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ADDRESSING *the* FOUNDATIONS *for* IMPROVED INDIGENOUS SECONDARY STUDENT OUTCOMES: A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN QUALITATIVE STUDY

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■ Abstract

It is well documented, that Indigenous students, compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts, attend school less frequently, and are more likely to develop anti-schooling attitudes leading to their early exit from school (Hayes et al., 2009; Gray & Partington, 2003; Hunter & Schwad, 2003). Although research does suggest that there has been some gradual improvements in some areas of education over the years, serious gaps still remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student learning outcomes. There is a great need, to build on the more significant research on Indigenous education that is focused on exploring the achievement potentials of Indigenous students to address the foundations for improved Indigenous student outcomes. This paper reports on a South Australian qualitative study based on interviews with 36 Indigenous senior secondary students, on factors which facilitate improved learning and achievement, leading to higher levels of secondary school completion among Indigenous youth.

■ Introduction

Since the early 1970s, there have been a number of important developments in Indigenous education to work towards improved levels of Indigenous student school participation and achievement, including the implementation of bilingual/bicultural education, “both-ways” or “two-way schooling” and the conceptualisation of the “learning styles” theory. The development of the both-ways schooling and theories of bi-culturalism, came as a result of the original work of Harris (1980) on *Tradition and Education in Northeast Arnhem Land*, maintaining the belief that there are significant differences in the ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people learn. According to Harris (1990) the dilemma was that Western academic success was likely to be destructive of Aboriginal culture and language and hence the need for appropriate schooling. The central importance of these early theories was that it enabled “simultaneous Aboriginal cultural maintenance and academic success” (Harris, 1990, p. xiii) for Indigenous students in school, and led to the premise that Indigenous people were in fact capable of learning and becoming educated.

Although the model of bilingual education has been widely supported by educators and Aboriginal communities, parents and leaders alike, there have been several critiques in the last decade, of its effectiveness to achieve improved educational outcomes, particularly with regards to literacy in the mainstream language. Munns et al. (2003, p. 146) points out that, “theories of cultural difference and ways of learning, such as those highlighted by Harris (1980), have influenced ideas about classroom practices for Aboriginal students, suggesting that culturally appropriate curricula need to be developed”. According to Nicholls et al. (1996), these differences mean that teachers involved in the teaching of Aboriginal students, whether children or adults, must alter or modify their classroom teaching approaches and practices in order to achieve successful learning outcomes. Critics of Harris’s “learning styles” theory, conclude that there is no single “Aboriginal” way of learning, but that Aboriginal children use a variety

of styles and strategies to learn, that are reflective of the individual (Stewart, 2002; Nicholls et al., 1996, 1998). To date, Harris's "learning styles" theory has been arguably one of the most influential theories in Indigenous Australian education research.

In addressing the foundations for improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students in school, a central question remains: how better to align school with the diverse backgrounds of students to enable improved learning outcomes? Many studies in Australia and internationally have been successful in identifying effective evidence-based interventions and solutions for addressing some of the educational disparities that remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes. More recent Australian studies by McDonald (2003), Mercurio and Clayton (2001) and Strachan (2004) investigate the achievement potentials of Indigenous secondary students, contributing to greater understandings of important factors which facilitate improved levels of secondary school completion. Mercurio and Clayton (2001) point to the importance of career goals, a positive academic and cultural identity and positive attitudes towards school, for facilitating improved levels of Indigenous students completing Year 12 and achieving the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). McDonald (2003), on the other hand, indicates that improved levels of Indigenous student engagement and learning success can be attributed to exemplary classroom teaching practices. Strachan (2004) illuminates the importance of family and school-based support in her research focused on exploring the success of a group of Indigenous secondary school completers, in Alice Springs, Northern Territory.

In the last decade, there has been some recognition by the Australian governments on the need to close the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and to identify the factors which have a potential influence on achieving successful outcomes for Indigenous students in school. The 2008 National Apology to members of the Stolen Generations, by the former Australian prime minister, Kevin Rudd brought widespread awareness on the need to address some of the current issues in Indigenous education, health and employment outcomes, with a commitment to setting concrete targets. Over the years, strategies and programmes implemented by the Australian governments, such as the Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPi), have served as affirmative action measures to affect improved parent participation in school and to work towards better schooling outcomes for Indigenous learners. The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and school-based homework centres were developed to improve Indigenous student engagement in education, and academic achievement. Whilst Indigenous student scholarships have assisted Indigenous families to cover the cost of school tuition fees and boarding, and

improve levels of school participation, unfortunately most scholarships have been restricted to those students who attend schools largely in the private education sector.

Although these important educational developments have had some positive impact resulting in gradual improvements to Indigenous student outcomes in Australia, the research does indicate that in comparison to the progress made in Indigenous education by our neighbouring country New Zealand, as well as Canada and the United States, we still have a long way to go before reaching similar levels of national commitment to improving Indigenous student outcomes. For example, in the United States in the last decade, there have been greater levels of commitment to culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth, resulting in the incorporation of a bicultural curriculum in many community schools to affect student engagement and performance (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008). The concept of culturally responsive schooling developed in response to pressure placed on the United States federal government in the 1980s and 1990s, to work towards providing Indigenous people with more control and authority in the education of Indigenous youth. The concept of culturally responsive schooling derives from research on cultural difference and broader research on multicultural education, and assumes the position that culture and culture based learning potentially lead to improved Indigenous educational outcomes.

There are a number of important elements associated with the concept, including: school policy, teacher knowledge, curriculum, pedagogy, student expectations, standards, assessments and community involvement among others (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008). Advocates of culturally responsive schooling including Kanu (2007), Matthews et al. (2005) and Watego (2005) have similarly found that making classroom curriculum and structures more culturally compatible and consistent with the home cultures of students, results in successful outcomes for students, including better school engagement, improved self-confidence and higher cognitive skills.

■ Research design and methods of enquiry

This study was primarily an investigation into Indigenous student attendance, retention, learning and achievement, aimed to identify factors that facilitate improved levels of student success and completion of secondary school. Using qualitative methods of enquiry enabled the collection of fine-grained and characteristic data on Indigenous student experience with comprehensive insights into ways to effectively engage students in learning and improve levels of school attendance, retention and attainment. Thirty-six Indigenous senior secondary students participated in the face-to-face

interview research, conducted over a 12 month period, in the year 2004. The study intended to represent students from a variety of contexts and so schools were randomly selected from the three main schooling sectors in South Australia including: public, private and independent, and also from urban and country locations. The criteria for student selection was that firstly, a student needed to be determined to complete Year 12 and identified as successful in his or her schooling, and secondly, experiencing possible barriers to his or her school success. This particular criterion was to enable the analysis to investigate important factors contributing to Indigenous student achievement, but also some of the potential barriers for school success. Ethics approval for the research was provided by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee, along with approval from relevant education authorities including the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and Catholic Education South Australia. Student and parent consent was also sought and granted, along with formal approval from the participating schools to conduct the research. Each of the 15 schools approached agreed to take part in the study and supported the development and administration of the research within their school.

The interview questions focused primarily on student perspectives on school, the impact of teachers on learning, factors that promote student achievement in school, student futures and career goals, family support, and the impact of culture on student learning and school success. Each student interview was audio recorded and then later transcribed. The openness and informality of the student interviews allowed for a strong Indigenous student voice to emerge on the various topics discussed, contributing to the collection of some important data on student school experience, learning and achievement. An important focus of the interview research was also to explore the school success of the Year 12 students who went on to successfully achieve their SACE. Data provided by DECS, the year following the interviews, identified 13 out of 15 of the Year 12 students interviewed, who attained their SACE. The analysis of this particular student cohort was important as it enabled the contributing factors for their successful school completion and SACE achievement to be identified and further explored.

Collating the interview research data and analysing the results, was reliant on the use of the qualitative software package NVIVO version 7, by QSR International. Using the NVIVO program in research allows complex and non-numerical data to be classified, sorted, and arranged thematically, to enable deep levels of analysis for small or large research samples. To begin the process of analysis, the student transcriptions were

coded into main thematic and descriptive themes; including family, culture, learning, school success, attendance, motivation, futures, teachers and peers. This allowed for further investigation into some of the potential factors influencing Indigenous students and their school success, retention, attendance and motivation for learning. In the process of analysing the descriptive responses, data was also considered in relation to existing research on Indigenous student outcomes in Australia and internationally, locating similarities, discrepancies and consistencies among more current research. This process was to enable some of the findings to be validated among the more significant research on Indigenous student outcomes. Through this analysis, similar themes began to emerge as being important for Indigenous student success, including; culturally responsive teachers, family encouragements for completing school, school cultural support and student motivations for learning and achievement. The results were significant in supporting a number of important studies in the United States, Canada and New Zealand on Indigenous student success, illustrating the impact of culture and culture based learning for improving the educational outcomes for Indigenous youth.

The analysis of the qualitative data was informed by a framework of theory relating to culturally responsive schooling, culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural safety. These theories are guided by the premise that schooling which is culturally respectful, compatible and inclusive, and incorporates the home backgrounds of students, has the potential to enhance Indigenous student learning and achievement. Culturally responsive schooling is seen as a promising strategy for improving Indigenous student achievement because it enhances their academic involvements in learning, whilst respecting and valuing the importance of their cultures and worldviews (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Teachers, who position themselves within a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations, hold high expectations of their students; provide them with regular feedback on their schooling and believe in their ability to be successful in school. The concept of cultural safety is about students feeling safe to express themselves individually and collectively. Williams (1999, p. 213) argues that culturally safe environments allow students to be what they are and who they want to be, with "no assault, challenge or denial of their identity".

■ Results and discussion

Students retention and completion of the SACE

An important focus of this study was on identifying some of the significant factors which facilitate improved levels of Indigenous student retention

and secondary school completion. Based on the interview results, 30 students indicated their desire to complete Year 12. Data from DECS did also indicate that 13 out of 15 students who were undertaking Year 12, had been successful in completing Year 12 and achieving their SACE at the end of the year. There were a number of important factors identified from the student responses, contributing to higher levels of student retention, leading also to the successful completion of the SACE. Important factors influencing student retention were highlighted as; regular school attendance, support from home, school and others, a comfortable happy home environment, well developed and planned career aspirations, positive schooling motivations, responsibilities demonstrated to schooling, positive peer and teacher relationships, a positive cultural identity and a culturally supportive school environment. The results of the interviews did also indicate that school enjoyment as well as the perceived value students have of school, were found to be significant among those Year 12 students who had achieved their SACE. For example, the following quote by Coreen (pseudonyms used for each student), a Year 12 female student who attended a country public school demonstrates this, when asked what things keep her at school and assist her academic success, she said “probably because I’ve enjoyed coming to school. It’s never been dragging myself out of bed just to get here kind of thing. But it use to be like that before Year 12”.

Some Year 12 female students explained that the encouragement to continue on at school came from their own motivation to do well and succeed academically, to inspire others in their own family and community; by being a positive role model and becoming the first person in the family and community to complete school. For example, Lowan, a Year 12 student, who lived away from home to attend an urban Aboriginal school was asked why he wanted to stay on to complete Year 12. He says “Cos none of my other family, they haven’t been to Year 12 before. I’m the only one in the family”.

Yani, a Year 12 female student, who attended an urban public school, responds similarly when asked the same question: “Probably the recognition that you get for it, especially for being Aboriginal. Like there’s not a lot of people in my family that have finished Year 12, so it’s a big thing”.

Many of the interviewed students discussed educational changes or improvements they perceived were needed to make to school more encouraging and motivating for Indigenous students to remain on at school to complete Year 12 and achieve the SACE. Most student comments reflected the need for more cultural input and inclusivity, within schools; more Indigenous teachers and school staff, as well as the inclusion of Aboriginal Studies as a core subject, or

as integrated units of work in subjects, to encourage positive retention among Indigenous students. This was illustrated by Yileena, a Year 12 female student who attended an urban public school:

I think we need more Aboriginal teachers. Because like Nan, as the AEW, she’s always in the classes with the girls and they do work a lot better. So if you’ve got someone there that’s sort of like them [Aboriginal], then that does make it better.

Some students also talked about schools and the education system needing to address the apparent high dropout rate of Indigenous students from secondary school, by looking at providing a more flexible school learning system. For example, Frank, a Year 12 male student who attended an urban public school, commented that:

I think that they need to address the Aboriginal dropout rate and of course try to have a more flexible learning system, because if they wanted to try doing Year 10, 11 and 12 subjects here ... the only problem is ... is that you can’t. You’ve got to do it this way; you have to include this stuff and you can’t merge subjects together because it’s too complicated.

The following Year 12 student, Nerida, who lived away from her home community to attend an urban Aboriginal school, suggested an idea of making videos and other promotional resources to promote the SACE and the benefits of achieving the SACE to Indigenous students in remote communities. Nerida believed that this strategy would be effective in increasing the numbers of Indigenous students, particularly those from rural and remote areas, staying on at school to complete Year 12 and achieve their SACE;

They need to make videos and stuff; like of Aboriginal role models and about Aboriginal kids going to school, and finishing their Year 12, and have them talk about their experiences and about celebrating Year 12 ... like the formals and stuff. Like showing other kids in the community what it’s like to finish Year 12.

Whilst there were many subject and learning recommendations expressed by students, to work towards increasing the number of Indigenous students staying on at school to achieve the SACE, it was strongly apparent that more cultural input and inclusiveness in schools is needed to achieve this. When schools provide a high quality education that is culturally relevant, challenging and connects to cultural knowledge systems and practices, then this

is likely to result in improved schooling outcomes for Indigenous student learners, including higher levels of secondary school completion.

The impact of culture on Indigenous student outcomes

Research suggest that culture and also language play an important role in the learning outcomes of students (Watego, 2005; Brayboy & Castagno, 2008). The student interviews did also indicate that certain cultural elements are important for Indigenous student motivation, enhanced learning and academic success. These include a students' positive cultural identity, having Indigenous teachers in school, as well as a culturally responsive and relevant curriculum, culturally responsive relationships between teachers and school cultural support. Based on the results, eleven out of the 36 students interviewed reported undertaking Aboriginal studies at school, either as a separate subject, a language or units of work integrated through different subjects. The responses did indicate that all of these students maintained good relationships and interactions with their teachers in school, demonstrated strong desire to complete Year 12, were regular school attendees and perceived themselves as successful students. This shows a positive correlation between culturally responsive schooling and enhanced Indigenous educational outcomes, particularly in terms of student engagement and motivation. The findings also support wide-spread research on culturally responsive schooling, and cultural safety in schools, suggesting that the role of culture and language "is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally healthy students" (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008, p. 733). Based on the results of the student interviews, enhanced student engagement and achievement was apparent, among the students who reported undertaking Aboriginal Studies. The following Year 12 student, Kala, who attended an urban public school and considered herself a successful student, reflects on her enjoyment of Aboriginal Studies and how her interest and engagement in the subject led to higher levels of academic achievement:

I like Aboriginal Studies here. I got like the highest mark last year for the exam; 94 percent! In Women's Studies, there's a lot to do with Aboriginal culture and that, so that's really good ... and in history class also.

Similarly, the following Year 12 female student, Alexis, who attended a country public school, reflects on her enjoyment Aboriginal studies through subject integration units of work, which illustrate her positive engagement in learning:

We did an assignment on it [Aboriginal culture]. We did two actually; we did one on the movie *Yolngu Boy*; we did a film review of that and what it's like to be growing up in the 21st century trying to follow tradition as well. I really enjoyed this assignment. It was really good. It made me realise a bit about my own culture ... and we did another assignment on Eddie Mabo about the Power of One and Indigenous rights and stuff like that. The project was good because it made everyone in the class see that Aboriginal people and that this Aboriginal person was intelligent enough to make all these important changes in law.

Based on the results, it was strongly apparent that all students who undertook Aboriginal Studies or cultural learning's in school clearly enjoyed the opportunity to explore their cultures, which resulted in the students demonstrating strong subject motivation, higher standards of achievement and motivation to continue attendance to complete Year 12. Research by Bevan-Brown (2005) and Kanu (2007) have similarly found that the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum can lead to the achievement potential of students, including higher levels of academic skills, as well as improved interest in school.

The interview responses demonstrated that the majority of students believed that their identity, culture and community were important to them. Among those interviewed, a positive Indigenous identity was seen in relation to academic success and enhanced school competency. This was demonstrated by a high proportion of those who positively identified as Indigenous; regularly attending school, expressing their enjoyment and perceived value of school, holding higher academic self-concepts and indicating their desire to complete their secondary education. Jimmy and Zelda in their interviews highlighted the importance of a positive cultural identity for enhancing student achievement and academic competency. For example, Jimmy, who attended an urban public school, highlights the connection between a positive cultural identity and academic competency: "I feel good about myself, I can be confident at school because I know who I am; being Aboriginal is an important part of who I am".

Zelda, a Year 10 female student, who attended an urban Aboriginal school, explains a similar viewpoint: "It means a lot [being Aboriginal] when you're achieving higher; higher goals". Some interviewed students further explained the importance of their identity in connection with their culture, with some indicating that hearing Indigenous success stories gave them a sense of pride, and a feeling of wanting to emulate that success in their own personal lives. This has been highlighted in the following comment by Dorak, a Year 12 male student who attended an urban private school:

To see Aboriginal [people] achieve and then to be able to say look, we can all achieve, it's just a matter of applying yourself. And when you see people like Cathy Freeman and sports people who achieve; it's a good feeling.

These findings are significant in supporting research in New Zealand by Bishop and Berryman (2006) highlight the importance of a positive cultural identity for Indigenous (Māori) student success. Similarly, research in Australia by Beresford and Partington (2003) and Bevan-Brown (2005) also indicates that Indigenous children who have knowledge and pride in their identities and cultures are more likely to develop to their academic potentials and go on to reach success in their schooling.

Culturally responsive teachers

A recently developed concept of culturally responsive pedagogy of relations is focused on exploring the impact of teacher and student relationships and student learning outcomes. In developing this concept, Bishop and Berryman (2003) drew from the work of Villegas and Lucas (2002) on culturally responsive teachers and Gay (2000, 2002) on culturally responsive schooling. There are a number of important practical elements associated with the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy of relations. In schools, the concept aims to foster relationships between teachers and students that are built with a commitment by teachers to care and relate to students personally and pedagogically and in positive, interactive and non-dominating ways. These teachers demonstrate a caring attitude towards students and their individual needs, on a daily basis; they also hold high expectations of them for their schooling and believe in their ability to succeed in school (Bishop et al., 2007; Gay, 2000, 2002).

Data from the student interviews did indicate that teachers, in the way that they relate to students and their approaches to teaching and learning, can have a significant impact on student engagement, retention, attendance and levels of achievement in education. Based on the results, the majority of students reportedly enjoyed positive relationships with most of their teachers in school. Many students said that they felt comfortable around their teachers, and felt that their teachers cared about their education and their future and found them to be very interested in supporting their educational needs and always willing to offer personal time to assist them in their learning. In their discussions, many students indicated that they valued teachers, who believed in their ability to succeed academically, and those who used explicit teaching instruction and showed a personal interest in students and their schooling progress. Students who indicated that they got on well with their teachers, were also regular school

attendees, demonstrated strong desire to continue on at school to complete Year 12, they enjoyed school and their subjects, were regularly spending time on their homework and considered themselves academically successful. This highlights some of the educational benefits for students who enjoy positive personal and pedagogical relationships with their teachers in school. The findings also support research by Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. 28) who indicate that, students who are treated in a positive manner by their teachers, "tend to push themselves to meet the teacher's expectations". The following two students, Allora and Burnum, both completing Year 12 in a country public school were asked in their joint interview, if they believed their teachers cared about their education. Their comments also are significant in illustrate the importance of good teacher support for student retention and improved learning:

Allora: A lot certainly do ... 'cos I was going to drop out ... not so long ago ... but they all kind of pushed me not to.

Burnum: Yeah they do ... especially if I need information or help ... I know that I can go to them ... I'm pretty comfortable with all my teachers ... I get along well with all of them ... and they all seem pretty into helping their students.

Similarly, Yileena talked openly in her interview, about her teachers' support and academic guidance, assisting her classroom learning and subject understanding:

When I first started Year 12, I didn't think that my writing and everything was up to the "standards", but like the teachers sort of said to me like ... this is what we want and yeah. Like when we're in class and when they explain stuff I don't understand it because of the words and especially at the start of Year 12, I was all nervous and I didn't know what they were talking about, but they [teachers] always help me and lead the way and yeah. Like I'm not embarrassed to say "can you help me", but sometimes I'm not in the mood so I don't ask and then kind of know that there's something wrong so they come and help me anyway.

Teacher effectiveness has been widely written about in connection with culturally responsive schooling, culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural safety, and is considered important for enhancing Indigenous student achievement in school. The interview data indicated that effective teachers have a reportedly positive impact on student learning and engagement in class, school success, positive academic self-concepts, schooling motivation, and regular school attendance

and time spent on homework. The following two students Dorak and Yileena, provide their perspectives on effective teachers:

A good teacher is someone who will go that extra mile for their students; that is willing to do just about anything for their students. Who cares about their students and is willing to help them, guide them, shape them and generally be a mother, father and counsellor to them. I think that is an "exceptional" teacher. That's what a teacher should be made out of and I think that you'll find that most of the teachers that come to this school are that kind of teacher. They're willing to do that extra mile, they are willing to be there step by step through sickness and health and what have you, just to make sure those student can achieve their full potential. I think that is what a teacher should be made of We have a great number of them here.

They relate to me and I can relate to them. They understand where I'm coming from when I'm saying something. Like they understand if I've got work to do and I've had that one day off and I come in the next day and they're like hurry up and do that work and hand it in to me by tomorrow; like they'll give me a couple of days.

The findings of the student interviews demonstrate the importance of positive teacher and student relationships for working towards better educational outcomes for Indigenous students. The results are significant in supporting research by McDonald (2003), Martin (2003a), Bishop and Berryman (2006) among many others, highlighting how the teacher's way of interacting with students and the support they provide to them, can help develop student maturity and responsibility to school and the desire for students to continue attendance in school to complete their secondary education.

Student achievement

Research by Craven and Parente (2003), Harrison (2004, 2008) and Mercurio and Clayton (2001), have similarly found that school relevance and enjoyment, along with positive school attitudes are important factors for the facilitation of Indigenous student academic success. In particular, having the motivation to overcome some of the challenges of schooling can be critical for Indigenous students deciding to remain on at school to complete their secondary education. Based on the results of the student interviews, twenty-two students considered themselves relatively successful in their schooling, with the majority being the Year 12 students who attended urban public schools. The results indicated that all the students who

considered themselves successful in their schooling, wanted to complete Year 12, which demonstrates an important correlation between effective student learning resulting in enhanced academic success, and demonstrated desire to complete school. There were important indications from the results, to suggest that certain cultural elements are important for improving Indigenous student potentials for achievement. For example, the results highlighted that all students who reportedly had Indigenous teachers, had perceived themselves as successful students. This suggests that Indigenous teachers, through positive role modelling, can potentially improve the learning engagement of Indigenous students, leading to their subsequent success in school. Further to this, almost all students who considered themselves academically successful, positively identified as Indigenous and believed that their school was warm and welcoming towards Indigenous people and culture. The results are significant in demonstrating the importance of a positive cultural identity, along with a culturally supportive school environment, for facilitating better Indigenous student outcomes.

Students in their interviews, discussed factors they considered important for assisting their achievement in school. These were reported as: working hard academically and demonstrating positive attitudes towards the value of their education and strong commitment to completing their education. This was apparent in the interview with Yileena. When asked what helped her to succeed in school, Yileena said, "Just that tunnel. I just want to get there and just want to achieve something". Whilst Harris and Malin (1994) claim that positive attitudes are vital for the success of Aboriginal students at school, the importance they place on their education is also likely to influence the kind of success a student experiences. (Craven et al., 2005; Mercurio & Clayton, 2001). Various comments provided by students confirmed that many Indigenous students have the desire to succeed and do well in school and are committed to their education for improving their futures. Wyata expressed her commitment to education through personal persistence; "I believe that I'm a good student when I'm in class. I'm a bit slow in doing things, but I still do it". Similarly, Dorak in his interview said; "I see myself as a person that wants to be educated and wants to learn. The findings of the student interviews indicated that positive school attitudes are fundamental for students to develop important skills and school related knowledge necessary for their educational progress and academic success. The results also suggest that positive attitudes towards school are also important for improved student interest in learning and for the personal and pedagogical relationships students maintain with their teachers.

Various researchers including Day (1992), Hudspith (1996) and Malin (1989) have argued that school

cultural knowledge is an important requirement for Indigenous students to succeed in school. As pointed out by Nakata (1997), when students acquire knowledge of school culture, they learn how the school operates and ways of effectively negotiating their success in school. There were clear indications among the student interview data to support this argument. Students, who were reportedly successful in their schooling, indicated that they understood the learning codes and what was required of them to be able to achieve success in their education. For example, they realised the importance of homework to progress with their learning, understood how access to various educational support programs, including ITAS tutoring, was important for their enhanced learning and academic achievement. The students who reported on their academic success, also demonstrated positive attitudes towards learning and recognised that getting along with their teachers in school, was also important for their educational progress. This school related knowledge was shown in the analysis, to be an important factor facilitating higher levels of student achievement, because many students reportedly were familiar with the goals, standards and expectations for learning and their subject criteria. The interview with Yungara, a year eleven female student who attended an urban private school, demonstrated the importance of goals and teacher assistance for students being able to negotiating their success in education. Yungara's comments highlight her preparedness to ask for assistance from the teacher, to improve her potentials for achievement in school:

I find something that's easier to do. Like I find that when I hand up other assignments; I feel like even 1 little assignment, it's just a load off my shoulders. I try to work step by step and like if I talk to a teacher ... that maybe I'll get a better understanding of what I'm suppose' to be doing and that it can be completed and then it's one more assignment out of the way. Then I just know I can do the rest of them.

Harrison (2008) and Martin (2003b, 2006) have similarly found that students who perform better in school, are generally those who actively pursue their learning, are driven to achieve academically and manage their own education. In particular, Harrison (2004, 2008) argues that these students have usually learnt to play the game well; they know how the relationships work in the classroom and the way in which to speak to their teachers to get what they want. Hudspith (1996) and Malin (1989) share the view that school cultural knowledge is important for Indigenous student academic success, but argue that it should not be acquired at the expense of their cultural heritage and identity.

Extensive research on Indigenous education indicates that parents play an important role in the

learning outcomes of Indigenous students (Howard, 2002; Martin, 2003a, 2006; Sims et al., 2003; Strachan, 2004). For example, Martin (2006) claims that their perspectives on school, and that the amount of support, encouragement and guidance they provide, can influence the type of success students achieve in their schooling. An important aim of the student interview research was to develop deeper levels of understandings on the correlation between family support and Indigenous student success. The results indicated that the majority of students interviewed as part of this study, were in fact supported by their families in their schooling, through the application of high educational expectations, school encouragements and motivations, and the provision of a comfortable and resourceful home environment. This level of family support was found to benefit students in their schooling, in their desire to complete Year 12 and their demonstration of a positive attitude towards the value of education. For example, these students attended school more frequently, held higher academic-self concepts and were motivated to achieve academically. Some of the students interviewed described their parents as being overly "pushy" and persistent, but understood that their high expectations and persistence were for their own educational benefit. Many interviewed students also felt that their parents' personal persistence was one of the main reasons why they were still at school. This was illustrated in the interview with Dorak, who considered himself very successful in his private school education:

They [grandparent guardians] see it [school] as being very important because they understand that it's important for me to do well at school and so they will push me and push me ... and sometimes they push me a little bit too far (laughs) ... but I think without that constant shoving in the right direction ... I don't think that I would be here today. In that respect ... I'm glad they've done it.

Similarly, the following comment provided by Jimmy, demonstrates the significance of parent support through the application of school encouragements, for improving school engagement and motivation to continue attendance in school:

My mum pushes me, but she doesn't really help me out with work or anything. When I'm falling off a bit, she puts things into different perspectives and she makes me realise [the importance of school for the future].

Based on the student interview data, it was also apparent that those students, who demonstrated positive attitudes toward the value of school, reportedly had parents who also saw the importance

of school, offered schooling support, were involved with the school and maintained good relationships with teachers. Pindari a Year 12 student, who attended a country public school, provides an example of this in his interview comments:

I think school is really important. I've been brought up in a strict household where schooling was the number one thing and everything else came second ... um ... when I look at my cousins and that, I'm often called a coconut. But they're ok, but hardly any of them have graduated [from Year 12].

The results suggest that students who demonstrate higher levels of school achievement, are not only strongly committed to completing their secondary education, but that they understand the requirements and skills needed for their educational success, and are prepared to seek assistance from their teachers to improve their potentials for achievement. The results of the student interviews suggest also that students, who have the support of their families in their education, have better learning outcomes, including greater potentials for completing their secondary education. These students demonstrate their maturity towards school, through regular school attendance and by maintaining positive relationships and interactions with their teachers in class.

Educational Assistance Programs

School support has been identified by Fleming and Southwell (2005), Harrison (2004, 2008), Martin (2006) and Mercurio and Clayton (2001), as an important requirement for Indigenous student schooling success. Research does suggest that the amount and type of support an Indigenous student receives in his or her schooling can have a significant influence on their learning outcomes and potential to reach higher levels of educational achievement. The student interviews indicated that 13 students accessed the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Program (ITAS) for support with their schooling, and these were mostly the Year 12 females who attended urban public schools. ITAS is a nationally funded support program through Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations (DEEWR), aimed at improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Exploring the impact of ITAS tutoring support through the student interview responses was important for developing understandings the effectiveness of the support program for improving student potentials for achievement. It was apparent that students who accessed ITAS tutoring demonstrated higher levels of academic competency, subject attainment, motivation to complete Year 12, and student maturity as in positive school and class attendance. Most

of the students who accessed ITAS felt that their tutoring support made a significant difference to them in their school learning, in terms of being able to understand and complete their work and not "fall behind" in school. This was illustrated in the following quote by Kala, "Yep ... it's [ITAS tutoring] helped with me handing stuff up on time". Other students, who accessed ITAS tutoring, also discussed how their grades had improved with the academic support provided by their tutor. This was raised in the interview with Baringa, a Year 12 male student who attended an urban public school. When asked if ITAS tutoring has assisted him in his schooling, he says; "Oh, I do heaps better; I go from like C's to A's with my tutor". A similar viewpoint was expressed in the following quote by Lowan, also a Year 12 student:

I got a lot better grades for my Maths [as a result of ITAS tutoring]. Last year I got like A+ for Maths and I usually sit on a D in Maths, and this year I'm sitting on like B+ for Maths.

Similarly, student access to school scholarship support was also found to improve Indigenous student participation in education. Among students interviewed, school scholarships were received mostly by those in urban private schools, students living away from home and those completing Year 12. In Australia, Indigenous student scholarship programs are generally administered through private schools, to cover the cost of school boarding and tuition fees and other educational expenses or materials. The interview results indicated that all students who received a school scholarship were regular school attendees, who perceived themselves as being successful students. These students were also regularly spending time on their homework and reported on their desire to complete Year 12.

Among the student interviews, seven participants reported accessing support for their homework, through attending a school-based homework centre. These students discussed the positive impact of homework centre support on their school learning, academic success and with their responsibility demonstrated to schooling. Most of these students indicated that the support provided to them by the teachers and other staff in the school homework centre assisted them to successfully complete their homework requirements on a regular basis. Based on the student comments, it was apparent that attendance in homework centres benefited student by promoting higher levels of student responsibility and maturity, including daily attendance in school and increased motivation to complete secondary education. The results also indicated that the majority who attended a school-based homework centre, maintained positive relationships with their teachers. This could suggest that keeping up with school homework requirements

improves student competency, which also potentially impacts on students maintaining positive relations with teachers in school. The interview with Jimmy highlighted the importance of a school homework centre for developing responsibility for completing homework. Jimmy's appreciative comments suggest that school homework centre support can be important for Indigenous student educational progress:

Homework was always a big factor when I was younger as well, especially when I was stuck doing my homework. It's always good to have a teacher around to explain it [in the homework centre]. It's good ... especially for the younger students, it's very good.

The findings have indicated that educational support programs such as ITAS tutoring and school-based homework centres have the potential to raise the academic standards of Indigenous students, leading to higher levels of student achievement and completion of secondary education. Although the results demonstrate that Indigenous school scholarships are an important initiative for improving parent support and involvement in education, student retention and positive attendance, many scholarships appear restricted to students who attend private schools in urban areas. The results do suggest the need for more scholarship opportunities to be opened up to many other Indigenous students, particularly for those who attend schools in the Australian public education system.

■ Conclusion

This study was intended to develop an increased level of understanding of why Aboriginal students make the decision to stay on at school and important factors which have the potential to enhance student academic motivation and achievement, leading to increased levels of secondary school completion. Although the research was designed to contribute to theoretical knowledge and development in Indigenous educational research, the primary focus was on practical implications for schools and teachers, indicating important factors which lead to better learning outcomes for Indigenous secondary students. Based on the findings of the interview research, some of these factors were identified as: a positive cultural and academic identity, support from family and teachers, career goals, student access to educational support such as ITAS tutoring and the undertaking of Aboriginal cultural learning's in school. The results indicated that positive attitudes towards the value of education and student possession of school knowledge on how to succeed in school were particularly important for improving student achievement in education.

Family support and encouragement, as well as family involvement in education and the perceived importance parents place on school, was found to have an important impact on the decision of students to remain at school to complete their secondary education. This study has demonstrated that teachers, in particular the way that they relate to students, can significantly impact on student interest in school, their learning engagement and levels of retention, attendance and achievement. Many of the students interviewed as part of this study, reportedly valued teachers, who believed in their ability to succeed academically, use explicit teaching instruction and showed a personal interest in students and their schooling progress. This was shown through the results to assist students to understand their work, learning goals and expectations and improve their potentials for achievement.

The results also indicate that certain cultural elements are significant for Indigenous student school motivation, enhanced learning and academic success. These include a students' positive cultural identity, having Indigenous teachers in school, the provision of culturally responsive and relevant curriculum, culturally responsive relationships between teachers and students and culturally respectful and supportive school environments. However, overwhelmingly, the research supports the theoretical developments and conclusions of previous international research on culturally responsive schooling, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy of relations and cultural safety; concepts which feature widely among Indigenous education research, from New Zealand, Canada and the United States. The central argument of this study is that the role of culture has a significant impact on the learning outcomes of Indigenous students. In particular, the findings do suggest that culture and culture based learning, potentially lead to improved levels of student engagement in learning and achievement in education. This is because students who learn as part of a culturally responsive school environment are exposed to culturally supported and compatible teaching methods, instructions and materials, which build on the knowledge and skills and strengths students' come to school with.

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