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Family, Friends and Teachers: Why Indigenous Students Stay at or Leave School

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Introduction

This paper considers the comments made by Indigenous adults returning to school about their earlier experiences at school. They were written by Indigenous people who have chosen to return to education in the Northern Territory after leaving school early. They reflect the variety of factors which contributed to their motivation to stay at school when younger, or to leave school early.

Fifty-two (52) Indigenous students wrote comments on their earlier school experiences. They came from all around Australia and ranged in age from late teens to early forties. What they experienced at different places and at different times was remarkably similar. It would seem overt discrimination was more prominent in times past and has become more subtle in recent times.

Indigenous education is an area where blame and failure often proliferate. Teachers blame parents for not making their children come to school. Parents blame teachers for not teaching in a way so their children want to come to school. Students blame teachers for not being interested.

All feel a failure and often respond to each other from a sense of defensive inadequacy. Better educational outcomes can be achieved for Indigenous students and it is people who are crucial to achieving them. Researchers have consistently pointed to relationships being a crucial factor to gain better Indigenous outcomes (Malin, 1990; Partington, 1999; McRae *et al.*, 2000). The research presented in this paper supports the importance of relationships and points to the role of family, friends and teachers in supporting children to come to school and learn while they are there. Relationships provided the motivation to be at school, helped to enjoy being there and were the medium of learning. However, relationships could also undermine each of these and in doing so damage educational outcomes.

Family Support and Family Problems

The most important influence in people's motivation in staying at school was family support.

Things that made it easy for me at school was I had a lot of family at school that supported me

I was praying for the reports to hold me up and give me confidence for my year ten. I gave year ten everything I had just to please my family, teacher and friends.

One of the regrets of leaving school was letting down family.

I feel I did not live up to everyone's expectations and therefore let them down, but I did not find this easy to cope with.

However, problems in the family also created difficulties in schooling.

The things that made it hard for me at school were I had personal problems at home like my mother and her de facto fighting always and arguing. I copped a few beatings myself which brought my feelings down about even going to school at all.

I did not do to well in year 12 as I had a lot of trouble at home and I was travelling around a lot, as I could not deal with home life, therefore I was not concentrating on my studies

Family support and living up to family expectations were the most powerful motivating factors for Indigenous children to stay at school. However, family difficulties could make it hard to stay at school. After family, friends were the next most important influence on being at school.

Friends

Friends were mentioned often as what contributed to school being enjoyable, or bearable.

Through high school I was very happy, I had heaps of friends.

I felt school was a good and happy place because I made lots of friend.

I enjoyed going to school and mixing with friends.

Friends helped with work, relieved boredom and helped get through hard times.

Well I felt bored, but when my friends came I felt good and things went better.

When I was at school I was nervous, scared and confused about school work, because I felt alone... First time at school it's hard to get to

know the other students because you're new, in a couple of days you got new friends by talking to them and [my] feelings [be]come excited.

However, friends could at times be a distraction from work, and students mentioned regretting wasting too much time socialising with friends at school. While friends were pleasant distraction antagonistic peers was a reason many left school.

Problems with Other Students

Overt discrimination by peers was a reason some left school.

The kids were like animals against me. So I left school at 13 years. I returned to school but still there was a lot of hate in the school for Aboriginals.

Other students treated me as an outcast. I almost had to fight where I was aiming to go.

I had to put up with so many bullies, like many others had to. Those things that made it hard for me at school, I was teased and bullied and fought against it for nothing.

When I finally got to school after a couple of days off it felt strange because then you've got children at school giving me a hard time like calling me names. So it wasn't that easy at school.

Comments from students who attended school outside the Northern Territory seemed to indicate that they were more isolated and possibly faced more severe discrimination than in the NT.

When I went to school in (another state) these couple of boys kept calling me names because



I was part Aboriginal, they thought that this was a big joke, but it wasn't. So I hated to go to school because of them. When we came back to Darwin to live, no one called me names about my Aboriginal descent.

It was all right, I met a few friends, had some arguments, but who didn't at school. Some started because I was half-caste and they told me I should go where all the other mob go (to another school). You see in (interstate capital) they have got a school for coloured kids. I'm not really sure if it's really just for coloured kids, but all of them went there. I just used to say I will go where I like. So when they got to understand me they just left me alone. By the end of that year I had some good friends there.

Social relations at school are a powerful factor in attendance and retention of Indigenous students. Friends are an attraction to be at school and help make it enjoyable and productive, even if they can sometimes distract from schoolwork. Antagonism from non-Indigenous peers, on the other hand, made school feel like a battleground. A place many could not wait to leave. Teachers' response to student disputes was important in shaping how Indigenous students saw them.

Teachers

Teachers can play an important role in contributing to Indigenous students remaining and achieving at school. Conversely, relations with teachers were often mentioned as a reason for leaving school. There were almost twice as many negative comments about relations with teachers (11) as there were positive comments (6).

There was a perception among some that teachers were prejudiced against Indigenous students.

Teachers never wanted to teach black kids because they couldn't be bothered. Great isn't it! Teachers didn't bother with you, so white kids had right of way.

When schooling at (interstate) high school I felt like I was dumb because of the teachers. Some were coloured prejudiced and others only ever took notice of the real high kids, the ones that had brains. There was also favouritism and that didn't help. I didn't feel too good about myself when I was at school.

Older students related experiences from an era where discrimination was more obvious.

School for 'native' children, as we were called then, in that era was not compulsory and this reflected in the attitudes of some of the teachers who were teaching at that time. I remember quite vividly an incident that has stuck in my mind throughout my life. A teacher who was teaching us arithmetic and he used to send me outside with a broom to sweep up the verandah and yard. I felt bad about school after that incident and couldn't wait to finish school and get out of the system. I left school when I was in grade 7.

The one thing that made it hard for me to like school was the teachers always picking on us black kids. At the time when I was a child I thought it was me doing things wrong all the time, I did not understand about racial prejudice against black people. But now when I look back and think about it I wasn't as bad as I thought I was (then).

The response of teachers had a major negative influence in how these students felt about themselves as people and learners. However most comments about teachers described disinterest rather than discrimination. Either a general disinterest or selective disinterest in less able students.

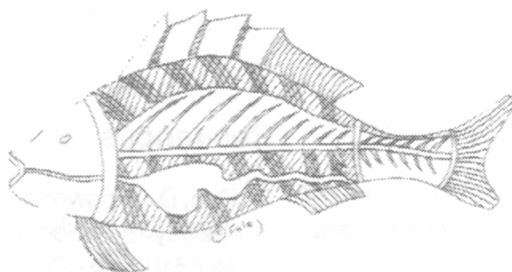
When I was there I was not very happy. I guess it had a lot to do with the teachers I had. I never felt comfortable around them. I believe they were not good teachers. They were just there because it was a job. I don't feel I learnt much at all at school. My life in the work place was greatly affected by this, especially maths skills, which I had a lot of trouble with. You learn to get by but it's the insecurity that is hard to live with.

In my past I found that the education system was easy to slip through without learning anything at all. Whether it was my fault or the teachers' fault, personally I think it was the teachers' fault. When I was doing my last year at high school I really felt I was being robbed of my education because the teachers didn't give a dam if I was there or not.

When I went to school I felt that everyone was against me. The teachers were not very helpful.

In high school I had failed all my grades and I had two tries at year 11. None of this was because I was dumb, but because of lack of understanding and lack of support of teachers.

While the positive comments about teachers were about half as numerous as negative comments they illustrate the powerful impact teachers **can** have on motivating students to be at school and learn.



The teachers at school were pretty good. I didn't mind going to school then; we would go on field trips and camping.

What really made it helpful for me were mostly teachers, they would always be there for help.

As I went to higher classes the work got much harder for me, but after I finished year 10 I felt the school work was so easy to do. As long as I had a good teacher who was always there for me, to help me out, and I felt school was a good and happy place because I made lots of friends and I've learnt a lot of things.

Some of the teachers there were helpful and understanding and that helped. I could go to them with problems

The things that made it easy at school for me was that I had good friends, also that when we were in trouble the teachers would help us, just like talking to us and cheering us up.

The teachers were great and supportive and made classes a breeze.

One student related how the support of a teacher made the difference in his long-term confidence in himself.

The only things I thought were hard at school were Maths and English. I was never very good at Maths since primary school and as I got into high school it just got worse. But in English when I was in grade 9 my teacher had a good talk to me about life and where I was headed in life. That year I got a B+; ever since then I always gave myself a second chance at something I thought I could never do.

It is easy for teachers to minimise the influence that they have on the life and learning of an Indigenous student in their class for a year. However, these comments show how even absence of classroom contact can convey a powerful message that

reverberates in the years of students' future lives. Conversely, interested and supportive teachers can play a powerful role in Indigenous students confidence in themselves in the present as well as in the future.

Regrets

It is not surprising that many students were left with regrets about the missed opportunities of past schooling.

When I was younger school did not mean much and I lost interest very quickly. I started missing classes and eventually found myself so far behind that I couldn't cope or comprehend. I knew everything there was to know and my parents and teachers knew nothing, which proved to be the biggest mistake of my life.

I took school as one big joke when I was there, but now when I look back at it I should have done better and learnt more.

Although I had completed year 10 level secondary education, I truly feel I had missed out on what was available. My self-confidence has dropped tremendously through this lack of knowledge.

My wanting to attend university is because I have been cheated (at school) when I was younger.

Low Confidence

As adults a consequence of leaving school early was loss of confidence and lost opportunities.

I truly feel I had missed out on what was available. My self-confidence has dropped tremendously through this lack of knowledge.

I don't feel I learnt much at all at school. My life in the work place was greatly affected by this, especially Maths skills, which I had a lot of trouble with. You learn to get by but it's the insecurity that is hard to live with.

Only one student mentioned later experiences re-building confidence lost at school.

I could not read very well when I left school. I started to read comics with pictures, then I stepped up to cowboy books and I can sit down and read a novel now. That showed me that I am not as dumb as I thought I was and helped me make the decision to come back to school.

Conclusions

These comments about earlier experiences of school point to factors important in Indigenous students attending and achieving at school. It highlights that people are important in Indigenous students being at and succeeding at school.

- The positive expectations and support of family are powerful motivators for Indigenous students to attend school and learn.
- Family problems, family mobility and family disputes potentially undermine Indigenous students' attendance.
- Friends help make school enjoyable as well as provide support in learning, although they can also distract from learning.

- Antagonistic non-Indigenous peers make school an uncomfortable and difficult place for Indigenous students.
- The way teachers handle disputes between indigenous students as well as the interest and support they provide to Indigenous students are critical factors in whether Indigenous children want to attend school.

It is important for programs aiming at supporting Indigenous students centre around the people who are most important to Indigenous students. Family, friends and teachers.

Families can make a difference.

Friends make school fun.

Whole lives can be shaped by teachers interest in and help for Indigenous students at school.

Don't let your family down by staying away from school.

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