Aboriginal students’ potential to frame the future

Paper presented by
Dr Diane Russell – Assistant Principal (Secondary), Anangu Education Services, Ernabella
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Introduction

Although the retention rate of Aboriginal students has improved over the past fifteen years, it is still significantly less than that for all other students. In fact, very few Aboriginal students are completing twelve full years of schooling. The situation is worse in country schools than in large metropolitan areas. Despite the fact that some Aboriginal students do stay at school and succeed little work has been done to identify what factors have helped those Aboriginal students who have done so. In addition, there is relatively little knowledge about how the various school, home, ability and personal factors are interrelated. The research on which this paper is based (Russell 1997) set out to explore what had helped ten Aboriginal students in various regional and rural centres in South Australia to stay at school and to succeed when so many of their peers had dropped out of school.

Not all of these students were expected to stay at school and succeed at senior secondary. However, by doing so they have learnt many of the secrets of Australian society that will enable them to frame their own futures. We can learn a lot from these ten students, particularly how other Aboriginal students can be assisted to reach their potential so that they have the same choices as non-Indigenous students.

The study

Ten Aboriginal students participated in the research. All lived in regional or rural centres of South Australia, had stayed at school into their post-compulsory years and were achieving a significant degree of success in their studies. In more specific terms, the study sought to answer the following questions about these ‘successful’ Aboriginal students:

• What factors influenced their decision to stay at school?
• What factors have been important in their succeeding at school?
• How are these various factors interrelated?
• To what extent have various factors in the lives of individual students fostered their Aboriginal identities?
• How do these students express their Aboriginality and how do others see them expressing it?
• What is the relationship between the Aboriginal identity of the students and their retention and attainment at school?

For this study, retention related to students staying at school into the post-compulsory years of schooling. Attainment was defined broadly and was seen to have both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. This allowed perceptions of a student’s attainment by the student, his or her peers, family and teachers to be included and also recognised that success in an individual area of the curriculum can, in its own right, be a pre-requisite for post-secondary study or lead to a specialised career. Identity included how one viewed oneself as well as how one was viewed by others, the emphasis being on Aboriginal identity and Aboriginality.
Unstructured but focused interviews were used to obtain most of the data. Each student was interviewed at least once. In addition, significant others (a close family member and a selection of teachers and/or friends nominated by each student) were also interviewed. Additional data about the students came from school copies of students’ school reports with the students’ permission.

NUD*IST was used to analyse the data. Initially this was done for each individual student and ten case studies were written. Individual student data were then conceptualised graphically.

The major ethical considerations were those of anonymity, informed consent and the level of power which knowledge gives the researcher. Anonymity has been ensured by the use of pseudonyms for the names of the student participants and by using general descriptions for their schools and communities. Transcripts of all interviews were checked by interviewees themselves and participants were encouraged to make any changes they wished. Each student participant was provided with a copy of his or her own case study and the accompanying conceptualisations. Each of the following summaries of the case studies is written in the present tense as that is how the students presented themselves at the time of the study.

The students

Bret

Bret is a Year 11 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are more than 600 students at Bret’s school and less than five per cent of them are Aboriginal. The retention rate of Aboriginal students is rather low so the majority of the Aboriginal students are in the early years of high school. The percentage of Aboriginal students at the school varies quite considerably from year to year, and even during the year, as there is a high transiency of Aboriginal families in and out of the town.

The town’s reputation for being extremely racist has spread widely in educational circles. However, according to one of Bret’s cousins who is also a student at Bret’s school, Aboriginal people believe that the inter-racial strife between groups of Aboriginal people in the town is far worse than the racism of non-Aboriginal towards Aboriginal. The problems between groups of the Aboriginal people in the community, and racism from non-Aboriginal people, have permeated the school. In the relatively recent past there have been some serious incidents. For this reason the school now has an AERT and an AEW even though the percentage of Aboriginal students at the school would not normally warrant both of these.

Bret lives with his mother and members of his extended family just out of town. The family community has its own bus and uses that to take all the children to school, and those who have left school to TAFE. Bret’s grandfather is active in ATSIC and one aunt is training to become the director of a local Aboriginal organisation.

Although Bret is not achieving academic success in traditional curriculum areas, he is making a real impact on his school. His personality, his musical talent and his positive focus have helped raise the status of Aboriginal students in the school among the staff, and among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

The school curriculum has been flexible in allowing Bret to undertake studies at three year levels, and concentrate on the performing arts. Bret has been supported in his artistic endeavours by individual instruction and flexible teaching styles. It is clear that Bret will now go on to further his music career.
However, as a Year 8 student at secondary school, it is unlikely that anyone would have foreseen him staying at school and achieving success at post compulsory level. The school Music program and the Music teachers changed that, with the support and encouragement of his immediate and extended family.

**Gina**

Gina is a Year 11 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 400 and 600 students in the school and less than 5 per cent are Aboriginal. Gina lives with her non-Aboriginal mother and her younger brother. She was born here but has spent several years, at different times, in other parts of the country. Before she came back to live with her mother Gina spent time living with an aunt in the same town, and with church friends. During some of this time she had problems with violent behaviour. The various moves usually necessitated her changing schools. Despite this or perhaps because of it Gina makes friends readily with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Despite these ‘negative’ factors, Gina has made a successful transition to senior secondary schooling. She is strong in her Aboriginal identity and has become a leader among the Aboriginal students at her school, even though she is not related to any of the local Aboriginal people. Her cultural heritage comes from her father who lives interstate with the rest of her Aboriginal relatives. Gina has good literacy skills and is achieving academic success in at least some curriculum areas. She also has plans to complete Year 12 and go on to further study, even though she is now pregnant.

**Helen**

Helen is a Year 12 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 400 and 600 students in the school and 10-20 per cent are Aboriginal. Helen is the younger of two girls. Her older sister was more ‘arty’ than Helen but she completed Year 12 and went on to do a traineeship after she left school. Helen’s father was unable to attend secondary school because it would have meant leaving home, but he has worked in a variety of semi-skilled and skilled labouring capacities for his current employer, a federal government body, for many years. Helen’s mother completed Year 10 at school. She was an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) in primary schools for many years, but spent a year at Helen’s current school as well. In more recent times she took time off to work with a federal government department, and now has a position with the local office of an Aboriginal organisation sponsored by the federal government.

Although Helen has had a lot of support from home and school, she has still had to overcome difficulties in her efforts to stay at school and succeed academically. Most of these difficulties have been associated with her Aboriginality. She has learnt positive ways of dealing with racism, to the extent that she has been able to help others to do the same. In fact, Helen is seen as a role model for other Aboriginal students in the school. There have also been some significant changes in attitudes since she came to the school. Teachers and non-Aboriginal students are beginning to lose their perception that Aboriginal students cannot succeed.

Helen has set her sights on being politically active in Aboriginal affairs as a journalist. Her Year 12 subjects were chosen with this in mind. Until Year 12 Helen did not have difficulty with any of her school work. However, she is persisting and making good use of the personnel and physical resources available to her.
Larry

Larry is a Year 11 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are over 600 students at his school and less than 5 per cent are Aboriginal. However, the actual number of Aboriginal students at the school fluctuates because there is particularly high transiency of Aboriginal families in and out of the town. The majority of Aboriginal students are in Years 8 and 9. Of those that were with Larry in Year 8, only a few are still attending school.

Larry has a younger brother who is still in primary school. He also has an older sister who is part way through a book-keeping traineeship with Aboriginal Health. She has her own flat but whenever Larry’s mother goes away for a few days his sister comes home to look after the family. Larry’s father is an invalid pensioner, crippled with arthritis, and has been unable to work for many years. Larry doesn’t ever remember him working. His mother left high school very early and was married soon afterwards.

When Larry first came to secondary school his attendance was not particularly good; it took him some time to decide to actively resist the negative influences and pressures of his Aboriginal peers. It is most likely the encouragement he received from his parents and some of the school staff, plus the role model of his sister, still studying, helped him make the decision to stay at school. Once the decision was made Larry began to work more consistently at school, aiming to pass so that he would have more options in the future. Particularly in Maths, Larry took the initiative to fill in some of the gaps in his earlier learning. He is now succeeding in all areas, although he is still rather shy and tentative of asking for assistance, believing that teachers should take the initiative in helping him.

Over the years at secondary school Larry has been conscious of racism from both students and teachers. He discusses Aboriginal issues only with some teachers, and never in front of the class, but he does take advantage of opportunities teachers provide to learn more about such issues. He and his family are actively participating in group efforts to reconstruct some of their cultural heritage.

Lisa

Lisa is a Year 11 student at an R-12 school in a rural centre. Approximately 30 per cent of the students in the school are Aboriginal and there are between 200 and 300 secondary students. Lisa has lived in this community all her life. Her mother grew up a short distance from the town and attended the old school. She now works as an AEW at the local church school. Lisa’s father spent his early years in an Aboriginal community, then moved around before settling here. He works for an Aboriginal organisation as a handyman and drives the kindergarten bus. Lisa has an older brother who left school in Year 11. After completing a traineeship he now works in the hospitality industry and is continuing his studies at the local TAFE campus. Lisa is one of four Aboriginal girls in Year 11. All four of them get on very well with each other, although Lisa has one special friend in the group. Lisa gets on well with non-Aboriginal students as well and has not been particularly troubled by racism at school. Sport has been very helpful here.

Although she has not definitely settled on a career to pursue, Lisa anticipates that whatever she does do will require further study. She believes that this will be made easier if she completes Year 12, which she intends to do. Her mother supports this view and actively encourages her not to be put off by others who are jealous of her success.

Lisa is an active learner, prepared to ask for assistance and put in the effort required to succeed. She makes good use of the personnel, physical and curriculum resources available to her at and through the school.
Lucy

Lucy is a Year 11 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 300 and 400 students at the school and 10-20 per cent are Aboriginal. Lucy lives at home with her parents, her older sister, a younger brother and sister, and her nephew. Lucy’s parents first met when they were at school together in a rural centre some distance away. Her mother finished Year 10, which was the highest level she could go to without leaving home at that time. Lucy’s older sister was born there. Soon after that the family moved here where Lucy and her younger brother and sister were born. Lucy’s older sister left school during Year 12.

Lucy’s mother is a cleaner and Lucy works with her after school. Her father now works in a professional capacity with a government department, but he worked in several other occupations before that. After leaving school as soon as he could he worked on a sheep station and then with the highways. When he moved here he first worked for another government department before he left to become a field worker with one of the Aboriginal organisations. He was promoted within that organisation and subsequently within another Aboriginal organisation. From there he transferred to his present position.

Lucy has had both support and pressure from home to stay at school. She feels a responsibility to her parents, particularly her father, to do so. She has also compared herself with those of her Aboriginal peers who have already dropped out of school or intend to do so. She doesn’t like the alternatives so is determined to finish Year 12, undertake further study, and get a good job in a caring profession. Lucy’s academic potential to achieve her ambitions has been recognised by her teachers since she was at primary school.

At school Lucy likes to work with other Aboriginal students if she has the opportunity, but is also comfortable working with non-Aboriginal students as there were not many Aboriginal students at her primary school. Now most of her Aboriginal peers have left school Lucy has developed a fairly independent learning style. In addition to having ability, Lucy also works hard, both at school and at home. Perceived racism from a few teachers has affected her subject choice and possibly her achievement in some subjects, but not to any great extent.

Only Lucy’s father is Aboriginal, but Lucy identifies strongly as Aboriginal and has made an effort to learn and to use aspects of her cultural heritage in a positive way.

Marcia

Marcia is a Year 12 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 400 and 600 students in her school, of whom between 10-20 per cent are Aboriginal. Marcia has lived in this town all her life, and went to her local primary school before she came to secondary school. Marcia is the eldest of three girls. Her older sister lives at home and has a young child. Marcia’s next sister is in Year 11 and plans to complete Year 12 and then go on to study at university to be a nurse. Marcia’s mother stayed at home until the youngest started school, then she went to TAFE and did a certificate course before obtaining her current position as an aged-care worker. Marcia’s father is a cook. Both work for the same local Aboriginal organisation.

In the past, Marcia has played a lot of sport and was very good at it, being selected in primary school teams to play in competitions away from home. More recently she has given up sport because of study commitments and injury. However, she is still very much an outdoor kind of person. She did not enjoy either of her work experience placements, partly because they were both indoors.
Although Marcia has had strong support and encouragement from her parents and a special group of Aboriginal friends at school, Marcia’s main driving force to stay at school and succeed is her belief that it is important for her to make something of herself, both for herself and for others. She feels that as a Police Officer she will be a role model for other Aboriginal people.

Marcia’s Aboriginal identity is very strong and at school she expresses aspects of it in her work whenever she can. Her favourite subject is Aboriginal Studies. Marcia still gets upset about racism. This has affected her attainment in the few instances where she has perceived racism on the part of the teacher.

Nicolas
Nicolas is a Year 11 student at an R-12 school in a rural centre. The school has less than 200 secondary students and there are few Aboriginal students at the school, between zero and five percent. This has remained fairly constant over the years, as evidenced by old school photographs, and reflects the number of Aboriginal families in the community. Nicolas has lived in this community all his life and has been one of only two Aboriginal students in his year level since beginning school. Now he is the only one. He has two younger sisters who attend the same school. Nicolas’ father has a job which takes him away from the family during the week and his mother has not worked regularly since she had the children. However, she completed Year 12 at school and was training to be a kindergarten teacher before she married.

Nicolas is recognised as having a great deal of natural ability, both academically and in the sporting arena. Despite encouragement from his teachers and his mother, pressure from his mother, and a desire to pursue a career, Nicolas has never worked very hard at school. However, he is recognised as a natural leader among his peers and enjoys school as a place to be with his friends. Nicolas will not be staying at school to complete Year 12 because he has won a clerical traineeship with DEET.

Nicolas has never had the opportunity to spend much time with Aboriginal peers because there are so few in the community. It appears that he had not thought of himself as being Aboriginal until relatively recently, certainly not in the contexts of most other Aboriginal students his age who live where there are more Aboriginal people. A variety of occurrences have facilitated his recent exploration of his Aboriginal identity.

Sally
Sally is a Year 11 student at an R-12 school in a rural centre, one of four Aboriginal girls in her year level. Thirty percent of all students at the school are Aboriginal, but there are only five Aboriginal students in the senior secondary years despite the fact that the secondary component of the school has between 200 and 300 students. The school has a Social Justice Coordinator, an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT) and three Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs).

Sally’s mother was born in an Aboriginal community not far from here and has many relatives living in the town. She did not get a lot of schooling because her father was required to move around with his job. She eventually left school around Year 9 and did not think about work until her children had started school. She did a course at TAFE and is now a secretary with an Aboriginal organisation. Sally’s father was brought up by an aunt and his family come from a different area. He met Sally’s mother when they both lived in the state’s capital city. The family has lived in this town for five years. They originally came here for a holiday to visit relatives, but decided to stay. Sally’s father works for
another Aboriginal organisation.

Sally has an older brother and a younger sister. Her brother left school after completing Year 11 because he had not done well enough to go on to Year 12. He now has a CDEP traineeship and lives with an aunt. Sally’s younger sister won a scholarship and is at a private school in Adelaide.

Sally has always had to work very hard at school to keep up with her peers. She has done this enthusiastically throughout her time at school and does not appear to have really recognised how hard she has had to work. Sally has been supported and encouraged in her efforts by her parents and extra tuition by some staff but, most importantly, by a special group of like-minded peers. In turn, she has supported and encouraged the others in the group. As a result of her efforts, Sally is now achieving at a higher level than might have been expected from her earlier achievements.

Sally has a great deal of sporting ability and has had plenty of opportunity to use this at school, including in extra-curricula activities. Her teachers feel that the success she has achieved in this area has been more significant in her retention at school than any academic achievements might have been. Sport has also provided Sally with opportunities to display her pride in her Aboriginal identity.

Toby
Toby is a Year 12 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 300 and 400 students at his school, and 10-20 per cent of these are Aboriginal. The majority of the Aboriginal students are in Years 8 to 10 but this year there is a significant group of Aboriginal boys in Year 11. Toby has four brothers. He and his three younger brothers live at home with their mother. Toby’s father died when he was quite young and Toby cannot remember much about him. His mother has remained single since then. One of Toby’s brothers is only a year behind him at school, and the youngest two are still at primary school. Toby’s older brother stayed at school and completed Year 12. He even repeated Year 12 so that he could get better marks but has still been unable to find employment as an artist, which is what he really wants to do. At present he works as an assistant to a tradesperson and paints in his spare time, supplementing his income by selling the occasional painting. Toby’s mother has worked most of her adult life, except when the boys were young. She left school in Year 11 and went straight into a job as a shop assistant. She has also worked as a cleaner, an AEW and is now back cleaning.

Toby has had behaviour problems right through school. Most of these seem to have been inappropriate responses to students and teachers for what he has perceived as racist comments or behaviour. It appears that the school administration have been particularly understanding and forgiving about these because they have allowed him to stay at school when most students over the age of compulsion who had behaved like Toby would have been excluded. Toby has reacted to comments that he really should leave school by becoming more determined that he will be the one who decides when he leaves.

Toby has friends among his non-Aboriginal peers and, apart from associating with other Aboriginal students at break times, has not really associated with other Aboriginal students in class. This is just as well because there are now very few in his year level. In fact, Toby has a very independent learning style. In Year 12 Toby has continued to have success in those subjects where he has a good relationship with the teachers but has done little or nothing in other subjects. Toby wants to fulfil the requirements of the SACE so may return to school for another year.
Significant findings

Much of the data produced supported previous findings that Aboriginal students’ retention and attainment are closely related to students’ goal directed values and intrinsic motivation and the support and encouragement they have received from their families that can be reinforced in schools by the provision of stimulating and supportive learning environments. The data also indicated that:

- factors related to the Aboriginal students’ retention and attainment are intrinsically linked and that the links between the various factors are bi-directionally causal, part of a positive spiral that intensifies at students progress through secondary school, rather than correlational as had previously been thought (Finn 1989);
- Aboriginal students’ security in their own identities is also important in their retention and attainment and specialist support staff in schools play a significant role in this.

One outcome of the analysis of the data was the identification of three specific groups of students. This had not been anticipated given the small sample of students who participated in the study.

The three groups of students

- **Expected stayers** - students who either had a history of being academically successful or who stood out from their Aboriginal peers in junior secondary school because of their desire to learn, their positive attitude to school work and their motivation to pursue a career that required further study.

- **Possible stayers** - highly motivated students who were academically competent but less academically successful than the expected stayers, and students who had recognised academic potential but who were less motivated than the expected stayers.

- **Unexpected stayers** - students who had stayed at school and intended to complete Year 12 despite a series of ‘problems’ that would have led most students to leave school early.

More specifically, all the **expected stayers**:

- had good literacy skills, positive self-concepts, positive academic self-concepts, were intrinsically motivated and did homework regularly;
- were described as being determined and persistent and said they were confident or were able to encourage or push themselves;
- saw a strong relationship between school and work, had chosen a possible career and had benefited from the work experience organised by the school;
- had received more consistent support from their immediate families than that received by any other group of students;
- appreciated extra academic support, both in the classroom and outside it and valued teacher contact with their parents and teachers who took a personal interest in them as individuals.
- had been part of a special group of Aboriginal students in Years 8-10 and three of the four had a special like-minded friend.

The **possible stayers** shared some of the above characteristics whereas the **unexpected stayers** shared very few of them.
Implications of the findings for schools and individual teachers

The importance of a supportive group of students
As this study has demonstrated, many Aboriginal students, particularly in their junior secondary years, benefit from having a support group of other Aboriginal students to help them to stay at school and to achieve. This presents a challenge for schools - to recognise early in their junior secondary schooling those Aboriginal students who work well together and then to keep them together as much as possible and for as long as possible. These are not necessarily close friendship groups or ability groups but groups of Aboriginal students who have positive attitudes towards school and learning. The groups should not be too big but big enough so that if one or two students do drop out there is still a core left to continue.

The right teachers for Aboriginal students
The data suggest that the quality of teaching is more important for the unexpected and possible stayers than for the expected stayers. The unexpected stayers identified specific examples of ‘good teaching practice’ as having been important to them. For example, individual teachers had been willing to negotiate with students, provided students with help without having to have been asked for it, used a variety of teaching strategies and developed special teaching strategies where necessary. These teachers had also explained work requirements clearly, facilitated opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills, built on what the students already knew and applied gentle pressure. Consequently, Fanshawe’s (1976) description of an effective teacher of adolescent Aboriginal students remains as relevant today as it was then.

[T]he teacher who will effectively facilitate the growth of adolescent Aboriginals is likely to be warm, encouraging, demanding, stimulating, responsible and systematic; …he will have a positive attitude to his Aboriginal students, valuing them as people, respecting their culture, being free from racial prejudice, and being confident in their ability to achieve demanding but realistic goals set for them; …he will be knowledgeable not only about the subjects he teaches, but also about Aboriginals, Aboriginal adolescents and Aboriginal culture; …he will be a clever strategist, fitting his wide range of instructional techniques to differences in the learning styles of his students; and…he will play with proficiency the role of facilitating the learning of Aboriginal students, being an innovator, and work in harmony with the Aboriginal community and the co-workers in his educating team (Fanshawe 1976: 19-20).

Therefore, wherever possible, Aboriginal students should be taught by the best junior secondary teachers in the school. This will maximise their chances for succeeding and staying at school.

Training and development for teachers
Given that teacher relationships with Aboriginal students appear to be so crucial to the students’ retention and attainment, all schools need to continually inservice staff on how to:
• Be accepting, tolerant and understanding of Aboriginal students’ ‘difference’.
• Be sensitive to cultural issues relating to Aboriginal students.
• Recognise the subtleties of covert racism.
• Deal with racism in the classroom and in the school yard.
• Support students to use existing school structures to deal with racism themselves.
• Recognise that identity crises which Aboriginal students may experience during adolescence are likely to be more complex than those which non-Aboriginal students may experience.
Use the curriculum to make Aboriginal students feel included.
Ensure Aboriginal students participate in classroom learning activities.
Build positive working relationships with Aboriginal students.

In addition to acquiring the skills listed above, concerned teachers of Aboriginal students can assist them to stay at school and to succeed by behaving in the following ways:

- Have high but realistic expectations of Aboriginal students and support them to achieve these.
- Utilise small group activities where the students can interact with each other. This can strengthen the group and facilitate both collaborative and competitive learning.
- Facilitate and support Aboriginal students’ desires to work with other Aboriginal students by allowing them to work alongside their Aboriginal peers when group work is not appropriate.
- Provide assistance, reassurance and encouragement to the group and to individual Aboriginal students without them having to ask for it.
- Encourage students to make cultural input or look at topics from alternative perspectives.
- Recognise and foster any special potential and/or goal orientation of individual Aboriginal students or groups of students.
- Consult Aboriginal students about incorporating Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.
- Facilitate Aboriginal students’ opportunities to learn about Aboriginal issues.
- Utilise a career focus that includes specific opportunities for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal students need to be shown that there are real opportunities for them, both in the mainstream and in specific roles where their Aboriginality is important, especially in their local communities. Otherwise Aboriginal students will look no further than “the relationship between their social and cultural status and their [expected] potential for success after leaving school” (LeCompte & Priessle 1992: 841).
- Make full use of the school and/or district AEWs and AERTs in planning units of work and in curriculum activities.
- Actively support Aboriginal students’ participation in any special activities organised by AEWs and/or AERTs.
- Volunteer to work in the school’s Homework Centre and/or make yourself available for additional assistance outside normal class time.
- Utilise a variety of teaching / learning strategies.
- Make positive contact with the students’ parents early in the school year.
- Facilitate the moves of enthusiastic Aboriginal students to resist negative influences from their peers.
- Take an interest in the students as individuals.

Conclusion

Given appropriate family support, Aboriginal students who feel comfortable at secondary school because they have supportive teachers in their junior secondary years are more likely to stay at school and succeed. Their successes may not necessarily occur in the traditional academic sense. However, whatever the level of their academic outcomes, those Aboriginal students who do stay at school into their post-compulsory years will be in a much better position to frame their own futures because they will have learnt many of the ‘whitefella’ secrets necessary for this.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


