What Educators Can Do to Help Aboriginal Students Stay at School and Succeed

Dr Diane Russell

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ABSTRACT

Educators can have a powerful influence on both the immediate and long-term educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. This paper draws on personal research into school and teacher factors that can support the retention and attainment of Aboriginal students, and is part of a larger study which identified a variety of factors which influenced ten successful senior secondary Aboriginal students to stay at school and succeed. These research findings are corroborated by more recent research in South Australia. However, a large scale Western Australian study failed to identify two of the factors my study had and possible reasons for these significant omissions are discussed. This indicates possible future directions for research into improving Aboriginal education outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

When I began my PhD research (Russell 1997, 2000) in the mid 1990s the participation, retention and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all levels of schooling had started to improve (DEET 1995; Ainley 1994). In South Australia retention to Year 12 had improved from 10 per cent in 1982 (Marovich 1992) to 27 per cent in 1992 (EDSA 1992) but there still remained "… unacceptable differences in Aboriginal students' schooling experiences in terms of attendance, participation, attainment and retention" (EDSA 1993: 7). Both Watts (1981, 1982, 1983) and McInernery (1991) had identified a range of reasons for this outcome. However, little work had been done to identify what helped Aboriginal students stay at school and succeed (Scott 1987) and even less to determine how various home, school, ability and personality factors were interrelated (Poole 1983: 152) which is what my research focussed on.

Although the retention of Indigenous students has steadily improved since then it is still well behind that for non-Indigenous students. For example, in the late 1990s it was 30 per cent compared with over 70 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians (Katu Kalpa 2000: 1.9). By 2004 this had increased to 40 per cent but Indigenous students were still half as likely to continue to Year 12 as non-Indigenous students because of a big drop off in retention between years 10 and 11 (SCRGSP

2005: 3.14). This means the attainment levels of Indigenous students are also much lower than those of their non-Indigenous peers. For example, in South Australia, in 1996, 38 per cent of Indigenous students who started their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) in Year 11 completed it (Rigney et al 1998: 3). By 2004 this figure had improved at a national level to 55 per cent (SCRGSP 2005) but in South Australia this was still significantly less than the 75 per cent completion rate for all students in 1996 (Rigney et al 1998: 3).

The retention and attainment figures cited above represent considerable progress but also indicate that there is still a lot more to be done if the social disadvantage these figures represent is to be overcome. In his foreword to a recently published report that reviews contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes (Mellor & Corrigan 2004), Professor Paul Hughes points out that we still do not know enough about improving Indigenous students' learning outcomes. Mellor & Corrigan (2004) concluded that two of the reasons for this were: much of the research in the area of Indigenous education has focussed predominantly on 'problems'; and there is a lack of Indigenous voices in the research. Given that my research focussed on success factors rather than problems and included Indigenous voices, my findings are possibly still as relevant today as they were ten years ago. However, because my findings are nearly ten years old, they need to be corroborated by more recent research.

This paper looks briefly at the part of my research which indicates ways schools and educators can help Aboriginal students stay at school and succeed, indicating other studies which have identified similar supportive factors. This is followed by a discussion of two findings of my research which were not identified in a large scale Western Australian study (Partington et al 2000; Harslett et al 2000) which focussed on characteristics of teachers who are successful in helping Aboriginal students succeed at school. The possible reasons why these factors did not emerge in this particular study are identified and this indicates some possible future directions for research into how schools can support the retention and attainment of Aboriginal students.

ABORIGINAL STUDENTS CAN SUCCEED

My study involved seven students undertaking Stage 1 of the SACE and three students undertaking Stage 2 of the SACE who were succeeding in their studies. All students attended schools in regional or rural areas of South Australia because country students are likely to experience greater disadvantage than their metropolitan counterparts. My literature review had established that the interrelationships between the various factors shown to be related to Aboriginal students' retention,

attainment and identity were complex and largely unknown. Also, psychometric analyses of grouped data may absorb individual differences between students for whom various motivational factors are influential (McInerney 1991: 167). For these reasons, I chose a qualitative approach to my data collection.

Each student was interviewed at length at least once. In addition, a variety of significant others (a close family member and a selection of teachers and/or friends) nominated by each student were also interviewed. These multiple unstructured but focussed interviews provided a large amount of rich qualitative data about each student. Additional data about the students came from school copies of students' school reports and school administrators provided demographic data about their particular school. The data were analysed using NUD*IST for both individual students and for the whole data set. Ten individual descriptive case studies were written, individual student data were conceptualised graphically and cross case patterns were identified. Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms for the names of the students and by the use of general descriptions for their schools and communities.

Seven school and teacher factors were identified as being important in supporting the ten students to stay at school and succeed:

- a supportive group of students
- positive teacher-student relationships
- high expectations
- flexibility in teaching and assessment
- recognising when students need help
- being sensitive to cultural issues
- dealing consistently with racism.

Each of these factors is briefly discussed below, using the voices of the some of the students, their parents and educators who participated in my study. Recent research that has identified similar factors is referred to where appropriate.

A supportive group of students

My students identified that having a support group of other like-minded Aboriginal students to help them to stay at school and to achieve, particularly in their junior secondary years, is really important.

Such a group has also been recognised as a factor in the success of Aboriginal students at senior secondary school (Rigney et al 1998: 12).

Helen's AITAS tutor explains how such grouping of students can reduce isolation:

> The group that Helen came through with … all had a strong sense of doing their work and being positive about school … it meant that they weren't isolated as the only Aboriginal student in one class trying to battle on their own …

Lisa's Home Economics teacher emphasises the importance of moral support provided by the group:

> In Year 8, Lisa, [her best friend] and a few other Aboriginal girls were placed in the same care group … We kept them together … The support that these girls give each other is just incredible. It's more the moral support, just the security of having someone like minded there.

Sally's Maths teacher explains how such support can reduce negative influences:

> She and [her best friend] … have tended to alienate themselves from the less inclined Aboriginal group. As a result they have continued to succeed.

And Lucy talks about how a group of students can support each other academically:

> In Year 8 and 9 we were all together … We supported each other ... We all helped each other get through. Then they split us up … The subjects we were in by ourselves sort of went down.

Keeping positive like-minded students together for as long as possible is one strategy schools can use to support Aboriginal students who want to stay at school and succeed. It also helps in the development of teacher – student relationships.

Positive teacher – student relationships

The importance of positive teacher – student relationships for the success of Aboriginal students has been well documented over many years (Fanshawe 1976, 1989; Malin 1998; Rigney et al 1998; Simpson, Munns & Clancy 2000; Partington et al 2000).

Nicolas's Australian Studies teacher thought that this was:

… the single most important factor in whether he succeeds or doesn't succeed. If he can't form a successful working relationship with a teacher then he doesn't seem to do very well in that subject.

Lucy also commented on the relationship between academic success and teacher – student relationships:

If you don't like someone you won't listen to them, you know. If he's talking you just forget everything. If someone doesn't like you, you know they don't like you. They don't come up and help you; more often, they just let you go. It's very important to like your teacher.

Larry says that the teachers should take the initiative in establishing these relationships:

It's up to the teachers. If the teachers get on good with them then they'll probably help them.

However, as Munns (1998) has pointed out, these relationships need to be formed at both a personal and a pedagogical level in order to support Aboriginal students' academic success. This includes having high expectations of students.

High expectations

The importance of having high expectations of Aboriginal students has also been well documented (Fanshawe 1976, 1989; McInerney 1991; Walsh 1993; Rigney, Rigney & Hughes 2000; Harslett et al 2000).

Larry's English teacher has been personally challenged in this respect:

I try to look at my expectations. It is easy to expect that Aboriginal kids won't go to Year 12.

However, according to Helen's AITAS tutor, sometimes it is the students themselves who challenge the teachers to raise their expectations:

… every now and again you get a significant group of students...that seems to have a better work ethic … doing work against teacher expectations and comments about being

'white' for doing it ... It raised teacher expectations as well, I think.

Then there are some students that need to be pushed. Toby's friend who works in the school library commented:

> Sometimes you need to push him. I get on his back and help him along, but that's what all kids need … He can pass but he just needs a bit of pushing now and again.

However, expectations need to be realistic and this may involve teachers being flexible in how they teach and assess.

Flexibility in teaching and assessment

The importance of teachers being flexible in how they teach and assess has been less well documented as a support factor in Aboriginal students' success although Fanshawe (1976, 1989) did allude to it. More recently, Aboriginal students' use of the flexibilities in the SACE (Cormack and Comber 1988), teachers appreciating students' differences and needs (Partington et al 2000) and programming work at appropriate levels (Harslett et al 2000) have been identified as facilitating factors.

Both Helen's Hospitality teacher and Lucy's English teacher have recognised the importance of flexibility in assessment:

> Some of the assessment was negotiated to be oral and she did this in the homework centre after school.

> I haven't had her speaking in front of the whole class. In fact, many of the girls refuse to speak in front of the boys ... So I had them speaking in their little groups. She did that well.

Then there are students with specific learning styles who need teachers to adapt their teaching approaches to allow them to learn. Bret's year 12 Music teacher describes how she helped Bret learn music notation:

> All I could do was give him the information, giving him a big blast of it for about 30 seconds, and then give him time for it to sink in. As soon as I see him fidgeting or his eyes wandering I stop straight away. I give him all the stuff verbally. If I get him to write it down he doesn't do very well at all. Verbally he can answer the questions straight away.

He actually remembers it that way.

Sometimes the teaching and assessment can be incorporated into the curriculum in a different way as occurred for Sally:

> We are doing this Nunga News for the Aboriginal students in the school, and for our English class, us four Aboriginal students. Us girls organised it, just the Year 11s, so there was a newsletter that was up-to-date. We all help and put things in it. We organise it. We get assessed on it ... it goes out to all the Aboriginal students, even Reception.

Then there are those teachers who put in extra time to work with students individually. Bret's aunt refers to one such teacher:

> The teacher puts aside a lot of time and energy to work with him, even after hours and at lunch time.

Many Aboriginal students need extra help and it is up to their teachers to work out how best they can provide this. However, the first step is recognising who needs the extra help.

Recognising when students need help

Most of my students felt that it was important for teachers to offer help without having to be asked for because they are often embarrassed about asking for the help in class. Some schools have provided structures for this to occur for students at risk of not completing their SACE (Cormack & Comber 1998).

Lucy is one of those embarrassed about having to ask for help:

> With me, I'm shamed to put my hand up, so if I don't understand it the first time the teacher just goes straight past you. Mostly I get the next door neighbour to ask for me … when they come close I'll ask. Most teachers know who needs help and who doesn't, but the other ones just go straight past you.

Both Larry's and Sally's English teachers developed their own strategies:

> The Aboriginal kids are a priority because I know that they are less likely to ask if you have got

a whole group of kids around you or you are talking to other kids … so I sort of check on them at the beginning of the lesson.

Her group sit very close to me and they know they can have one-to-one with me across the desk any time they like ... It works quite well. That kind of interaction seems very important for their learning style.

This means teachers need to be sensitive to cultural issues such as 'shame' with their Aboriginal students.

Being sensitive to cultural issues

The importance of teachers being sensitive to cultural issues has also been identified as being a success factor for Aboriginal students (Allen 1989; Harslett et al 2000; Rigney, Rigney & Hughes 1998; Partington et al 2000).

Larry's English teacher describes one way of ensuring the curriculum is culturally inclusive for Aboriginal students:

… in Year 10 I had a separate program for the Aboriginal kids. They did the same things as the rest of the class but I used Aboriginal texts – films, short stories, poems – to ensure that it was inclusive of them ... They can see that Aboriginal people were writing about their own experience and recording their own history, which is really important.

According to Toby's Youth Strategy Officer:

The two teachers he gets on with have lived and taught here for quite some time so they have an understanding of the issues for Aboriginal students.

However, being sensitive to cultural issues can be important at a more personal level as Helen explains:

I can remember [one teacher] who always used to expect eye contact. I used to find that really difficult, especially with someone I didn't know that well. They'd always say, "Look at me when I'm talking to you." ... I didn't really feel comfortable doing that.

Lack of awareness of cultural issues can often be perceived by students as racism, something

few Aboriginal students can get away from because it is common in the broader community and often brought into the school (Rigney et al 1998). Therefore, it is important that at all levels schools deal consistently with racism.

Dealing consistently with racism

Apart from recognising that racism can come from teachers as well as students (Rigney et al 1998), it is important to recognise that unless racism at all levels is dealt with it can easily become institutionalised within the school.

Helen's Hospitality teacher is aware of racism among her colleagues:

> Some of the teachers are racist. It's partly lack of awareness and understanding. Everyone has their prejudices. It's a matter of becoming aware and opening your mind a bit. I guess some people feel threatened by that and won't reflect on that in case they find there is something wrong with themselves.

However, even if teachers try to change their behaviour, there can still be problems as Marcia's AITAS tutor points out:

> There's problems in that class because of racism and racist behaviour by the teacher in the past … with other students, but [she's] known about it ... and [she hasn't] seen a change to indicate that [the teacher's] not like that any more.

According to Lucy's English teacher, it is important for teachers to work out how to deal with racism in texts so that Aboriginal students are empowered:

> The book we read at the beginning was Gary Cruse's *Strange Object* ... Before I actually read the class the book I picked out the parts I thought might cause problems for Lucy, and I asked her about them. She told me to go ahead and read it all out, not to miss them out.

Then there is the perception of racism by teachers being institutionalised. Marcia tells of one of her experiences:

> In Year 10 there was this teacher that picked on Aboriginal students. Sometimes we thought it was just because we were black, and it'd be right, but the principal would say it wasn't true. It

was like we were telling lies.

Toby finds racism a very personal issue but believes that it should not be allowed to persist:

> I try not to worry about it, or let it get to me, but ... you just can't help what colour you are,
> or how you're different to other people. It's just the way it goes, but people have got to
> learn not to be racist.

One strategy Aboriginal students use to try to stand up against racist harassment or covert racism is to stick together. Marcia explains:

> Not in front of you, they won't say anything … Sometimes you hear white kids when they talk to
> other friends. Also, "Shut up you black tribe", and things like that; just names, to tease us. All of us
> Aboriginal students, we just stick together. We feel stronger together.

Involving Aboriginal students in working through racist harassment issues can be empowering for them and other Aboriginal students. Helen's mother describes one such event:

> Helen didn't want an apology because she didn't think the girl would mean it. She wanted someone
> to sit down with the girl and tell her why Aboriginal students have the opportunity to have tutors ...
> So they had that culture lesson, including a video and apparently [the other girl's] dad wanted some
> more. Then they had a class photo taken and Helen and this other girl were sitting next to each
> other.

One of the reasons why all of my students had stayed at school and succeeded was because parents, individual teachers and school leaders had helped them to deal with racism so that they no longer over-reacted to it. This meant that they did not get into trouble when harassed and were able to report incidents of harassment so that these could be followed up.

DISCUSSION

As indicated above, all seven of the school and teachers factors identified in my research as being important in supporting Aboriginal students to stay at school and succeed have been corroborated by other more recent research. Several references have been made to the 'Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students' joint Edith Cowan University and Education Department of Western Australia research project (Harslett et al 2000; Partington et al 2000). As part of this research project, 'good' teachers were identified by the Aboriginal students and then these teachers were interviewed about

their teaching of Aboriginal students. From the interview data Harlsett et al (2000) identified four categories of responses: pedagogy, relationships, managing student behaviour and understandings (in order of relative frequency) which supported Aboriginal students' success at school.

Five of my seven categories easily fit into three of the four categories identified by Harslett et al (2000). For example, having high expectations, being flexible and recognising when students need help are all elements of pedagogy. Good pedagogy is important for all students. However, teachers of Aboriginal students need to be able to re-invent universal principles of good teaching "within the context of students' cultural and home backgrounds and student strengths and needs" (Harslett et al 2000: 43). My participants would agree. However, they identified two other factors that they believe are also important in supporting Aboriginal students to stay at school and succeed.

Firstly, teachers and students identified a supportive group of students, kept together by the school. This presents a challenge for schools – to recognise in their middle years of schooling those Aboriginal students who are positively inclined toward school and work well together, and then to keep them together as much as possible and for as long as possible. The groups should be large enough so that if one or two students do drop out there is still a core left to continue and support each other.

In addition, teachers, students and family members felt it was important for all educators in the school to consistently deal with racism at individual, class and school levels. This needs to be considered separately from the issue of student behaviour management which, from my perspective, is more a pedagogical issue. If teachers are racist they will not be able to establish positive working relationships with students or deal with racism in their classes. From the perspective of the participants in my research, this means that Aboriginal students will not engage in learning in their classes, that is, if they even attend those classes. Although one would not expect the 'good' teachers of Aboriginal students to be racist, it is surprising that these western Australian teachers (Harslett et al 2000; Partington et al 2000; Simpson, Munns & Clancy 2000) did not mention the need to deal with racism in their classes which involves more than being culturally sensitive.

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this paper indicates that in addition to using good pedagogical practices, teachers need to accept that Aboriginal students might perceive racism where none is intended and be prepared to look at themselves first. Then they need to think about how they will address issues in the curriculum that could upset or exclude Aboriginal students. Finally, individual teachers and

school leaders need to critically examine what is going on in the classrooms and the broader school context, and do their best to eliminate racism and facilitate Aboriginal students supporting each other. Only then will the chances of Aboriginal students staying at school and succeeding be maximised. However, further research needs to be done on how dealing with racism and structuring classes so that Aboriginal students can support each other relate to pedagogical practices in terms of improving Aboriginal student outcomes.

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