

“Smooth seas never made a skilled sailor”: Indigenous students’ academic buoyancy and the locale of the learner

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This article explores how academic buoyancy, a concept from the educational psychology literature, can be used to understand the experiences of Indigenous secondary students’ schooling. Academic buoyancy refers to students’ ability to overcome everyday challenges of schooling. In this project, 11 Indigenous secondary students in a remote school shared their experiences of school and how they developed a range of capabilities to overcome the everyday challenges. Factors often seen as cultural impediments for Indigenous students, such as the “shame factor”, can be viewed as agentic attempts by Indigenous students to develop new capacities, such as a strategy to deal with the fear of failure. It is through these attempts that students develop strategies to negotiate the classroom without giving up their own cultural positions. This article extends earlier research on resilience to focus on the development of academically buoyant capacities that allow students to better navigate the complexities at the locale of the remote Indigenous learner.

Keywords: Indigenous students, cultural interface, academic buoyancy, locale of the learner, Indigenous education, remote schooling

Introduction

Indigenous students’ schooling is shaped by many layers of outside influence. From the decisions that policy-makers, regional offices, school leaders and teachers make; to families’ histories of and engagement in formal schooling; to changing curricula: these factors shape Indigenous students’ experiences and how the students are represented by those around them, long before they step foot in the classroom. The field of Indigenous educational research has helped to show how these influences give shape to the locale of the Indigenous learner. The current research, reported here, shifts the focus from the outside to the students, exploring more closely how students develop the capabilities they need to successfully navigate their locale and to move through the everyday challenges of schooling.

The *locale of the learner* draws on Nakata’s theory of the cultural interface, a guiding framework for this study. As Nakata (2007, p. 10) describes, Indigenous learners are “already variously constituted and positioned discursively to take up the knowledge which has inscribed their position”. Many Indigenous students are familiar with Indigenous practices and ways of thinking, talking, sharing language, and relating to others. They are also familiar with Western epistemologies, through everyday living and social and cultural practices. The tension of moving between the two—“a transforming process of endless instances of learning and forgetting, of melding and keeping separate, of discarding and taking up, of

continuity and discontinuity" (Nakata, 2007, p. 10)—gives form to the locale in which learning takes place.

By turning the focus to students' agency, we can better see how Indigenous students navigating the school system are presented with unique challenges. Agency can be defined as an educational outcome that places autonomy, individual development, self-determination and self-direction central to learning (Crockett, 2023). It describes the ability of a learner to identify valued goals and desired outcomes and to proactively, purposefully and effectively pursue those goals and outcomes (Chuter, 2020). For Indigenous students, learner agency becomes another strategy that they need to master to be able to push forward into uncharted waters.

A focus on agency provides a way to think about students' challenges that moves beyond a binary of taking a deficit- or strengths-based approach. Instead, challenges require students to draw on behaviours and traits which can help them to develop and refine the skills and strategies that enable adaptation to new and complex learning contexts. When responding to these challenges, some Indigenous students may find it difficult to suspend accepted "truths" about who they are as learners in school without suspending allegiance to Indigenous interests, often resulting in being tagged essentialist or assimilationist (Nakata, 2007). For example, Indigenous students speaking Standard Australian English could be seen as "big noting" by other Indigenous students (e.g., Munns, 1998). Hence, finding success at school for Indigenous students requires the development of internal capacities, and the use of external supports, to overcome challenges.

There are many ways that the literature defines success for Indigenous students, including through levels of retention, completion, employment, personal strengths, resilience, aspirations, financial independence, human capital, healthy lives, and the maintenance of land, language and culture (Herbert, 2002; Riley, 2015; Watts, 1981). In this study, we define Indigenous student success as the ability to respond to and move among the contested spaces at school that push and pull at their learner locale. In this definition, resilience, academic buoyancy and the capacity to work within such tensions at the locale are essential.

Resilience, academic buoyancy and Indigenous students

Research on the concept of *human resilience* emerged around 1970 with a focus on the impact of trauma and stress on the function and development of individuals (Masten, 2018). Resilience is usually used to refer to an individual's traits, characteristics of the individual's environment, as well as a set of processes and mechanisms through which internal and external assets (i.e., strengths) are harnessed when adversity is present (Ungar, 2011). Predictors of resilience are the strengths that support an individual's ability to adapt. For Indigenous people, reaching safe levels of wellbeing requires resilient behaviours that draw on the "whole of life" concept, including an individual's surroundings as a strength, to be able to bounce back from the challenges that may present themselves (Hickey, 2021, p. 424). This holistic view of Indigenous wellbeing "incorporates the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of individuals and their communities" (Dudgeon, Milroy, & Walker, 2014, p. xxv).

Various models have been developed to better understand resilience, including compensatory, protective and challenge approaches (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). For Indigenous peoples, socio-ecological theories of resilience have also been useful, thinking about how individuals are situated within a broader environment (Robinson et al., 2022). All models are interested in resilient behaviours and how individuals respond to or buffer stressful events, how they adapt and cope to maintain positive levels of

wellbeing through the development and use of strengths such as the protective and promotive factors, and the factors associated with positive engagement and motivation. Throughout these models, individual resilient strengths are described as the assets and resources individuals draw on or navigate to for support (Masten et al., 2008). Assets refer to individual internal strengths such as motivation and personal traits which include self-efficacy and self-esteem. Where self-esteem can be defined as a person's self-worth (Du et al., 2017), self-concept incorporates an individual's evaluation of their overall abilities in a particular domain (Prehn et al., 2021). Resources refer to external factors such as parental support or positive role models (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

This study adds to a small body of research examining resilience in remote Indigenous contexts. One five-year project used social and emotional wellbeing frameworks to develop a resilience intervention in response to the increased risk of youth suicide (McCalman & Bainbridge, 2021; Rutherford et al., 2020). Here, resilience is represented as an issue of the educational system, whereby schools should be better prepared to meet Indigenous students' needs. In this research, we suggest that the relationship between the student and their environment can be thought about differently: while Indigenous students draw on the different resources that exist within their environment, they can, and do, have internal capacities that can potentially be strengthened. We suggest it is worth focusing on these internal capacities, given students will continue into unknown environments. In particular, we focus on Indigenous students' educational resilience, related to their educational development (rather than broader social and emotional wellbeing), and how Indigenous students are already managing their school contexts.

A psycho-educational construct, educational resilience refers to students' ability to successfully navigate and overcome academic adversity (Holliman & Sheehy, 2022) and is related to other constructs of educational psychology such as achievement motivation (Martin & Marsh, 2006). The umbrella terms of motivation and engagement include the assets individuals draw on such as learning orientations, self-regulatory capacities, self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Student motivation and engagement are closely associated with two key concepts: academic resilience and academic buoyancy. Where academic resilience refers to successfully navigating major (chronic or acute) academic adversity (Martin, 2013), academic buoyancy refers to the ability to successfully navigate low-level "everyday" setbacks at school (Martin & Marsh, 2009).

An example of an everyday setback for some Indigenous students would be negotiating "shame". Indigenous shame encompasses not only a feeling of guilt when one has done something wrong, but also a wider feeling of shyness, fear (e.g., of unfamiliar people or places), or embarrassment at standing out from the crowd—even in a positive way, such as when receiving praise. It describes the appropriate feeling of a person in the presence of relatives with whom they are in an avoidance relationship. Indigenous students will often comment "she getting big shame" or "I was shame", as well as the term "shame job" (embarrassing situation) (Butcher, 2008, p. 638). An academically buoyant Indigenous student who experiences shame must be able to manage such internal emotions; while they may occur, they do not need to stop students from engaging in school.

Initial large-scale survey studies have explored Indigenous students' academic buoyancy (Martin et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2021). This research has established that Indigenous students score significantly lower on standardised tests of motivation and engagement. Although they score similarly to non-Indigenous students on most positive motivation and engagement factors (e.g., valuing of school, mastery orientation, planning, task management, persistence, academic buoyancy, goal setting, positive intention), Indigenous students were higher on negative factors (e.g., anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control, self-handicapping, disengagement).

However, these broad observational studies have not been able to examine the various ways Indigenous students may express academic buoyancy. This research sits aside from a broader body of studies that look at Indigenous resilience. These holistic Indigenous-centred wellbeing frameworks range from clinical level studies (Dudgeon et al., 2017) to frameworks for young people (Priest et al., 2012). Such research has been able to successfully centre Indigenous perspectives on resilience but has not yet been extended to focusing on learners and learning capacities.

The research to date offers a limited view of the utility of academic buoyancy as a concept to understand Indigenous students' schooling experiences. Yet there are many Indigenous students who could be understood as academically buoyant, navigating their way through the rough waters of schooling. This present study aimed to explore how Indigenous secondary students in a remote school spoke about schooling experiences that could be understood as contributing to academic buoyancy, asking:

- How do Indigenous secondary students experience academic buoyancy?
- What factors contribute to academic buoyancy for Indigenous secondary students?

This research took place at a remote P-12 school in Far North Queensland. At the time of the research, just over 1000 students were enrolled in the school, with approximately 60% identifying as Indigenous (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2023). Compared to schools with a similar rating, National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy results recorded for this school indicate that an average of 35% of students are making above average progress in areas of writing, numeracy and reading (ACARA, 2023). This school was chosen in part due to its remote location. While all Indigenous students negotiate the interface between Indigenous and Western experiences at school, students from more remote and/or more traditional backgrounds may find the leap into formal schooling a bigger gap to bridge (Nakata, 2011). The school in this project services multiple communities throughout the Cape York Peninsula, with students from community, town and boarding all participating in the research.

Methodology and method

The cultural interface

This study used the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) as an interpretive framework. Nakata theorises the contemporary Indigenous learner space or *locale* as a complex and contested space influenced by the *corpus*: "that body of knowledge, both historical and ongoing, that is produced by others 'about us' across a range of intellectual, government, and other historical texts" (p. 7). For this research topic, the corpus can be understood as the collection of written work and knowledge produced about academic buoyancy and Indigenous people from the outside. The corpus creates contested spaces that challenge Indigenous students as they are pushed and pulled between choosing to stay loyal to what they know or responding to their knowledge of Western contexts.

As an educational theory, the cultural interface highlights the uniqueness of the learning position or locale of the remote Indigenous learner and what this means for their ability to be resilient, particularly in response to the tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions within the school setting. These tensions not only condition Indigenous learner experiences, but how the learner experience is interpreted and understood (Nakata et al., 2019). Nakata (2007) argues that there is much that can be

recruited from Western science to assist Indigenous learners, but that the locale of these learners needs to be better understood. Here, this includes what impacts or influences Indigenous students to develop resilient behaviours.

Author positionalities

The first author (Ms Tamara (Armit) Sam) is a descendent of the Bwngcolman people of Palm Island. As a child, Ms Sam lived and attended school in remote Indigenous communities throughout Far North Queensland. As a primary school teacher at the same school as the research site, participants were familiar with Ms Sam, although she had not taught any of these participants. Ms Sam's role as a researcher in this investigation stems from her position as an Indigenous teacher and draws on her experience with remote Indigenous schooling as a student and a teacher. The second author (Dr Ailie McDowall) is Ms Sam's research advisor and a non-Indigenous person, with Scottish and European heritage and raised on Yuggera Country in Meanjin. With an awareness of the complexity of the interface between Indigenous and Western knowledge positions, Dr McDowall guided Ms Sam's work through the formal postgraduate research learning environment and to assist her to use her understandings as an Indigenous educator and student as a tool for inquiry. As a research team, we are committed to supporting the agency of Indigenous students and respect the complexities of developing capacities in the interface of Indigenous and Western knowledge positions.

The project

Eleven Indigenous secondary students (aged 14 to 18) participated in small semi-structured group interviews over two weeks in 2021. The participants were students from the residential college, the nearby Indigenous community and the local town. These interviews were led by the first author.

Extensive planning and consideration were given to ethics, particularly as the participants were both Indigenous people and minors. This research received approval from both the James Cook University (JCU) Human Research and Ethics Committee and Education Queensland's Queensland Education Research Inventory. The JCU application addressed the six core values involved in researching Indigenous peoples as set out by the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders*: spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect and responsibility. This research sought to address these principles by a strengths-based approach that engaged Indigenous students as agentic and capable learners who can learn to balance both their own cultural positions and the requirements of formal schooling. A further aim of this research was to develop new knowledge that can inform teachers of such students.

Following ethics approval and permission from the gatekeeper (school principal), parents of potential participants were contacted to inform them of the project. Parents were required to formally consent to their child's participation before details of the project was discussed with students. After receiving parental consent, students were provided with an opportunity to discuss the research process in depth (including that it was voluntary, they had the right to withdraw and that their data would be de-identified) before signing their consent to participate.

The audio-recorded group interviews were structured into three parts. First, students were asked to choose a stimulus picture and discuss how it related to their experiences of academic buoyancy at school. The pictures provided were mostly landscape and abstract pictures, representing a variety of scenes (see

Appendix). The students then wrote a letter to a new (fictional) year 7 Indigenous student starting school, sharing advice on being successful at school. Finally, students discussed questions about what they did at school when they came across challenges. These questions were open-ended, written in teenager-friendly language, and prompted students to both discuss their experiences and reflect on the capacities that enabled them to be successful. The first author, who ran the discussions, had a pre-existing relationship within the school community. This was an important factor to help make the students feel comfortable. The conversation prompts included questions such as:

- What do you do when the going gets tough for you at school or when things don't go your way?
- What/Who helps you to be resilient at school?
- What is it within you that helps you get/keep going?

Analysis

We transcribed the interviews and used NVIVO to code transcripts. This analysis process was guided by the cultural interface and the literature about academic buoyancy. Across two rounds of coding, we identified complexities that represented the locale of Indigenous learners in remote schooling, and internal and external capacities that students drew on to navigate these complexities.

Findings

Here we present the findings relating to the locale of the learner: both the challenges that students experienced in schooling and the motivational factors that enabled them to keep going.

Challenges

When talking about the challenges they experienced at school, students shared their experiences of being an Indigenous student, managing expectations from home, grief and navigating the *shame factor*. Overall, students were able to articulate that they experienced challenges in their everyday schooling, but that these challenges could help to grow their own capacities.

The students interviewed discussed school as challenging in general. One stated that school had "unexpected waves and winds. That's just like unexpected grades hitting you hard. You could get lost out there".

Students recognised their own capacity to make decisions, talking about different pathways they could choose, and knowing that some were harder than others. Even though students expressed that the school experience was "hard", some expressed their awareness that it was possible to navigate this difficulty. Exposure to challenges and experimenting with strengths and assets was seen important in developing the skills needed to master tasks. One student summarised this as:

So, there'll be challenges ahead in life, and probably mostly in schooling, and outside of school, but they shape you to be who you are after ... but what they say less smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.

Another provided a similar response: "It's not gonna be easy sailing, it's gonna be struggles".

Being an Indigenous student

In addition to the general challenges of school, many of the challenges that students spoke about were specific to their experiences as Indigenous students. One student articulated this explicitly, as they shared how they drew on strengths such as culture and identity to respond to the challenges the contested spaces create at school: "Being Indigenous is not easy ... it's always gonna be a hard journey as an Indigenous kid, we go through daily challenges all the time".

In this example, we see the student's position within the contested locale of the Indigenous learner, whereby they are aware of the tensions involved with being Indigenous. This level of reflection and self-knowledge suggests a level of preparedness to face these challenges.

Another student highlighted how historical factors are a significant contributor to the contested space and the tensions Indigenous students need to successfully manage to stay afloat at school: "Because, like, we've been oppressed, repressed and suppressed for so long ... we never really, even though you say you've made up for that, sorry it's still there ... that hurt ... and that's not gonna change".

In this example, the student acknowledges that their learning position is influenced not only by the challenges that they experience, but also by those that came before them. Acknowledging the past can provide students with internal strengths passed down throughout history, which are useful tools that act as the push effect required to motivate them to continue at school.

Home and family

Students also experience challenges from home, including both the pressure to succeed and stressful home environments. This can include comparing themselves to siblings. In other cases, school provided an outlet where students could come, "not, like, to escape from [arguments with family], just to, like, clear my head and everything".

These experiences help students identify with what strengths they can draw on at school to help manage contested spaces that arise between school and community. This includes learning strategies to regulate their own emotions ("clear[ing] my head").

Grief and sorry business

Multiple students also raised experiences of grief and sorry business (loss). In discussing their experiences of grief, some discussed that school provided a constant, stable environment where they could ground themselves to help manage external tensions, even if it was hard to attend school when grieving. One student spoke, for example, of "having mountains behind you [grief] but looking forward to the city [bright lights], keeping your head up and focusing on calmness and staying strong and afloat at school".

Here too, school provided a context where students could practise and develop their capacity for emotional regulation, given the grief that they were experiencing in their home lives.

Shame

Many students shared how the shame factor created contested spaces in the contexts of learning and with their peers, and how it was associated with the fear of failure. Here, we view shame as a pull factor that creates tension for Indigenous students at school.

In the context of learning, shame was explained as a barrier, as “being shame, it is within a lot of Indigenous kids ... I was really shame, like I didn't want to talk”.

In one case, the shame factor was an internal response to an academic critique, creating tension for the student:

They [other students] just point out all the things you do wrong ... [other students] make you shame especially if you get, like, a question wrong or quiz wrong, or low mark, or you got a high mark, but they got a higher mark and they throw it in your face.

However, even though students shared the experience of the pull effect of shame, understanding how the shame factor can pull them back is an important contribution to developing academically buoyant traits and behaviours, as they use this as the motivation to overcome shame. For example, one student said, “Me personally, like, I've been shame all my life ... and being shame, you'll always have to overcome that barrier ... don't be shame, because that's the number one thing that stops every Indigenous child”.

Shame was also evident in peer associations and influenced the decisions students made. Most students agreed that they had been affected by peer pressure in some way or another. For Indigenous students, part of being pressured into doing what others are doing is due to the shame factor. Several students stated that shame is a barrier or a challenge they experience with peers at school.

The pull of peer pressure included situations such as, “parties on the weekend ... people saying, oh, you don't need to study, we can hang out and go watch the sunset, when I really should have been studying” and “when your friends go out and smoke and that, you be shame to say no. Or feel pressure, pressure from them, to say yes”.

These examples demonstrate how Indigenous students can find themselves in a push-pull position, contemplating going against the grain of peer behaviour, but without wanting to suspend their own position as Indigenous peers. Part of the shame in these examples is their fear of being viewed by peers as acting white—that is, not wanting to “hang” and be involved with their Indigenous peers. However, this shame can also be a motivating factor. Here, students' reflections on being shame helps them to articulate their awareness that they are experiencing pressure and reflect on the path/s they could have taken.

Often, shame was spoken of as a fear of failure. This connects the shame factor to student self-concept, with students suggesting it is associated with lacking the skills to fully participate and succeed at school. Shame was seen as a result of not engaging in class, leading to a domino effect of skipping school, or a fear of mispronouncing words when speaking in class using Standard Australian English. In sharing these examples, the students again demonstrated their awareness of how not engaging with school because of shame might limit their future options. One student disclosed, “Public speaking was very hard for me, and it probably is still gonna be hard going into leadership, but I'm willing to overcome that barrier”.

Here, this experience of shame and the student's awareness of it is not a barrier to learning. Instead, it is an opportunity to develop their capacities to draw on internal strengths and external resources, motivating (pushing) them to perform.

Indigenous students' experiences of shame often differ from non-Indigenous students' experiences, and the shame factor is not something that can be easily eliminated from school environments. It is through experiencing shame that students are pulled into multiple realms of contested spaces, including those that go against their own ways of thinking and being. The shame factor can be both the pull and the push within the contested space. Opportunities to reflect on experiences through shameful moments contribute to agentic behaviours, as students begin to make meaning and sense of where they belong and, more importantly, how they can affect change for their futures and where they see themselves.

Similar to the other challenges shared here, the students in this study shared how they position themselves when faced with the challenge of shame. Rather than allowing the concept of shame to pull them down, students have developed strengths through making choices that will benefit them as they navigate the contested space within their own locale as agentic learners.

Contributors to academic buoyancy

To navigate the challenges presented here, the Indigenous students in this study were able to draw on a range of strengths and resources to stay afloat at school. These strengths and resources acted as protective factors and were expressions of academic buoyancy. These emerged as the motivational factors required to positively engage students in their learning experiences. The predictors shared by students in this study include valuing education, finding strength in knowledge of themselves, having aspirations for the future, striving for achievement, and receiving recognition for their efforts and learning through relationships and social interactions.

Education as priority

According to some of the students, valuing education and ensuring it becomes a priority was an important motivational factor. To these students, education is a priority because they "wanna get an education". Another student said:

Because there are times where I haven't come to school, and then I'm in class and I don't know what's happening, then it makes me feel like, aw, I don't know what's happening. Then I'm gonna do it propa slack like. So there are things like always come to school, so you stay ahead of your thing, you know what's going on, and you won't like be like that.

Attending school every day contributes to student capabilities, enhancing their ability to find success. Students wanted to be at school and understood that when they lagged in attendance they fell behind and lacked motivation to participate and perform.

Identity

Students' sense of identity and how they see themselves as learners, and as Indigenous learners, was an important motivational factor. Some students discussed their experiences of identifying as Indigenous learners, the complications associated with this identity and how they use this as motivation to show others that they can be successful at school. In one case, the stereotypes associated with Indigenous learners motivated the student to do better at school:

So they gotta, like, show them that we actually, we're not just all about wagging and coming to school and like, like, somewhat, some of the other kids might resent us, and you sort of just have to show them ... that you're your own person ... and you can do, you can actually do well.

Other students agreed that they felt people made assumptions about their abilities to perform and operate successfully at school. Being an Indigenous learner was seen as challenging but remembering who you are and your purpose at school is a useful motivational tool in continuing to strive: "Just remember who you are ... remember why you came this far".

Students' connection to and identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students was a driving force and a strength they drew on for motivation. Here, the learner locale involved understanding the assumptions that exist around their own capabilities and achievement, and knowing where they come from and their purpose to counter the pull of these assumptions.

Aspirations (educational intentions)

One student noted that it was important to have a purpose for being at school. Choosing the right path to contribute to their future aspirations, including further education, was a motivator to stick it out: "It matters what you want to do in life and how far you want to go ... to go down the right pathways in life ... hopefully use that to go to uni someday".

Responding to stimulus pictures in the interview, this student detailed that feelings of success could be represented by the light shining on the other side of a large boulder "and on either side is a bit of light. So that's your accomplishment and success in life after school and in the hardships".

This student's responses show how Indigenous students from a remote community can draw on aspirations for the motivation to continue with their learning. In these examples, the students understood how the choices they make will help them to reach these goals. Choosing to attend school every day and to be actively engaged was a positive choice, one that would lead to opportunities for further success, particularly after school.

Achievement recognition

Multiple students reported that reaching a level of satisfaction through achievement and/or recognition, including being satisfied with their own positive choices and success in life, was one of the motivational factors for them to perform. According to some of the students, being acknowledged for their efforts, achievements and capabilities added to improved levels of self-satisfaction and motivated them to keep trying at school:

I feel very proud of myself ... I just feel excited ... Yeah, it makes me very happy to know that I'm on track to get a [year 12] certificate as an Indigenous kid ... But I went for leadership, and I am now [a school leader] and very proud.

I find if you, like, work really hard and because, like, you know, I've never, I never used to get As and then when I got my first A in English, I was just, like, so happy. I went home I was, like, Mum I got my first A! ... I was so happy, like, I couldn't stop talking ... I called all my families and all my uncles, they're, like, I hope you do this again, my god - A!

In this example, achievement recognition reinforced the importance of putting in the extra effort, as the student realised they were capable of achieving an A grade, and this shaped their view of their own capacities. Sharing with family is also an important factor, as students are recognised as capable learners by their families and they can celebrate this as a successful moment.

Although these examples of celebrations are important and contribute to motivating students, reaching this point could be challenging, and subtle acknowledgments were also satisfying:

[Being] finally acknowledged and that's something that's very hard to, to get ... no good deed goes unrewarded ... and if you know you did the right thing, feels even better when the teacher comes and sees you and gives you that pat on the back, recognition version of rewarding or getting an award.

Students were motivated by the personal satisfaction of how they could themselves contribute to Indigenous communities in the future: "[I] just wanted to make Australia as a whole and Torres Strait, just a better place ... and after I had achieved all of this, I felt relieved ... and I felt like I was fulfilling my people's dreams". Additionally, satisfaction was found in knowing in the future; students would be able to look back and see their growth: "When you grow up, you're gonna look back and say, you know, wow, like, I did that, I came that far".

These examples suggest both internal and external factors are at play when motivating students. Students not only shared their joy in their successful moments but felt motivated when these efforts were recognised and valued by others and themselves. These moments acted as reminders of what they are capable of.

Such moments provide students with opportunities to understand and recognise the strengths they drew on to achieve. Whether to satisfy an internal drive for themselves or to gain recognition from external resources such as teachers, family, peers or ancestors, these ways of recognising achievement play an important role as the strengths students draw on to stay academically buoyant at school.

Relationships

Extensive relationships are contributing motivating factors that students rely on to stay afloat at school. Family, friends and teacher support was vital in developing academic buoyancy. The sense of "making them proud" and setting goals to get better at something also contributed to motivating students.

This included family and community as both inspiration and support: "You need to take into account that, what you believe would make the world a better place. Think about what you could do to make your family slash mob proud".

Similarly, for another student:

Fam [family] is just that number one support. Yeah, they've always been there from day one and it just helps me through my journey as an Indigenous kid ... and helps me get far ... helps me through hard times ... someone there that is giving me the right advice.

Friends helped students to stay afloat at school through encouragement, or being there for them, especially after experiencing grief. Friends were able to provide encouragement to "keep my head up and look forward".

While these examples demonstrate positive relationships as a motivational factor, one student shared the experience of negative peer relationships and how this challenged them and motivated them to excel: "Show them next time, like, what, what I do, like, if a white kid or anyone in general rubs it in my face, if I get it wrong, I'll show them one day".

In addition to peer relationships, several students mentioned relationships with their teachers, especially when they felt that teachers motivated them by empowering or encouraging them to perform. This included forecasting into the future by discussing how school achievement could open possibilities and encouraging students to stay on track. Teachers were able to reinforce students' developing understandings of their own capabilities: "They say, like, I know you can do it, you're just being slack".

Important here is the time taken by teachers to establish relationships and understand Indigenous students and their individual strengths, capacities and learner locale.

Social learning

Students indicated that they learn and are motivated through observing both positive and negative social experiences. Reflecting on behaviour choices, conforming to school expectations and observations were all part of the social learning process.

Relationships provided role models for students, with most reporting having a role model that they could look up to. Students referred to teachers, family members, other students and even themselves as role models. Role models allowed students to develop their own understandings of who they wanted to be in the future, and what they must do to achieve this future self:

Like, she's really independent ... if you look at her, she has, like, a future ... sort of sets, like, a goal for me, like, I want to be like her, I want to be able to ... look after myself ... I also look to [friend] as a role model too because, like, she was, like, down here, like, she was here as just a student and now she's, like, a qualified diesel fitter ... I wanna be like her, I wanna be, like, qualified.

Here, role models model academically buoyant traits, such as the ability to be independent, set goals, achieve a qualification and have a strong sense of self-concept.

Some students were motivated by viewing themselves as a potential role model, hoping that others aspired to be just like them: "I guess they'll sort of look up to you one day, and like you're doing good ... then they'll think about the choices that they may have made".

Viewing themselves as role models demonstrates students' understanding of the need to be able to observe others to learn how to overcome everyday difficulties. Rather than simply having someone aspirational to look towards, role models were important in their ability to demonstrate the negotiation of everyday challenges. They also contributed to students' own understandings of success.

Reflecting on past experiences also helped students to gain the skills they need to be able to adapt their own behaviour:

Like, you think fighting is good. And swearing out loud? Oh, my God. I've been there, done that bro. I used to walk around the schools and everything. And now when I think [of] it, it's just, like, so embarrassing.

Self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and social awareness are important abilities to possess, as it reminds students of their priorities and motivates them to persist with behaviours that are going to be rewarding through responsible decision making. This is demonstrated in comments such as, "It's right to be by yourself ... like, learning time is learning time and your friends will always be there".

Understanding individual capacities to succeed and having this reinforced by teaching staff for Indigenous students is important in motivating students to continue at school. This behaviour can also be learned by reflecting on peers' experiences, reinforcing to students that they are capable of making choices that will support their goals: "I've gave her advice. And, like, I've told her, like, me and my friend, like, all my friends we told her, like, we've gave her advice before. But I think it's just, like, her way of learning".

Some students were able to explicitly reflect on the importance of observation: "It's just that everyone fights because they've seen their parents do it ... I observe other people, observe the teachers, what they do with their routine".

Risk-taking

Throughout these examples, students have demonstrated stepping out of their comfort zones and taking risks to develop their own sense of confidence. Taking advantage of opportunities was important in motivating Indigenous students to actively engage with school, whereas taking risks was seen as requiring personal strength:

And just that taking up that opportunity is so good. Even if you're not great at it, if you want to try something new try because everything is a learning process ... you can go into something and not know nothing, not know anything about it but at the end of it you will know something.

Another student said, "Remember that you can go for any big opportunity that you want ... you just have to have that confidence and that right mindset to be able to get that far".

Students also reflected on risk taking behaviours that others experience. Referring to a peer, one student discussed overcoming similar experiences and how this behaviour motivated them to seek opportunities that would further develop their confidence:

She used to wag and smoke and drink ... and I was like, don't be afraid to try different things. And then I thought, if it's something I really like, then this is my only opportunity I get. This is the only chance I get, so I'm gonna go for it.

Here, risk taking behaviours can motivate students, given opportunities to reflect and learn. Students discussed drawing on strengths that involved a willingness to learn and try new things, even if it meant failing.

Discussion

All students face common challenges at school, including problems associated with performance, grades, and navigating the hard, rough and uneasy paths that school presents. The current research focuses on the experiences of overcoming everyday challenges for Indigenous students in a remote secondary school to better describe how academic buoyancy operates within the locale of remote Indigenous learners.

Contributors to academic buoyancy

The challenges that the students in this study discuss give shape to their locale as remote Indigenous students. In line with Nakata's (2007) argument that Indigenous students' learning takes place within the

tension of competing discourses and social practices, we found that Indigenous students' representations of everyday challenges and successes at school encompassed both experiences familiar to all students (getting their first A, or dealing with family expectations) and experiences reflecting their position as Indigenous students (combatting assumptions about their learning capacities, increased exposure to loss at a young age, feeling shame). The students were themselves aware that being an "Indigenous kid" added layers of complexity to everyday experiences.

These findings deepen our understanding of how the concept of academic buoyancy applies to Indigenous students. Where previous studies (Martin et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2021) established that Indigenous students display more negative factors of academic buoyancy than non-Indigenous students (including anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control, self-handicapping and disengagement), in the current study, Indigenous students were able to construct their own locale as learners, describing the everyday setbacks that they must navigate as learners: transgenerational trauma, grief, family issues, the shame factor. Better understanding Indigenous students' everyday setbacks provides a context from which researchers and educators alike can identify the development of resilient traits that contribute to academic buoyancy that may otherwise be missed.

In the face of these challenges, the students' discussions demonstrated various contributors to their academic buoyancy. Rather than focusing on the 5C model which outlines validated predictors of academic buoyancy (confidence, coordination, commitment, composure, control) (Martin et al., 2010), we took a broader approach of asking students what helped them to stay strong in their schooling (we note here that a subsequent publication explicitly exploring the 5Cs is planned). Where the challenges were more specific to their position as Indigenous students, most contributors (prioritising education, educational intention, achievement recognition, social learning, risk taking) are concepts recognisable from the educational psychology literature on motivation and engagement. However, they played out differently for the Indigenous students in this study.

For example, achievement recognition can be understood as developing self-efficacy, a vital aspect to all students' motivation for learning (Martin, 2007). For the Indigenous students in this study, achievement recognition overlapped with their identity as Indigenous students; getting good grades and receiving leadership positions was made more meaningful by knowing they were doing it "as an Indigenous kid" and that they could one day contribute to Australia as a whole, and specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Likewise, managing uncertainty and emotional control is an important contributor to academic buoyancy (Martin et al., 2010) and motivation more generally (Martin, 2007). Here, Indigenous students observed and learned from how others acted to develop their own capacities to emotionally regulate, whether that was learning from watching others fight or from seeing peers engage in risky health behaviours.

This idea of social learning is worth examining in more detail. While not a predictor of academic buoyancy, and rarely engaged in the engagement literature, social learning helps to explain a core pathway through which students develop the traits of academically buoyant learners. By reflecting on their own actions and the actions of others, students can plan and adapt behaviours that are suited to new and unfamiliar situations (Bandura, 2006). In this study, students used social learning and agentic behaviours as motivators. In addition to academic achievement, students developed social and emotional learning capacities, such as self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management and responsible decision making (Frey et al., 2019). As Bandura (2006) suggests, social learning draws on individual agency, providing opportunities for students to grow as individuals, developing their internal and external strengths to adapt to new situations. Evaluating both positive and negative situations

triggered the development of social learning skills. By observing and reflecting on their own and others' behaviours, Indigenous students in this study were able to identify with the strengths needed to draw on to help them engage positively with school.

Given the study sought to explore how remote Indigenous students experience academic buoyancy within their locale, we note that, in addition to the responses where students spoke about the specificity of their position as Indigenous learners, many of the responses could have been shared by any number of students across the country. That is, Indigenous students' academic buoyancy may be both different and similar to that of their peers, and both differences and similarities are important in thinking about ongoing support of Indigenous students.

The locale of the Indigenous learner

In concentrating on the locale, this study sought to work at the interface of Indigenous and Western knowledge standpoints. This provides a different view of Indigenous students' experiences compared to work undertaken by scholars such as Martin and colleagues (2021). By interviewing students in their own locale, this study provides nuance as to how factors such as academic self-concept – which has been shown to protect Indigenous students from disengagement (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2012) – can be developed. It also extends the work by scholars such as Shay and Sarra (2021) by demonstrating how previously identified factors such as identity contribute to the internal capacities that Indigenous students require to be successful at school. Where many of the themes reflect other studies about Indigenous students, such as those that emphasise the importance of relationships (Britton et al., 2020), Indigenous students' educational aspirations (Craven & Marsh, 2004), and role models (Durmush et al., 2021), here we emphasise that these contributors to academic buoyancy are important in that they help students to develop their own capacities to be successful learners now and into the future, developing their ability to stay afloat in academic contexts.

A key concept of the locale is the push-pull factors that Indigenous students experience, positioned within both Western and Indigenous narratives. An example of this tension was expressed by students as the shame factor. Previous research suggests that shame for Indigenous people can be attributed to several factors, including being singled out from a group (Butcher, 2008), novelty of experience or not knowing rules and expectations (Butcher, 2008), being forced to act in a way that does not conform to social and spiritual obligations (Maher, 1999), internalised racism (Kwok, 2012), and response to colonising power dynamics, including engaging with people who speak "Standard" rather than Australian English (Kwok, 2012). In this study, feelings of shame are seen to manifest as students experience the contested space of the cultural interface while navigating challenges at school. It is where Indigenous students feel the contradictions and tensions in making decisions. Shame shows how students often struggle with their locale as a learner and the effects of the push and pull effect. However, experiencing shame is not seen as a deficit, but rather an opportunity for students to develop resilience and their own identity as learners within these tensions.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to explore the potential of student agency in the interface of Western and Indigenous knowledge positions. By both engaging psycho-educational concepts and working at the locale of Indigenous learners, this study gives insight into Indigenous students' ability to observe and articulate their own learning capacities.

While a small-scale exploratory study, the analyses presented here already suggests implications for the classroom. It is important that educators recognise that Indigenous students both inhabit a contested space at school and enter schooling with a range of capacities that can be further developed. Where students experience challenges and setbacks related to being Indigenous learners in a remote setting, teachers and parents should not shy away from discussing these experiences and modelling productive ways to navigate them. As the students in our study demonstrated, young Indigenous learners are capable of observing, reflecting on their experiences and growing from the challenges they experience. This internal capacity building can be supplemented by ensuring students have a strong network to lean on and learn from.

We hope to extend this work in future to expand the methodology and the sample, including more students and multiple sites, and testing and consolidating the ideas presented here. What is clear from this preliminary work is that Indigenous students can know themselves, their worlds, their engagement and what they are capable of, irrespective of academic achievement. This evidence provides confidence that we can improve Indigenous student outcomes by targeting academically buoyant capabilities and students' reflections on their own schooling.

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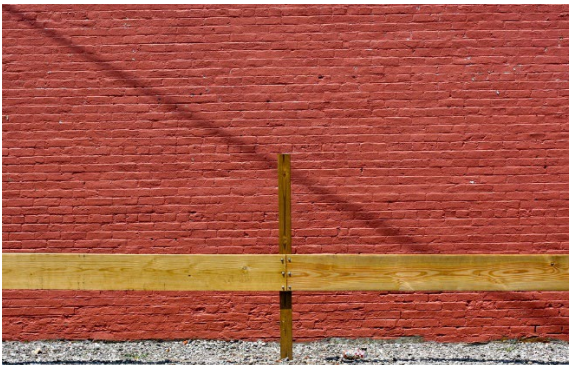
Appendix: A sample of stimulus pictures provided to students



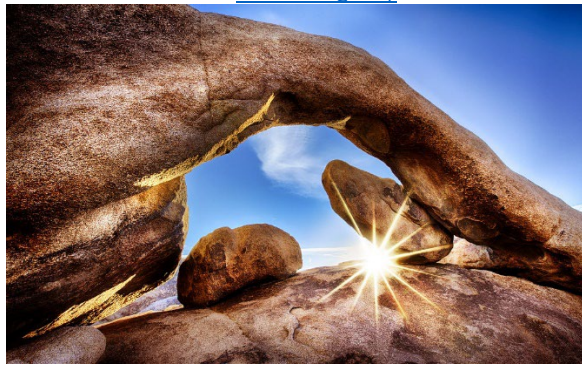
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