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# ENABLING VOICE: PERCEPTIONS *of* SCHOOLING FROM RURAL ABORIGINAL YOUTH *at* RISK *of* ENTERING *the* JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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## ■ Abstract

In this article the perceptions of school experiences by male Aboriginal youth at risk of becoming in contact with the juvenile justice system are presented. These adolescent boys, from inland rural New South Wales, attend Tirkandi Inaburra Cultural and Development Centre (Tirkandi). Tirkandi is a short term residential centre designed to provide at risk boys with an opportunity to participate in strengths-based culturally appropriate educational, cultural, social and personal programs. In this study, participants give detailed accounts of schooling describing their lives as students. Their voices offer a powerful insight into the situated construction of agency and identity in classroom life, culture and learning among Aboriginal students. They serve as a window in to how perceptions and voice are socially-culturally-politically configured – both in their production and deployment. Further, they show the complexity and deeply problematic nature of how individuals' lived experiences collide across contexts when these contexts operate in isolation. The insider's voices, presented in this paper, are significant because they offer valuable insights that will encourage educators to be challenged by the *relational architectures* dominating teaching practices. These voices form not just the backdrop but the centerpiece for discussion in this paper.

## ■ Introduction

For many decades the educational and social outcomes for Aboriginal students have been the subject of much discussion in educational and political media. The ways to address the issues and performances of Aboriginal students are ardently contested across contexts and much of the debate comes loaded with a variety of contending political agendas. For the purposes of this article the discussion will not enter the debate about results and academic achievement of Aboriginal students, and furthermore it is not the intention to review the extensive literature advocating particular pedagogies or policies for the improvement of the educational outcomes for these students. Rather the intention is to present a representation of schooling from the perspectives of particular Aboriginal students, offering a starting point for renewed understandings of the importance of listening to student voice. How these participants perceive classroom experiences has the potential of informing teachers of practices which enable or constrain learning for Aboriginal students.

The conceptualisation of school presented through the voices of young Aboriginal males in this study highlights the necessity for understanding role of connectivity between system worlds (such as school) and individual *lifeworlds* (Habermas, 1987). The study is important for determining the value of explicitly making connections between the experiences of learning, living and schooling at Tirkandi Inaburra Cultural and Development Centre (Tirkandi) and life in their mainstream communities (in schools and in community). This explication offers important "lessons" from an insider's perspective.

## *The social construction of school and identity*

School sites are characterised as complex social contexts whereby the significance of these contexts can be outlined in terms of what is accomplished within them (Baker, 1991). In many accounts, formal and informal, conscious and unconscious, the performance of students at school is attributed to individuals, not to the fabric of classroom interaction within the unique

social context of schooling (Freebody & Dwyer, 1992; Freebody et al., 1996). What is learnt in classrooms is often based on what students take from their school experiences, not only as shown in the more visible aspects of tests and performances, but in terms of how students process and account for their experiences especially their social relationships (Freebody et al., 1996; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004). This essentially shapes student perceptions, identities and consequently “accounts” of that context.

Participant perspectives illustrate the value of understanding the classroom as social sites, and how experiences across contexts mutually act on and interact with each other in the formation of self; that is, the social construction of the individual hinges on the social particularities experienced in different social contexts. It is the social practices which form the contexts in which particular moral and social orders are established (Schatzki, 2002, p. 70); each social context is formed by the practices found within it.

Schools and classrooms in particular, have recognisable *learning* or *practice* architectures which are viewed to enhance or inhibit learning (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2007; Wenger, 1998). These learning architectures are enacted within particular interactive practices or *relational architectures*. The unique contexture of classrooms is created within *relational architectures* which simultaneously construct the visible interactive boundaries, moral orders, expectations and routines (designed or otherwise) of classrooms. An understanding of this phenomenon assists to determine the critical role that the social construction of classrooms has for locating the perspectives of the individuals in this study.

Identities are social constructions (Moje, 2002), and how these young Aboriginal people perceive themselves can be taken to be formed through their interactive encounters with others in the world (within and beyond school). This phenomenon is referred to as “social constructionism”, a theoretical perspective emphasising knowledge of self, others and the world is formulated between participants in social relationships (Hruby, 2001, cited in Triplett, 2004, pp. 215). Therefore, just as the actions and interactions are constructed in social-cultural contexts, so too are the perceptions of the members within these contexts. These identities, in turn, act within these contexts in ways which reflect (often predictably) both internal and external expectations.

Listening to student voices as they articulate experiences and perspectives on schooling is important. The perspectives recounted by the Aboriginal youth in this study were essentially shaped by the events and relationships encountered within the particular school contexts they described. They did not form in a vacuum but within a social climate and within relational architectures created in their particular circumstance. Particular architectures can

be said to not only enable or disable learning, they more importantly contribute to the development of a sense of self, as individuals are positioned culturally, socially, politically and emotionally. Personal recounts and perceptions of experiences within particular social situations – the classroom in this instance – provide a frame for understanding the actions, reactions and interactions and how these consequentially influence student identity. However, it is important to acknowledge that in studies such as this, the recounts themselves were situated in the social context created by conditions provided by the researcher. The research circumstance therefore enables participants the opportunity for “voice”, opportunities of which they would not otherwise have had. Therefore caution is required as data, such as those presented in this paper, are always twice removed from the situation in which they are produced as the researcher interprets the accounts of participants perceptive on experiences past (referred as the concept of “double difference”, Derrida, 1982).

#### ■ Background: Participants and context

Data for this study were collected with male Aboriginal adolescents enrolled at Tirkandi. The centre was established in 2006 as an intervention initiative for young Aboriginal boys who show potential but are at risk of entering the criminal justice system. Participants come from New South Wales communities located between the Lachlan and the Murray Rivers and between Balranald and the western side of the Blue Mountains. They often come to Tirkandi with complex family histories and have usually experienced exposure to violence, abuse, poverty, addiction, drugs and alcohol (either through personal affliction or as a witness).

Tirkandi was developed at a culturally relevant site at Coleambally, in the Riverina, New South Wales, as a response to the Black Deaths in Custody inquiry, the increase of youth suicide among males and the documented over-representation of Aboriginal males in the criminal justice system and supported by the New South Wales Attorney General’s department along with local Wiradjuri elders, the New South Wales Department of Education and New South Wales Health.

The centre aims to provide a “whole-of-life” experience incorporating educational, personal and cultural programs which offer opportunities to develop resilience and strengthen cultural and personal identity. Aboriginal elders along with other community personnel are involved as “teachers” in developing and implementing Tirkandi’s programs. Regular schooling is provided on-site, with classroom teachers provided through New South Wales Department of Education and Training. After “graduation” the young people return to their communities and mainstream school with an exit program which relies on support

from local Aboriginal elders, a school sponsor and a community mentor.

### ■ Methodology

This qualitative research took place at Tirkandi during the residential terms of three different cohorts, over 18 months. At 12 different sessions, interviews were conducted with 17 boys. Data was collected during semi-structured tape recorded individual “photointerviews” with 10 participants, focus group “photointerviews” with three participants, informal discussions with groups of students during participant observation sessions in classrooms, leisure activities and cultural programs. Some recurring individual interviews were conducted in a location selected by the participant; and it is noteworthy that these “localised” interviews became the inspiration for the creation of jointly constructed poetry (see conclusion for an example). Importantly the recursiveness of the research process (frequent visits over an extensive period of time) enabled the thematic perspectives to emerge.

The sample of participants was small and non-representative of all Aboriginal youth’s perspective of schooling. However the exclusivity of the sample was necessary to ascertain the perspectives among this particular group of Aboriginal people. Conducting focus group interviews and having informal discussions with groups of boys was an important way not to single out individual students, something about which Aboriginal students are reported to be particularly sensitive about (Russell, 1999). Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms (although some boys expressed a strong desire that their real names be used as they wanted to have their stories heard).

“Photointerviews” (the employment of photographs with semi-structured dialogue) was developed as a methodology in an attempt to conduct culturally relevant and inclusive form of ethnographic research. Methodological considerations were paramount as ethnographic representations remain a contested domain when concepts of culture are addressed (Clifford, 1988). The use of photographs, and in some cases other artifacts constructed by the participants at Tirkandi (e.g., classroom work samples, artworks – didgeridoos, paintings, jewelry, journal entries), provided a practical way for the researcher to firstly, support participants through the interview process in a way that balanced power, created a sense of ownership, fostered trust, built capacity and respond to cultural difference; and secondly, to provoke focused discussions with participants.

The photographs were either taken by the participants themselves or by mentors, teachers or youth workers and were used as to prompt discussions initially about its content. These photographs represented the things, places, activities or people participants liked, that helped them with their learning or that they

perceived as important. Discussions were discursive in nature as they generally moved to explorations beyond the photographs (or artifacts) with the aim to gain a deeper understanding of participant experiences and perceptions of school and schooling – deeper than would have been elicited by interviews alone. An important rationale for this approach was that photographs or artifacts provided the participants with opportunities to voice their perceptions about a range of experiences using “authentic” visual stimulus explore facts, opinions, discuss interpretations. And as a result, participants voiced powerful and specific reactions toward learning, school and classroom experiences under these main categories:

- Resistance and response: Actions and reactions in classrooms.
- Relational experiences: Interactions with teachers and other class members.
- Learning success.
- Cultural recognition, knowledge and appreciation.

In this study, it was crucial to have the voices stand out empirically. Transcript excerpts enable the voices of the participants to be positioned as the authoritative voice enabling them to be both the speaker and the authority of the experiences they are recounting (Harrison, 2003). Importantly, transcripts offer participants the opportunity to revisit the “conversations” to clarify and attribute their own meanings to the talk. Transcripts privilege the focal voices as they also enable the reader to develop their own interpretations rather than have perspectives mediated through the researcher/author (Edwards-Groves, 2007; Harrison, 2003). As readers can closely interrogate transcript data for themselves, it is important to note that the thematic interpretations and representations made in this paper are those of the authors (and care must be taken to acknowledge that the authors write over the informants words to draw their own conclusions, Derrida, 1982; Harrison, 2003).

### ■ Accounts of learning: Findings and discussion

Understanding provenance is important in contextualising the messages delivered by the participants in this study; it requires us to consider: Who are these boys? Where do these accounts come from? How are they formed? What relational experiences shaped their message? How do they account for and interpret the experiences and interactions they encounter in classrooms? What is life at school like for Aboriginal students in rural Australia?

The logic of the accounts presented relies on acknowledging the *lifeworlds* of these particular boys, who enter the educational domain with an already complex history. Relational architectures are the largely invisible, taken-for-granted aspects of pedagogical

practice which are often neglected in accounts of successful teaching and learning as educators focus on curriculum, assessment and other political agendas. Consequently, the following accounts are important for illuminating how particular practice and *relational architectures* are inextricably linked to the social relationships observed and experienced in classrooms.

*Voicing resistance and response: Actions and reactions in classrooms*

This section presents findings about how participants perceive and respond to classroom experiences. In this first set of transcripts participants clearly orient to hegemony and agency; their accounts describe how they use their own behaviours as a control mechanism to resist and respond to the power and authority demonstrated within classroom interactions. The segment below demonstrates the ways in which these class members actively and consciously participate in socially constructing the classroom; these boys choose to behave in particular ways and provoke particular formulations of interactive trouble:

Adrian (13 years): Teachers don't care about me, sometimes I feel that I am invisible ...

David (15 years): I don't think they trust us.

Adrian: We're not given responsibilities; jobs like the other kids, those things always go to the others, the white kids.

Jack (14 years): Teachers only teach the kids who already can do it, not me; I have trouble with reading and Maths, they always tell me "we've done that already why weren't you listening, or I've already told you".

David: I don't reckon they care, they seem to ignore us, I get into trouble all the time even when I don't do anything. I know I do do stuff that isn't right, like swear and stuff, but I don't care anymore.

Jack: And anyway I think I am dumb and stupid 'coz I am not as good as the others, they think that too.

Interviewer: Are all teachers the same? Do any treat you better?

Adrian: Some teachers are okay, seem to care.

Jack: Yeh, they're all the same to me [pause]. They don't seem to notice me; they ignore me, I put my hand up but they don't ask me, when the

work is too hard, they never give me work at my ability, like they do here [at Tirkandi].

Adrian: I put my hand up all the time too, but I get sick of it after a while. Then I get in trouble for not doing my work, oh you know, I just give up.

Interviewer: Can you think of any teachers that did listen to you? Talked to you?

David: Yep, Mr B, he's real mad, I really like him, when I am having a bad day he never gets mad, he always tries to reason with me and get it all sorted out. He listens to what I have to say, I respect him. I don't respect the others because they don't even try to understand me, see things from my side. They just yell, 'n want me out of the classroom, so I give 'em what they want and I go 'n see Mr B.

Interviewer: What about the other kids in the class?

David: It's not all kids, some of my friends are white, and they're cool, it's just some people, the teachers mainly don't like us.

Careful reading of this extract exemplifies how the social (fielding accusations of teacher's not listening, not selecting and not understanding) constructs student identity ("I think I am dumb and stupid, I am not as good as the others"). The power of self belief in achievement acts as a strong indicator of perceptions of schooling success (Russell, 1999). These perspectives direct us to the visibility of *relational architectures* as, in their view, teachers *only teach the able, they pick those who know*. Therefore, if we take teaching to be essentially an interactive endeavour, then what this extract demonstrates is that teachers relate differently to different students, explicitly connecting teaching with the interactive dimension of classrooms as a social experience. Instead of viewing students as individuals, these Aboriginal students report teachers favouring some over others: able over less able, black over white. Teachers overtly validate participatory rights of class members by their particular organisational structures.

In their descriptions, participants consciously turn their perceived powerless position (invisibility, distrust) into a powerful arrangement through a choice to display unacceptable behaviours, as indicated in the comment "so I give 'em what they want". Another reading of such comments suggest that some students behave as they are perceive they expected to behave, in a type of self-fulfilling prophecy, as they are severely compromised in their capacity to respond to a teacher's desire for compliance (Greene & Ablon, 2006).

Participants oriented to particular categorisations of interactive trouble (Freiberg & Freebody, 1995). These

are *interactive features* which give some purchase on understanding how classroom experiences are mutually constructed (Freiberg & Freebody, 1995, p. 297) and form particular *relational architectures* (interactive structures and routines) in classrooms. In the instance below, the categorisations of “relational trouble” (students relating in a preferred or expected way) and “reasoning trouble” (conflicts caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings) are evident.

Jack’s comment (above) “I think I am dumb and stupid ‘coz I am not as good as the others”, highlights the central role played by student’s self-evaluations in accounts of learning and school experiences. Another reading of this comment orients the reader to the notion that “it is better to act out than to be seen as *dumb and stupid*” (Lavoie, 1989; Levine, 2002). The effect Jack describes is that a low self concept about academic success is compounded by ongoing experiences of failure or ignorance, tenuous social relationships within school followed by ongoing and escalating incidences of lack of effort followed by less success and so forth. He has learnt that the “way to be a successful student” relies on being both the student the teacher wants you to be and your ability.

The notion of “othering” as socially generated phenomenon (Burnett, 2004) is often raised; for example the comment, “teachers only teach the kids who already can do it, not me” indicates a belief that they are “the others”. It suggests uneven treatment which perhaps unevenly mobilises them as successful learners. In their view, the more able warrant “more teaching”, the less able experience “less teaching”.

David’s description of Mr B (above) is notable as this same teacher was described 15 months later by Mark (13 years) as someone who “always tried to help, he always listened to me and my point of view”. Such positive descriptions offer insights into the crucial role of mentors in the lives of troubled youth. In their experience, “listening” leads to respect. These individuals need to experience genuine interactions which focus on them and their lives in a way that bridges their *lifeworlds* to particular system worlds, actively, visibly and genuinely. Relational architectures such as these are a paramount consideration in the construction of positive self identities among young people at risk of failure.

In the following accounts participants rationalise their classroom actions; their remonstrations are a direct response to their experience. Mikey and Sam participate in constructing interactive actions in expected ways; they act how they are expected to act [in their view]:

Mikey (14 years): I just walk out of the room, or kick something or swear – I may as well do something to get suspended then at least I can stay home. That’s what they want.

Sam (15 years): You don’t put your hand up any more ‘coz you don’t get picked anyway.

These accounts reveal uneven treatment in classrooms. The relational conditions for success in all classrooms need to be perceived by its members to have equal outcomes for all. It is important for all students if they are to develop an intrinsic desire to achieve even more success by investing sustained effort and persistence over their schooling life; this cannot happen if students do not perceive fair opportunities in classrooms.

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*Voicing relational experience: Interactions with teachers and other class members*

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Cutting across the pedagogical activities of the classroom are the interactions which constitute them. The classroom interactions described below demonstrate the ways of organising how cultural positions – and the individuals identified by those positions – are constituted and reconstituted as they progress from one context to another (Burnett, 2004). The accounts speak into existence *relational architectures* through versions of the cultural divide as participants substantiate various positions within a range of recurring themes: racism, teacher ignorance and lack of understanding and unresponsive teaching.

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*Racism*

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Racism was identified as a significant issue when participants were asked about challenges faced at school. This next explanation, by a 14 year-old boy, is an evocative account of what this boy takes racism to be “when people don’t respect you, they swear at you and make fun of you because you are ‘black’; because you are Aboriginal; people swearing at me all the time, fighting with me”.

In his view, the notion of racism still has much currency in his life and the lives of many young Aboriginal people in rural New South Wales. Whilst a robust raft of government policies, programs, agencies and strategies addressing the cultural and educational divide between Aboriginal people and the dominant white Anglo-Saxon culture (particularly prevalent in rural Australia) exists and have us believe that racism an old issue, the accounts presented here tell us otherwise. In the accounts from these boys, the signs are everywhere that racism is experienced within the interactive experiences of these people in their day-to-day lives at school. This next interchange highlights the experience of racism encountered by these Aboriginal students; it is their view that:

Adrian: We get it all the time; get called names like coon, nigger, blackfella, Abo, I don’t like it and when I stand up for myself or stick up for my cousins, I am the one that gets suspended, not

the one who started it, they [teachers] reckon I'm the bully.

David: And what can we do about it, they don't listen, don't take our word for it.

Jack: That's why I get mad and swear and stuff, I can't help it, it happens all the time

Adrian: It's because I'm black.

David: And I feel stuck in the middle sometimes, I am too white to be black, and too black to be white.

Racism, as an interactive category, is produced through the experience of it in the school context (explicitly – name calling, and implicitly – punishment because of retaliation). The representations here are based on the notion of difference. In their view they perceive that teachers condone racism by siding with the other students and not listening to their perspective; they take the actions, or inaction, of teachers to be connected to race. David's final comment also strongly reinforces a stark reality expressed by Foley (2007, p. 97) that "fair-skinned Aboriginal Australians continue to suffer identity problems", and offers us the window into the point that these Aboriginal students generally perceived their position in classrooms to be inequitable.

In the next examples we are taken to an experience which attributes not being trusted or being provided with responsibility to race. The viewpoint strongly encapsulates an expression of inequality and discrimination with comments strongly orienting the reader to the notion of the social constructedness of identity and perception:

I have never been asked to do a job for the teacher; they don't trust me or something. When I was in primary school I would have liked to get a job like taking a note around, the only thing I got was to go to the principal for was when something went wrong, must be 'coz I'm black.

What is noticed, by these boys, as valid participation and equity may, in fact, be invisible to the teachers they engage with on a daily basis; a finding reminiscent of the Malin study (1994) more than a decade ago which highlighted teachers were not aware of the role relational architectures (their interactive practices) had on student learning. Whilst "taking a note around" may seem as a mundane school activity, what it really means to classroom members is much more significant when we consider what it means to be a participating member of the social classroom culture. Sharing classroom responsibilities and trust are key elements of an effective learning community.

Participation rights, attitudes and equities are a part of the "invisibilities" that constitute the subculture of classrooms (Willes, 1983) and illuminate particular relational architectures which impact on how classroom participants perceive their experiences. What is produced interactively emphasises fundamental difference, and how these are perceived are crucial in the development of identity. Additionally, power differentials influence perceptions of successful participation in learning contexts and it is not just in what is said to students but also what is not said, and not done, to create what Burnett (2004) describes as "othering".

Adrian: They just ignore me, it's like they look over the top of me, I put up my hand but they never answer me, they just don't seem to see it and after a while you just give up. I don't care anymore

Interviewer: What that different or the same for you?

Jack: When it is hard I sometimes put my hand up to ask how to do it or what I have to do 'coz I didn't get it, they either ignore you or I just get into trouble for not listening and get sent out.

David: Nuh, the only time some teachers talked to me is when I was in trouble.

Adrian: When something goes wrong, or even if someone else is the cause, I always get the blame first even if I am not in it.

David's reference to the times teachers talk to him suggests a lack of interactive reciprocity and substantive, and possibly sustained, communication about the substance of lessons with his teachers. Such comments indicate lack of power and agency within social relationships at school. Anger and frustration are displayed in their words and blame is attributed to the teacher. According to Triplett (2004), feelings of anger and frustration signal that someone else is responsible for lack of success. If a student is feeling a struggle then he interprets that situation as not beneficial, and then interprets that the teacher is accountable for that experience. In addition, such perceptions help us understand how feelings related to struggle, such as anger, frustration are socially constructed in particular contexts and in particular relationships (Triplett, 2004, p. 221). Overtime these students constructed a negative view of schooling and attribute poor relationships, lack of agency and relevance to be associated with all teachers, all classrooms and all schools.

### *Practice architectures in classrooms*

Classrooms as learning environments hinge on the participation rights and architectures for learning within classrooms. It is interesting that a question seeking to elicit what helps these students with their learning, categorisations about effective pedagogy emerged. Part of the contestation that arises about effective classroom communities for learning in the accounts of these participants are the features of listening, sharing responsibilities, visibly demonstrating caring and listening, meeting learning needs, substantive communication, explicit teaching and opportunities for practice (all documented characteristics of a “quality teacher” see Department of Education and Training, Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate, 2003). These practices are identified as important to their learning, according to participants in this study.

Although it was expected that this particular group of boys would not speak favorably about their educational experiences, what was surprising was that their words enabled rich interpretations of the school experiences that connect their learning to the practice architectures of their teachers and their preferred ways of learning.

### *Responsive teaching*

In this instance Jack (14 years) expresses a lack of connectivity between his ability to achieve and opportunities for engaging in appropriate levels of work; “I reckon work should be at your own level, so you get it and can learn; the work in my other school is not at my ability level. It’s too hard”. And below, although Mark is offered support in the special class, his comment suggests a lack of explicit connectivity between relevance and practicality of the support:

Mark (13 years): They don’t understand what I need to learn, I like practical things, I hate reading and copying off the board it’s boring. I don’t know what I am copying down anyway so what’s the point.

Cam (13 years): We don’t have enough time to practice what they teach me.

Liam (14 years): There is lack of opportunities to do practical activities and experiments, and that’s what I like, so it means somethin’ to me.

Mark: I am often getting withdrawn from class to do boring things, and the others are doing interesting things.

Interviewer: What do you mean? Tell me what you mean by that.

Mark: Well, sometimes when I go to the special class we just do more boring stuff, and it doesn’t even help. I wish they would make it interesting and practical, make about, make it relate to something I know about.

The segment also explicates the feature of explicit teaching and the necessity for teachers foregrounding the explicit purpose of their lessons. The extent to which students are provided with explicit criteria for lessons is given importance by these participants. Threading through the dialogue are the pedagogical issues of not being provided sufficient time to practice, a desire for practical activities and teachers offering a full knowledge of what the task requires of them (procedurally and epistemologically).

Furthermore, most accounts express feelings of marginalisation, frustration, anger, and ultimately an acceptance that it is their Aboriginality that is a significant issue for their education. Comments such as “I don’t reckon they care”, “It’s because I am Aboriginal”, and “If only the teachers would have given me a fair go, I really want to do it, ‘coz I want a good job and all that” reveal a source of tension for these participants. When asked about “a fair go” for example, most of the boys connected this to teachers not listening to and meeting individual learning needs (providing work at their level). It is contended that these perceptions have a direct relevance to understanding successful education and entrench a sense of disempowerment within these students. More importantly, the teachers the boys are describing seem to be, albeit unintentionally, participating in culturally divisive activity. Interestingly, the perspectives are widespread and frequent (as these boys come from an extensive geographical region).

One could read these comments as a prevailing challenge for education in the main, as these Aboriginal students report having to wrestle with educational experiences which deprive them of overt opportunities to develop the social, cultural, personal and emotional resources required to be educationally successful.

### *Voicing resilience and success: Connecting lifeworlds to system worlds*

This section illuminates the importance of teacher knowledge of student’s everyday life experiences to relational and learning success, a feature of the Tirkandi program. What differentiates Tirkandi from mainstream schooling is that the classroom context at Tirkandi is inextricably bound to the cultural, ideological, personal and educational dimensions of this “whole-of-life” program: each compliments the other. It is important to note that accounts presented are premised on more holistic perspectives of learning from across all Tirkandi programs rather than on the classroom alone, reinforcing the notion that



situations connecting lifeworlds to systems enhance learning success.

The first excerpt is worthy of close attention as it shows comparative differences between Tirkandi and mainstream classroom contexts and highlights the role that developing personal reciprocity within classrooms relationships with students has on perceptions of success and achievement. Personal reciprocity (where both interactive participants benefit from the relationship) ensures mutual respect, genuine listening and understanding between classroom participants:

Stanley (15 years): Here they [the teachers] listen to you, and they mean it.

Malcolm (14 years): At my other school the teachers ignore you and then walk away and help the other kids.

Stanley: At my other school it is too hard, then I just walk out of class 'coz I get sick of waiting ... sometimes I just leave and go home but here they help me get it. I reckon they want to get to know me more and if I have a bad day they get over it, move on, I like 'em here.

Malcolm: Before, they always tell me I am not listening to them when I don't understand something ... here they want to help, at my other school they don't want to help.

Jarrold (14 years): Here, the teachers recognise our abilities and take the time to get to know us ... they show us how to do things and we talk about things more; I can go slower, then I can get it.

Reflections give high priority to learning relationships. In their view particular relational characteristics seemingly help remove barriers to academic success; these boys recognise the importance of teacher knowledge about them (as individuals), a desire to help, a recognition of ability and teacher resilience ("they get over it, move on") as indicators of success. This mirrors findings reported by Franklin and Streeter (2004) who found the nature of classroom relationships to be a significant indicator of success and achievement in a program similar to Tirkandi. Similarly the next instance reflects features of learning success valued by participants in this context:

David: It's cool here, *I feel okay when I go to school here, I like to see the teachers, you can have a joke with 'em here.*

Adrian: *I like learning that I was good at something, like art, playing the guitar and the didge, I never did those things before, they always encourage us here, I didn't get that before.*

Interviewer: What about you Jack?

Jack: They know what you are like here, I feel good, *it's friendly.*

Adrian: *They told me how to do stuff, an' helped me, I hated poetry, I didn't even think I could do it anyway, but when we did the poem it was mad, 'coz we talked about it, it was so good, I felt so proud that I could do something like that.*

Jack: They get me.

Adrian: *I learnt what I'm good at.*

David: I have learn to try to ask more questions in school, *I am getting good at this.*

The positive attitudes, reflected in this extract, are shaped by a sense of belonging, success and achievement (see italicised comments above). Accounts reveal a sense of control, and success directly orients the right of students to know their capacities relationally ("I feel okay, we can have a joke") and educationally ("knowing what I am good at") in the overall process of education. Perspectives also provide insight into the importance of teacher feedback in developing positive attitudes and self-belief. Furthermore, consistency in what is overtly valued and explicitly recognised across different educational contexts is necessary for students if they are to develop a positive sense of engagement in their learning, in their learning environment and in their future endeavours.

Aspirations for better futures were expressed, but even more importantly, participants implied that it was within their power and control:

*I need to learn to keep trying even if it is hard or I don't like it, If I am going to be a good man and good husband I need to make better choices to stay out of trouble and this the courage to say "no" will help me be better, I need to try to stop and think about my actions first.*

Such statements reveal how these boys typically attributed resilience to paving a better future and offer optimistic and hopeful outcomes. Comments such as "I want to do it, to learn, so I can get a good job" and "I want to teach my culture when I leave school" are representative of how these boys intrinsically linked employment and education and a desire for a better future.

#### *Connectivity and understanding personal histories*

Participants highlight the need for an overt connectivity between school experiences and understanding the complexity of individual *lifeworlds*. The comments

below act as a reminder of the harsh realities experienced by some young Aboriginal people in rural New South Wales. These portrayals are not rendering the boys as victims, but rather a genuine call for compassion, understanding and acknowledgment of their social circumstance. One participant suggests, "it would help if teachers tried to know about us and our culture, knowing what I have to go through would help I reckon".

These examples offer anecdotal evidence revealing the impact of disadvantage and hardship on school life. One boy states:

People don't understand what I have got to go through, my family stuff, and that I have had to look after myself, live with violence, drugs and alcohol and abuse all my life, another says, they don't know me and what I have to go through everyday, sometimes it is just too hard to concentrate, to think about school stuff when I am tired.

Whilst this revelation in itself is not new, what is reflected is that there is a visible lack of acknowledgment. The accounts suggest that social capacities may well be enhanced in school contexts where a connection between public and personal histories is overt, visible and acknowledged in a genuine way. As these histories collide it is necessary for teachers to construct equitable and just social relations which are built upon mutual respect, collective knowledge and shared understandings.

#### *Voicing cultural recognition, knowledge and appreciation*

The set of descriptions about Aboriginality are robust and dynamic perspectives centering on the importance of cultural knowledge, respect and connectivity. Personal knowledge of history, culture, story and tradition, both at the local level and wider level was limited among the boys, as many entered Tirkandi with little knowledge about what "Aboriginality" means. Their cultural histories were formed as a result of social interactions with others rather than having explicit knowledge about Aboriginality. Their public identities were representations of what "others" took being Aboriginal to mean (as described in sections above – lazy, badly behaved, not trustworthy, black, not engaged, and so on). For instance comments such as "it was good to learn about the importance of the land, learning 'bout Aboriginal people helps us respect our elders, our community, grandparents, other people like teachers and kids in school even those who don't respect us".

Participant perspectives act as a signpost for sharing knowledge and developing a culturally relevant pedagogy, as Adrian suggests here:

We learn to listen and appreciate [and respect] our elders and teachers, in one way we learn by using our senses, by looking and talking about it as well as listening. We go out to the scrub and learn about our culture and the land and the geography stuff and how they all relate to each other ... then we can understand it, it makes sense when we have to read it in the books back at school.

The extract below highlights the impact that a lack of teacher knowledge about Aboriginal culture has on learning experiences. In their perspective, participants indicated widespread agreement that learning about culture was an important characteristic of effective interactions for all involved in education.

Adrian: They [teachers and kids] don't know about us and our culture so they ignore us.

Interviewer: Do you think that knowing about Aboriginal culture would help teachers and the other kids?

Adrian: I think everyone should know more about Aboriginal people, even the teachers and the other kids. I didn't know much about being Aboriginal 'til I come here, so I s'pose they don't either.

David: Na, I didn't know it 'til I got here, didn't know nothin' 'bout this stuff.

Interviewer: How about you Jack? What do you think? What did you know?

Jack: Nothin' [pause] just knew I was Koori, nothin' else, what that meant or anything, just bein' black.

Interviewer: So if you didn't know, and they still don't know, what do you think could be done to help the situation for other Aboriginal kids at school, your brothers and sisters and cousins?

David: Dunno.

Jack: S'pose it's hard for them too.

Adrian: Listen to each other more, I could teach them now I know 'bout it more ... Learning about our culture and traditions helps us to understand ourselves more; what it was like for our family years ago and why Aboriginal people did some things like the dances to tell a story and that.

Jack: It was good to learn about the art, it is mad ... it would be good for all people to know it.

These comments acknowledge difference but point to the importance of developing a shared and inclusive knowledge about Australian Aboriginal history and culture. In part, the views (by 13 and 14 year-old boys) are an inspirational reminder of the complexity of the issue faced by educators in contemporary Australian classrooms. But more importantly the comments lead us to consider that providing a genuine communicative space between educators and Aboriginal students, a space which enables the student to become a vital resource, has the potential to create far-reaching changes to social relations with people in mainstream communities. This point substantiates work by Rubie (1999) who previously found significant improvements in classroom performance of Maori students were evident when teaching recognises and develops cultural awareness. Explicit knowledge about heritage and culture could enable teachers to respond to learners in an informed way as they develop a fuller sense of student discourse and identity. Osborne (2003) suggests that teaching in a culturally relevant way demonstrates an awareness of student's prior experiences and fosters cultural identity. Accepting that the identity of these Aboriginal students is socially constructed, and that their historical circumstance is entwined with all other social contexts would yield an education which is transparent, visibly just and genuinely responsive.

### ■ Implications

Mistakenly the spotlight of concern for Aboriginal students is often on results and performance rather than on classroom culture and interaction. Ignoring student's perspectives of their experiences of schooling leaves educators meandering about searching for that overlooked piece of evidence or 'strategy' that will unlock learning for these students. In fact, the voices here ask that attention be focused squarely on three things: firstly, on how students account for and understand the culture of classroom life; secondly, on how classrooms operate interactively (the *relational architectures*); and thirdly, on ways to ensure classroom pedagogy explicitly connect *lifeworlds* and system worlds.

Relational architectures can academically and socially marginalise some Aboriginal students in mainstream classrooms. Participant accounts not only illuminate the relational features and power differentials operating in classrooms, but seem to indicate classrooms learning experiences do not provide a sufficient passport to life in mainstream society. What permeates the accounts is a sense of disempowerment and disengagement as these Aboriginal students have constructed their perspectives of schooling because of particular interactive conditions encountered in classrooms; these young people have voiced distinctive social and cultural subjectivities as a result. Accounts presented are sufficient in revealing

that particular relational architectures act as a barrier to positive sense of self, success and achievement, blocking access to curriculum and, possibly, to further education and/or employment.

For these Aboriginal youth, the school is a noticeable site where discriminatory practices are both promoted and maintained. But time for change is necessary. And as suggested by Burnett (2004), schools in general and classrooms more specifically should more overtly become the site where particular notions of difference can be challenged and de-legitimised by all of its members. Moreover, this must be visible within all classroom interactions. These students need to be treated as a resource for their own future; they need to be recruited as human capital in their own learning. Schools and classrooms are critical links to a future where relational architectures overtly establish culturally and socially relevant teaching.

Behaviours in and out of classrooms are socially constructed, often in a patterned way, and these patterns are intricately linked to the social identities formed in particular settings such as school. And since attitudes are associated with varying notions of success and agency, overturning these perspectives is paramount for successful engagement and participation in education. Responsibility needs to be taken and time needs to be taken for schools to develop practical and realistic strategies that genuinely address this challenge. It also relies on classroom teachers reconstructing learning environments, in particular relational architectures, which visibly value cultural and personal difference, not just pedagogically, but more importantly relationally. For Aboriginal boys such as those in this study, there must be an overt display knowledge and understanding of the impact that personal histories have on the everyday success at school so that when their lifeworlds meets the system world there is an authentic connection between them, such as experienced in the Tirkandi classroom. What is different in teaching and learning in this context is that the relationships are formed with the full knowledge and acceptance of the background experiences of these boys. Listening to student voices contributes to the development of genuine relationships which form the core of educational success.

We cannot take for granted the comments expressed in these accounts and what they symbolise for our society. Simply, the policies of the past do not immunise young Aboriginal people against experiencing the division created by uneven interactive encounters in classrooms. They cannot be brushed away as just words from sceptical, disengaged young people rationalising "poor classroom behaviours". How ever these comments are rationalised by the schooling system or whether they are substantiated or not by schools, these views are valid because comments such as this take us to the heart of identity and agency for individual students in classrooms. Furthermore

these students need to know that they can learn and be successful.

Identity is forged in the context of social practices and how these boys perceive themselves is clearly constructed through the social interactions or relational architectures experienced in their day-to-day interactions. In the accounts presented in this paper, classroom experiences often act as additional negative life experiences which contribute to compounding the complexity of the lives of these young people "at risk" of contact with the criminal justice system and their voices simply cannot be ignored. What is needed is firstly a closer relationship between home and school with explicit connections between lifeworlds and system worlds of schooling being made and acknowledged; and secondly, attention by teachers given to the moment-by-moment relational dimensions of their everyday classroom interactions with Aboriginal students

### ■ Conclusion

Concern about Aboriginal education attracts much attention and controversy in contemporary Australia. Public policy over the years has attempted to redress the engagement of Aboriginal students in schooling, yet the perspectives presented here contend that interactive barriers continue to restrict participatory equity for young Aboriginal people from successfully engaging in their schooling. The voices heard in this study reflect the notion of agency and personal identity developed within the situated contexts of classrooms. And these accounts illuminate how classroom experiences simultaneously shape agency, perceptions and identity within that context. These boys come to school with already difficult life circumstances and this places them at high risk of a life which will continue to be beset with violence, abuse, addiction and crime. This, in itself, creates a complex context for classroom teachers, but ultimately teachers have control over how they shape their own classroom culture, how they construct particular relational architectures, how they influence participatory equity, how they know and understand learners, and how they respond relationally, pedagogically and politically.

It is not to suggest that these young people think they are "in the right", they know and can articulate their shortcomings (academically and socially) and they know what they want from their education. It is about turning around disadvantage in a way that harnesses their social and cultural capital as a strengthening resource in the educational arena. These students need opportunities to make meaningful and relevant connections between their *lifeworlds* and system worlds (in school for example).

At least part of the issue falls to the need for systems to heed the message of the insider, in this case the voices of adolescent Aboriginal boys who experience

difficulty and hardship on a daily basis. Neglecting these voices deprives them from developing the necessary competence and resilience (as prioritised at Tirkandi) for dealing with conflicting life imperatives and a possible inner-tension for these boys having to preserve culture on the one hand, or abandon it for the sake of a mainstream education. In shaping future pedagogy, knowing about student perception is a crucial turning point. Teachers who know how individual students perceive and understand classroom experiences will be better equipped to respond to individual students, and will enable them to be in a strong position to redesign inequitable interactive or relational architectures. It also points to the need for all involved in education to visibly pay due regard to the nuances of cultural and societal difference so that education, in and of itself, is sustained. This can be done if classroom interactions or relational architectures are elevated to be a crucial educational resource.

These accounts established that teachers and other class members lack cultural, social and political knowledge and understanding about Aboriginality. Developing culturally aware schools would provide a supportive foundation from which to build a system, and educational experience, which positions teachers in a way that gives visible agency to the young Aboriginal people they teach. If Adrian's teacher knew, for example, the importance of responsibility, then he might turn more attention to matters of sharing classroom responsibilities equally among class members. If Jack's teacher was aware of the importance of sustained and substantive practice to Jack's success, then he might more consciously ensure all classroom tasks are supported overtly with multiple opportunities for practicing skills in order to develop deep knowledge and understandings.

This article suggests a renewed scrutiny on classroom interactions and more importantly still offers teachers an impetus for changing the perspectives of the "racialised marginalized other" (to use Burnett's term, 2004) so that the ways of being an Aboriginal student in Australian classrooms can be perceived as relevant, just and balanced. Then teacher's actions and interactions will be demonstrably wise, prudent and appropriate in the treatment of all students in their classrooms.

### *Between cultures: Concluding expressions of a cultural paradox*

The perspectives about experiences in the mainstream school context of these "at risk" youth highlighted several key themes of interest to all educators and community members. The following poem is representative of the themes and issues facing Aboriginal youth in contemporary regional Australia and beyond. The following piece (and others like it), express the values and positive attitudes towards their

Aboriginality which was revealed in the interviews. It clearly demonstrates the cultural paradox of a people locked between cultures and the changing perspectives of the participants after time at Tirkandi.

#### ■ An extract from “My Voice: There and Here” by Adrian

*There....*

You didn't see me,  
Look at me; really look me in the eyes  
To listen, really listen

My hand went up,  
But you didn't see it and I got tired  
My hand got tired, my heart got tired;  
and it hurt

When you gave up on me,  
I gave up on you and your teaching  
You ignored me,  
I was there but I was invisible

*Here....*

I journeyed to respect.  
I learnt to respect my Elders, my grandparents and my  
parents  
I learnt to respect myself. I am Aboriginal and I like it  
because I am.  
I will continue to learn, to respect  
    It will take strength and courage, but I don't  
    want trouble;  
    I will respect.

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