite clearly the view that to teach Victorian school children about Aboriginal people in their “natural habitat” – in Victoria in any case – required a historical perspective.

The Education Department produced a monthly reader, *The School Paper*, which included literary articles, songs and narratives to supplement and complement the curriculum. As historian Sianan Healy has shown, there is an absence of representations of Aboriginal children in contemporary educational settings in *The School Paper* (2015). While some texts show Aboriginal children learning and being educated, these are set in contexts far removed from Victoria – the desert, the tropics – which undermines both the possibility and the presence of Aboriginal children in Victorian classrooms. Instances of Aboriginal Victorian children being educated in schools are relegated to the colonial past, such as the 1962 *School Paper* text describing how in 1836 the first school in Melbourne to teach “little aboriginal pupils reading and religious knowledge” (Grades VII and VIII, July, 1962, p. 91). These narratives contributed a particular perspective on the state of Victoria, but also to the broader project of developing Australia’s national identity in the post-war era: one which was focussed on progress, industry and the modernity of south-eastern states such as Victoria from which Indigenous people were long gone. The vision of Australia as a growing nation presented in the curriculum did not include Aboriginal people who were instead relegated to the past and therefore the margins of the national narrative of growth and prosperity (Healy, 2015, pp. 14-16; Herbert, 2012, pp. 94-96; Campbell and Proctor, 2014, p. 205).

In addition to the absences from educational spaces, there are no stories in *The School Paper* about Aboriginal children in Victoria with their parents or families, just as there are no representations of Aboriginal homes, or of Aboriginal adults in employment or engaged in industry, enterprise or community participation in any of the *School Papers* published in the 1960s, or indeed in the 1950s. This absence is all the more striking due to the
overwhelming focus on the home, the family, community life, the role of mothers and fathers, civic participation, industrial and agricultural progress and the prosperity of Victoria and Australia more generally (Healy, 2015, pp. 17-19; Macknight, 2005). The School Paper was a supplementary resource, and often included frivolous songs and stories, yet the messages it delivered to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in Victoria – through repeated group and self-directed reading, dictation, the performance of plays and recitation of poems – was clear: there were no Aboriginal people in the state of Victoria.

Rokeby State School

While the narrative of Victorian education was constructed in such a way that imagined the nation as empty of Indigenous presence, in the early 1960s, Aboriginal children were very much present in Victorian classrooms such as that in Rokeby. On Valentine’s Day in 1961, three siblings of the Linden family – Cal, Ruby and Frank – enrolled at Rokeby State School. Frank’s sisters had previously been attending school in Kalimna West in East Gippsland, but it was Frank’s very first day of school. Frank’s date of birth was altered by his father when he was registered to suggest he had just turned five years old, rather than being much closer to the five and a half years old that he actually was, and closer to the limit at which all children were required to be enroled. Ruby’s date of birth was also manipulated to suggest that she was a year younger than her actual age. The changing of birthdates and the altering of other details when enrolling in and withdrawing children from school was just one of the strategies of Aboriginal parents employed as a way to evade persecution for truancy and to avoid sanctioning by the Welfare Board. Frank and his sisters joined two of their cousins, the Morgans, who had already been attending school at Rokeby for a year and a half. Over the next few months, another six Aboriginal children started at the school. They were all closely related to Frank, Ruby and Cal – cousins and second cousins, each other’s aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. More Aboriginal families moved to Rokeby in the early years of the 1960s, from similar small towns in Gippsland, before moving on again, and sometimes returning to Rokeby.

Frank’s presence in the classroom at Rokeby – along with his sisters and relatives – both contradicts and aligns with the messaging about Aboriginal engagement with schools and learning in The School Paper. There were twelve Indigenous students enrolled at Rokeby in 1961, and the record of their presence is at variance with the policies, curriculum and resources which omitted reference to Aboriginal students. However, Frank’s attendance at Rokeby State School – like many of his Aboriginal peers – was intermittent and his progress did not match that of most of his white classmates. In this way, his schooling mirrors the implication of the narrative of Aboriginal absence from spaces of learning produced by the Education Department. The lack of representations of Aboriginal students and learning, may well have influenced him to believe that schools were not places for Aboriginal children – children like him – in the same way as they were for his white peers (Healy, 2015, p. 17). The lack of representation of Aboriginal students in schools is only a very small part of the curriculum that included derogatory and racially prejudiced representations of Aboriginal people and culture. Added to this, the narrative of Aboriginal absence from Victorian schools must have affected the enthusiasm Aboriginal children living in Rokeby had towards turning up to school every day (Campbell and Proctor, 2014, pp. 203-205). The Department’s Inspector identified the “irregular attendance” of the Aboriginal students at Rokeby to be “a problem” compared to the otherwise “very good” “standards of achievement” of the school and head teacher. He stated that the children themselves were “given sympathetic treatment and special teaching”, but that in spite of this “their indifference has not been conquered”.

The comments made in the Inspectors’ Reports regarding Aboriginal students become more negative throughout the 1960s, and much more direct in laying blame at the feet of the
children and their families. The reports state that Aboriginal parents “show[ed] little interest in their education”. There seems to have been a reluctance to consider the possibility that the curriculum – and maybe the schools and teachers – were contributing to the indifference and irregular attendance of students, such as Frank, who were not progressing or conforming to the expectations of the Department or their teachers. These views are evident in the records of other schools with Aboriginal enrolments. Two teachers from Mooroopna State School, located 200 kms north of Melbourne, wrote to the Education Department protesting against the assessment of their teaching – which influenced their salary – by claiming that the presence of Aboriginal children should have been taken into account when they were assessed[6]. Both were successful in their appeals. Diane Barwick, an anthropologist who worked closely with Aboriginal people in Victoria in the early 1960s, reported that Aboriginal children told her of being “humiliated by the accounts of the early contact period in Australia” they heard in social studies lessons and that they were keenly aware of the attitudes of their teachers; they felt that sometimes teachers “made kids ashamed when they didn’t have proper uniforms”, and reported teachers as “making smart remarks so that the white children would laugh” (Barwick, 1963, pp. 212-213).

**Housing, employment, mobility and school attendance**

Frank’s father, Reg Linden, had been working as a timber cutter for a number of years before the family moved to Rokeby, where he had secured a position at the timber mill in town. The position included the provision of a mill cottage. At a time when accommodation for Aboriginal families was difficult to secure this was undoubtedly a boon. Many of Reg’s family lived in the district, as did relatives of his wife Joan. For the previous three years, Reg and Joan had been moving around Gippsland, staying in towns where they had relatives and also anywhere Reg could find work with accommodation[7].

Moving to Rokeby in 1961, the Linden family were able to access both – housing and the opportunity to be close to family.

The Board was focussed on monitoring Aboriginal families to ensure they were working, attending school and using housing in a manner conducive to assimilation. In 1961, a welfare officer was visiting Rokeby about once a week, and it was noted that there were “too many families gathering at Rokeby” and that some residents were making “no effort to discourage visitors”. In 1961, after Frank had been at school for only four months, Reg and Joan lost the mill house because of “too many visitors”[8]. Reg kept his job at the mill, but as there were no houses available to them in Rokeby, he and Joan withdrew the children from Rokeby State School and moved the family to the outskirts of Drouin, about 15 kms away. The Education Department’s school bus policy meant that the children were living too close to town to be collected, but it was a long walk to Drouin State School: Frank was not yet six years old and it was the middle of winter. The Linden siblings attended school “for a few days” in the first two months they were there. By the end of Winter, an Education Department bus began to collect Frank and his sisters, and their school attendance improved[9]. While in Drouin, Frank’s family were living in a small room attached to the cottage occupied by Reg’s parents. The Board strongly discouraged this but acknowledged “they had nowhere else to go”[10]. In spite of the difficulties with accommodation and transport, Reg and Joan did their best to maintain the school attendance of their children.

The interference of the Board, as well as the availability of employment, influenced the experiences of schooling of the Morgan children, Jed and Norma, who lived in Rokeby with their parents in a house owned by the Aborigines Welfare Board. They were consistently enrolled at Rokeby State School for three and a half years. Their father Jim sometimes worked at the mill in town, but he also travelled frequently for work, and was sometimes accompanied by Jed and Norma’s mother, with both parents returning to Rokeby on the weekends. During the week, the children were cared for by their grandparents, who were
living in a tent in the yard of the Morgan’s house. This sharing of houses frustrated the Board considerably as it subverted the intention that standard houses would break-down large family groups living together. Yet it meant that the Morgan children were able to continue to attend the same school for a considerably longer period than their Aboriginal peers. The Board refused to recognise the importance of this arrangement, and the property officer’s regular reports reveal the exasperation at the refusal of the grandparents to move on, and also Jim’s refusal to pay any rent. This seemed to be especially infuriating for one welfare officer who, at the end of a long paragraph complaining about the amount of people living at the house and Jim’s consistent refusal to pay rent, concluded with the statement “He owns a car”[11]. While it seems likely that this information was included as evidence of Jim’s capacity to afford the rent which he refused to pay, it may also reveal the frustration of the Board’s officer Jim also had the capacity to be highly mobile. In the summer of 1963, the same officer advised the local police to “raid” the Morgan’s home, partly because of the high number of visitors. Without informing the Board, the family left their house at Rokeby and Jed and Norma were withdrawn from school. The family left the district and moved to Healesville[12].

“Croa-jingalong” and schooling on Gunai Kurnai country

In 1968 at the very beginning of the school year, seven years after his first day at school, Frank transferred from Rokeby to Orbost in East Gippsland, on the traditional lands of the Gunai Kurnai people. Orbost and the surrounding area was home to numerous timber mills, and it may be that a mill job with a house prompted the family to move, or perhaps, like the Morgans, they moved in an attempt to avoid the constant surveillance of the Board’s officers. Orbost was different to Rokeby. It was a bigger town and had a larger Aboriginal population, many of whom were relatives to Frank and his family. It was close to the Lake Tyers reserve which, in 1968, had just been saved from closure due to the political activism of many of the Aboriginal leaders who lived there (Taffe, 2010). Many of the small mill towns dotted through the bush had become home to families who had been pressured or had chosen to leave the reserve under the 1886 Act (Broome, 2005, p. 272). There were three primary schools in Orbost, and Orbost North State School had one of the highest enrolments of Aboriginal children in the state (Felton, 1969, p. 8). Here too, as in Rokeby, the records of the presence of Aboriginal students in classrooms serves as a challenge to the absence of Aboriginal students from the curriculum material. Frank and his sisters were joining a large cohort of Aboriginal children attending school from families who had been attending school for decades.

Many of the texts published in the School Paper focussed on the pioneers and explorers so central to the development of Australia’s national identity in the post-war era (Healy, 2015, pp. 6-11; Macknight, 2005). For many students living in country towns, these stories were often local history, as was the case for those attending school in Orbost encountering texts about Angus MacMillian. MacMillian claimed to have been the first explorer to “discover” a route through East Gippsland, including the Snowy River where the township of Orbost was established, and he is featured in several texts published in the School Paper. In the 1950s, a series on “Explorers and Pioneers” describes MacMillan as “a friend of the natives” who “stood very high in their regard” (Grades V and VI, August, 1951, pp. 103-104).

It is now widely accepted that MacMillan was the instigator of the killing of hundreds of Gunai Kurnai people in the mid-1800s[13]. In 1965, the School Paper moved closer to acknowledging this with the publication of the poem “Croa-jingalong” (Grades V and VI, November, 1965, pp. 153-154). This poem constructs a narrative that justifies MacMillan’s actions in leading the “wiping out” of the local Indigenous people, the “vanished tribe of Croa-jingalong”. The author laments this tragedy but labels it as “ancient history”. Today, places such as Butcher’s Ridge and Black Satin Creek, close to the township of
Orbost, remain on the map, and serve as reminders of the massacres and violence against the Gunai Kurnai people. Narratives such as this, which acknowledge frontier violence but construct it as inevitable and as having occurred in the distant past, are common in the School Paper. They acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal Victorians, yet often this recognition is made only in order to establish their absence in the contemporary context. There were approximately 500 Aboriginal students attending primary schools in Victoria in 1968 (Felton, 1969, p. 6). Like Frank, they were in schools and in classrooms, where poems such as “Croa-jingalong” were read silently and out loud, and perhaps also performed and analysed.

Frank had been in Grade 4 when he left Rokeby in 1968, and he was twelve and a half. At this age, students were usually making the transition from primary and secondary school. Moving to Orbost in 1968, Frank was faced with the prospect of beginning at a new school in a new town at a grade level almost three years below others his age. Frank’s story moves off the archives at this point. It may be that he completed his primary education, and perhaps he went on to Orbost High School. Based on the experiences of his peers, it seems more likely that Frank left school as early as he could – or perhaps even earlier. His cousin, Jed Morgan, who attended school at Rokeby with Frank but had left in 1963 when his family moved had subsequently been enrolled at Traralgon Technical School. Jed then left school to work with his father Jim at the Lake Tyers Reserve. The Board, however, was watching, and in spite of Jim’s insistence that Jed was old enough to have left school, the Board was able to produce Jed’s birth record and he was made to return to school in Traralgon[14]. Elsewhere in the state, other Aboriginal students were leaving school without attracting attention. Ivan Couzen, who grew up going to school on the Aboriginal mission at Framlingham reflected that when he finished school at the age of 13 to begin working, “No questions were asked as to why I left” (quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, 1991, p. 148). Faye Carter grew up on the banks of the Goulburn River in Mooroopna, and recalled that the indifference of the teachers to Aboriginal children leaving school to work was obvious: “Us kids would sometimes get pulled out of school to go tomato or fruit picking […] It didn’t worry the school in those days. They didn’t think it was very important for Aboriginal kids to get an education” (quoted in Jackomos and Fowell, 1991, p. 181). Considering the situation of Aboriginal students in classrooms in Orbost being asked to read poems such “Crojinga-long”, it is hardly surprising that Aboriginal students wanted to leave school as soon as they could.

**Mobility and resistance in East Gippsland**

In spite of the determined aversion of the Education Department to acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal students in their classrooms, teachers and attendance officers were often engaged trying to locate Aboriginal children in East Gippsland. Throughout the 1960s, attendance officers visited the Orbost area frequently, corresponding with the Aborigines Welfare Board and sharing lists of families they were “looking for”. One wrote hoping to meet up with one of the Board’s welfare officers in Orbost so that together they could “check up on some of the schools before the bean picking commenced, so that the movements of children be better checked”[15]. The East Gippsland region – vast and dotted with small, isolated towns – appears to have been particularly conducive to avoiding the interference of authorities, if that was what Aboriginal families wanted. Sometimes it was possible to avoid the Board by simply not opening the front door. One welfare officer wrote in her diary “but they were in!” after her door-knocking had gone unanswered[16].

The archives of the Aborigines Welfare Board are full of letters sent to and received from the Department, teachers and other groups interested in Aboriginal education, with the authors seeking information on the numbers of Aboriginal students in schools, asking about family movements, school transfers, financial assistance and living arrangements. These letters demonstrate that there was confusion between the Board, the Department and
individual schools and other involved groups, and that this may have created an administrative vacuum that Aboriginal families recognised allowed them to, at times, further confuse and therefore manipulate the system. Strategies such as changing birthdates, and misplacing transfer notes and withdrawing children without notice, indicate that Aboriginal parents were cognisant of the institutional structures of the state school system and knew how to negotiate these. It seems that the determination of the government to avoid any sort of centralised approach to managing Aboriginal education – by refusing to acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal children, as an extension of the policy of assimilation and the denial of Aboriginality – actually facilitated Aboriginal resistance to assimilation.

Conclusion

The view of the Victorian government and Education Department on Aboriginal education is revealed in the comments made by the Minister for Education, Lindsay Thompson, at a seminar focussing on Aboriginal education in 1967. Thompson had formerly worked as a teacher, and had previously been the Minister for Housing, a role which meant he was well aware of the problems with Aboriginal housing in Victoria. In his address, Thompson did not concede that the policies and practices of his Ministry, the Education Department, schools, teachers or curriculum had contributed to the lower attainment rates of Aboriginal students. Instead, he stated that “When we move to the reason why the performance of Aboriginal children on the whole has been a little below that of the white population, we come to this question of environmental influence […] [Aboriginal parents] have tended to move around from one part of the state to the another, and the education of their children is affected accordingly”. He also suggested that the lower age at which most Aboriginal children began secondary school could be “directly attributed to the type of life that his parents have led” (Thompson quoted in Dunn and Tatz, 1969, p. viii-ix). Thompson was wrong to suggest that the mobility of Aboriginal families was simply a lifestyle choice made by Aboriginal parents. Families moved to avoid the Board and to maintain kinship and family networks. They also moved because of factors beyond their control. Certainly, mobility affected the schooling of Aboriginal children, yet in failing to recognise that there were multiple and complex factors that influenced mobility, and that these included significant barriers to secure housing and employment, as well as a resistance to government intervention, the Victorian government was also failing to recognise that the policy and practices assimilation were detrimental to the education of Aboriginal children. Thompson’s views echo those expressed in the Inspector’s Reports for Rokeby State School. Frank’s story reveals that ways that the assimilationist ideology encoded in the Aborigines Act 1958 – inherent in the narratives of school curriculum, the views of Department inspectors, the Board’s housing policy and the on-the-ground practices of the Board’s officers – was pervasive in Aboriginal children’s experiences of school in the 1960s. But between the lines of the “interruptions” in his schooling noted by administrators, we can also read the possibility that other motivations, epistemologies, and priorities dictated his and his family’s interactions with the Victorian school system. Only by paying attention to both these strands of evidence can we come close to describing the historical experiences of Frank and other children like him.

Notes

1. Public Records Office Victoria, VPRS 6456 Unit 1. The names of students and their families have been changed. The subjects of this research are connected – along with their families and communities – to Corranderrk on Wurundjeri land, and Lake Tyers on Gunai Kurnai land. Many people from different language groups chose to or were forced to move to these sites. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “Aboriginal people” to refer to those who were living in Rokeby and Orbost in the 1960s.
2. National Archives Australia (hereafter NAA) B357, item 70, 166; B336, item 30.
3. NAA: B357, items 137, 166; B2009 JARDINE.
4. PROV, VPRS 6456 Unit 1; NAA: B357, item 193.
5. PROV, VPRS 6456 Unit 1.
6. PROV, VPRS 640 Unit 3446.
7. NAA: B357, items 160, 193.
8. NAA: B357, item 166.
9. NAA: B357, item 166.
10. NAA: B357, item 166.
11. NAA: B357, item 166.
12. NAA: B357, item 166.
13. McMillan’s role in East Gippsland is subject to ongoing debate, particularly following the work of historian Peter Gardner (1990) has been central in connecting McMillan to the conflicts at the time of settlement. Some in the Gunai Kurnai community of East Gippsland have called for the federal electorate named after McMillan be changed, a move which has since been advocated by the federal member of parliament, Russell Broadbent, see ABC News (2016) “Federal seat of McMillan should be renamed because of links to Aboriginal massacres: MP”, 31 March. See also Bruce Pascoe, 2014, pp. 152-153, and Phillip Pepper, 1985, pp. 18-19.
14. NAA: B337, item 748.
15. NAA: B357, items 27, 137.
16. NAA: B2009 JARDINE.

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Victoria Parliament (1886), “Aborigines’ Protection Act 1886 (Vic)”.


Further reading

**Public Records Office Victoria, Victorian Department of Education, School Records.**

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VPRS 640, Unit 3446.

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