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Section B: Research

The Importance of Identity in the Retention and Attainment of Aboriginal Students at Secondary School: some research findings.

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Introduction

Background

Although the retention rate of Aboriginal students has improved over the past fifteen years, it is still significantly less than that for all other students. In fact, very few Aboriginal students are completing twelve full years of schooling. The situation is worse in country schools than in large metropolitan areas. Despite the fact that some Aboriginal students do stay at school and succeed, very little work has been done to identify what factors have helped those Aboriginal students who have done so. In addition, there is relatively little knowledge about how the various school, home, ability and personal factors are interrelated.

The research on which this article is based (Russell 1997) set out to explore what had helped ten Aboriginal students in various regional and rural centres in South Australia to stay at school and to succeed when so many of their peers had dropped out of school.

The participants

The sample of students was small and non-representative. Student participants were selected if they were succeeding at school in Years 11 or 12, it was anticipated that they would complete Year 12 or go on to alternative further study and their parents agreed to their participation. The final sample consisted of 7 students undertaking Stage 1 of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) (4 females and 3 males), as well as 3 students undertaking Stage 2 of the SACE (2 females and 2 males). Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms for the names of the student participants and by use of general descriptions for their school and communities.

The outcome of the cross-case analysis was the grouping of students as *expected stayers*, *possible stayers* and *unexpected stayers*. This was important because the factors that influenced the students to stay at school and to work to succeed varied to a significant extent between the three groups of students. The *expected stayers* had more in common with each other than did individuals in other groups. In addition, in relation to their attainment, student characteristics were more important for the *expected stayers* whereas teacher factors were more important for the *unexpected stayers*. All four *expected stayers* were female (Helen, Lisa, Lucy and Marcia) whereas two of the three *possible stayers* (Sally, Larry and Nicolas) and two of the three *unexpected stayers* (Gina, Toby and Bret) were male.

Method

Unstructured, but focused, interviews were used to obtain most of the data. Each student was interviewed at least once. In addition, significant others (a close family member and a selection of teachers and/or friends nominated by each student) were also interviewed. Additional data about the students came from school copies of students' school reports and school administrators supplied demographic data about the school.

The study used an assets analysis orientation and case study methodology within the constructivist paradigm to examine factors associated with the retention, attainment and identity of the ten students, and the interrelationships between the various factors. NUD*IST (a computer program) was used to analyse the data. Initially this was done for each individual student and ten

descriptive case studies were written. Individual student data were then conceptualised graphically. This revealed patterns which were followed up using the original data and further search facilities offered through NUD*IST.

Definitions

The following definitions were used. Retention related to students staying at secondary school into the post-compulsory years of schooling. Attainment was defined broadly and was seen to have both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. This allowed perceptions of a student's attainment by the student, his or her peers, family and teachers to be included and also recognised that success in an individual area of the curriculum can, in its own right, be a pre-requisite for post-secondary study or lead to a specialised career pathway. Identity included how one viewed

Factors related to	Identity Only	Identity Retention & Attainment	TOTALS
Students and their families	16	2	18
The students themselves	5	13	18
Students and their schools (including teachers in general)	4	12	16
Students and their peers	7	8	15
Students and individual teachers	1	13	14
A variety of multiple environments external to the student	4	2	6
The communities in which the students live	3	1	4
TOTALS	40	51	91

Table 1. Total number of factors identified by participants as being important in the students' Aboriginal identities.

oneself as well as how one was viewed by others, the emphasis being on Aboriginal identity and Aboriginality. This article explores some of the findings of the research.

What is the relationship between the Aboriginal identity of the students and their retention and attainment at school?

McCarthy (1990, 79) asked the question "how does racial difference operate in education?" He examined four types of relationships that governed the nonsynchronous (or uneven) interaction of raced, classed and gendered minority and majority actors in the school setting: relationships of competition, exploitation, domination and cultural selections. He argued that it was the 'cultural selections' relationship that:

... is the totalizing principle of 'difference' that organizes meaning and identity-formation in school life. This organizing principle is expressed in terms of cultural strategies or rules of inclusion/exclusion or in-group/out-group that determine whose knowledge gets into the curriculum ...

(McCarthy 1990, 84)

The data illustrated how important such a relationship was in the students' retention and attainment at school. In total, 113 different factors were associated with the students' retention and/or attainment and another 91 with their identity and/or retention and attainment. Table 1 categorises the latter responses. This classification was based on specific comments by participants or the context within which the information was provided.

As the data in Table 1 indicate, families were important in the students' development of their Aboriginal identities. However, few of these family identity factors related to the students' retention and attainment. In comparison, although the total number of student identity factors equalled the number of family identity factors, by far the majority of the student identity factors were also associated with the students' retention and attainment.

This article focuses on the four main groups of the 51 factors associated with the students' identity *and* their retention and/or attainment, those related to the students themselves, their teachers, their schools and their peers.

Student factors

The vast majority of the students, in a conscious effort to make their studies meaningful for themselves, related school work to their own experiences or gave an Aboriginal perspective to topics wherever they could. In addition, most students took every available opportunity to learn about Aboriginal issues and/or share cultural knowledge with their teachers. Some even spoke or wrote publicly about Aboriginal issues both in and out of class and/or had chosen a career that related to their Aboriginality. How these factors relate to the *expected stayers*, the *possible stayers* and the *unexpected stayers* is clearly shown in Table 2.

By actively participating in discussion of Aboriginal issues, giving examples from personal experience or putting Aboriginal perspectives into their work students could demonstrate their pride in their cultural heritage (Groome 1988). Both Helen and Lucy did this even when it may not have been so welcome; Helen because she felt she needed to educate some teachers and Lucy because she felt so strongly on some issues. Larry went further than that. He actively challenged the 'white' accounts of early Australian settlement by non-Aborigines and their accounts of Aboriginal history. According to Day (1994), by doing so he would have been strengthening his own Aboriginal identity. Three of the *expected stayers* and two of the *unexpected stayers* had made a conscious decision that they did not want to be like their Aboriginal peers who had left school. Jordan (1984), Scott (1987) and Day (1994) recorded similar findings. Some Aboriginal students were able to stand apart from the negative influences of their peers and to react positively to negative community perceptions and stereotypes. None of the *possible stayers* had made any such decisions.

Category	Student Identity and Retention & Attainment Factors	(4 students)	(3 students)	(3 students)	N
		Expected Stayers	Possible Stayers	Unexpected Stayers	
A	Student relates work to own experience or give Aboriginal perspective	3	2	3	8
RA	Student is academically successful relative to his or her Aboriginal peers	4	2	1	7
A	Student takes opportunities to learn about Aboriginal issues	1	2	3	6
RA	Student isolated self from negative Aboriginal influences in Junior HS	4	2	0	6
R	Student is a leader among his or her Aboriginal peers	2	2	2	6
RA	Students don't want to be like their Aboriginal peers who have left school	3	0	2	5
RA	Student wants to be or is recognised as a role model	2	1	1	4
A	Student shares cultural knowledge with teachers	3	0	1	4
RA	Student's career choice is related to their Aboriginality	2	1	0	3
RA	Student speaks or writes publically about Aboriginal issues	2	0	1	3
R	Student is a respected member of the whole school SRC	2	0	0	2
RA	Student selected as the Aboriginal Student of the Year	2	0	0	2
RA	Student doesn't want to be like some of her relatives	1	0	0	1

A - related to identity & attainment only

R - related to identity & retention only

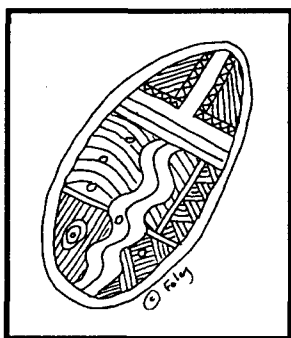
RA - related to identity and retention & attainment

Table 2. Student factors seen to be related to the students' Aboriginal identities and to their retention and/or attainment

Teacher factors

Individual teachers also supported the students' identity, retention and attainment. Table 3 lists these teacher factors. For all students it was important that teachers established good relationships with them. This confirms results of previous studies into the retention and attainment of Aboriginal students (McInerney 1990,1991; Walsh 1993). The students felt that it was up to the teachers to make the first moves in establishing these positive relationships.

According to several students, teachers could do this by consistently behaving in non-racist ways and by being culturally aware and sensitive to Aboriginal students' feelings. In addition, according to Helen and Marcia, it was important for teachers to deal with racism in class and to help Aboriginal students to deal with it. Walsh's (1993) students said teachers needed to be inserviced about these issues. In a supportive environment these students, as those surveyed by Ainley (1994) and Ulstrup (1994), felt that they were better able to get on with their work and to achieve success.



Significant others felt that, for five students about whom they were being interviewed, the academic support received from the schools' Aboriginal Education Resource Teachers (AERTs) was important for the students' Aboriginal identities as well as for their attainment. However, AERTs provided other kinds of support that also related to students' attainment. For example, the AERT at Toby's school supported him in negotiating to do an exam earlier as he had family commitments when it was scheduled.

For five students it was important that at least some teachers incorporated Aboriginal perspectives or issues and/or encouraged the students to include cultural input or alternative perspectives in their work. This served two purposes, it helped the students relate more closely to the work and it affirmed and fostered the students' Aboriginal identities. In addition, some teachers introduced students to prospective careers more specifically for Aboriginal students or facilitated the students' exposure to these possibilities. Helen, Nicolas, Larry and Bret had benefited from this.

Teachers at two different schools recognised the strength of a special group of Aboriginal students at their schools and consciously worked with the group instead of singling out individual students, something about which Aboriginal students can be rather sensitive. In fact, one of the schools had deliberately kept a small group of Aboriginal students together in junior secondary school. This indicated the importance of whole school priorities and programs in the student's identity, retention and attainment.

School factors

Table 4 indicates the school factors seen by participants to be related to the students' identities *and* to their retention and/or attainment. The table is structured differently from the two previous ones to indicate the significance of the Aboriginality of the students' parents for one factor whereas for all other groups of data there was no significant difference.

Clearly, the most significant school factor in the students identity, retention and attainment was the appointment of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and/or AERTs. The AEW and AERT salaries were additional to school staffing numbers and were allocated by the Aboriginal Education Unit of the Department of Education according to the numbers of Aboriginal students in the school. In every school where they were appointed participants talked about their role in the school in relation to the student participants.

Category	Teacher Identity and Retention & Attainment Factors	(4 students)	(3 students)	(3 students)	N
		Expected Stayers	Possible Stayers	Unexpected Stayers	
A	Teachers have established good relationships with students	4	3	3	10
A	AERT supports students academically	2	2	1	5
RA	Teachers encourage cultural input/alternative perspectives	3	1	1	5
RA	Teachers incorporate Aboriginal perspectives/ consult student re text	2	2	1	5
RA	Teachers recognise the strength of a special group of Aboriginal students	3	1	0	4
A	Teachers are not racist	2	0	2	4
RA	Teachers recognise talent and expose student to Aboriginal career options	1	2	1	4
A	Teachers provide choices and invite/support cultural input	1	0	2	3
RA	Teachers deal with racism in the class / encourage student to 'fight'	2	0	0	2
RA	Teachers are sensitive to cultural issues/student's feelings	2	0	0	2
RA	Teachers try to make curriculum inclusive	0	1	1	2
RA	Teachers facilitate exposure to Aboriginal role models	0	1	1	2
RA	Student was generally treated as if he was 'white'	0	1	0	1

A - related to attainment only & identity

RA - related to retention and attainment & identity

Table 3. Teacher factors seen to be related to the students' Aboriginal identities *and* to their retention and/or attainment.

Most of the students also recognised this. All the other factors listed in Table 4 were facilitated by the AEWs and/or AERTs.

AEWs were important to individual students in chasing up their absences, helping them sort out their personal problems and liaising with parents. They were also important resource people for the schools' Aboriginal Studies and Australian Studies programs, for the implementation of the Social Justice Action Plan, and anti-Racism Policy and special curriculum activities, and for the functioning of Aboriginal student and parent awareness (ASSPA) groups. In comparison, the AERTs were generally important in arguing for, introducing and implementing special programs, activities and awards for Aboriginal students, organising the schools' Homework Centres, tutorial assistance under the Aboriginal and Islander tutorial assistance scheme (AITAS) and the formation of the ASSPA group, and in managing both financial and human resources associated with all of these. Although individual schools organised the above functions slightly differently, it was the combined activities of the AEWs and AERTs in all the areas mentioned in Table 4 that supported the identity, retention and attainment of the student participants.

The school identity, retention and attainment factors listed in Table 4 relate to more of the *expected* and *possible stayers*. For example, AITAS tutorial assistance was important for the attainment of three of the four *expected stayers*, one of the *possible stayers* but none of the *unexpected stayers*.

Aboriginal Studies or the Aboriginal perspective of SACE Australian Studies were more important for the students who had only one Aboriginal parent than for those who had two Aboriginal parents. This is probably because they gave students an opportunity to recognise cultural unity and diversity, and develop a shared sense of history (Schwab 1988).

In addition, all three *unexpected stayers*, two *possible stayers* and one *expected stayer*, had benefited from special courses, classes or

activities their schools offered for Aboriginal students or students at risk of leaving school early. For example, Gina was in a special class for students thought to be at risk of not succeeding at their SACE, Bret was able to do Nunga Drama and Nunga Music in addition to other Drama and Music classes, Toby worked with the Youth Strategy support person, Larry was able to do Nunga Art, and Lisa and Sally were both involved in producing newsletters for all Aboriginal students and their parents as part of their English courses.

Thus, subject options were important for the students, but not just for retention as found by Bradley (1992). Options such as those listed above facilitated the students' opportunities to relate to the work they were required to do, to identify as Aboriginal and to express pride in their Aboriginality, just as internal course options provided by teachers had done. The special awards for academic achievement by Aboriginal students won by Helen and Lisa served a similar function.

Peer factors

Peers were also important for the students' identities and for their retention and attainment. Table 5 lists these factors.

Six students chose to work with other Aboriginal students in their classes whenever they could. Five of these students had been part of a special group of Aboriginal students in junior secondary school. All other peer factors that were important in the students' identity, retention and attainment also related to friends supporting each other, even in terms of providing friendly competition.

The data supported previous findings that positive peer influence was important in Aboriginal students' motivation (McInerney 1990, 1991, 1992), that Aboriginal students deliberately chose their friends on the basis of their attitudes to school (Day 1994) and that friendly competition was important for Aboriginal students' attainment (Day 1994).

Category	SCHOOL IDENTITY AND RETENTION & ATTAINMENT FACTORS	2 Aboriginal parents (6 students)			1 Aboriginal parent (4 students)			N
		Ex. Stay.	Pos. Stay.	Unex. Stay.	Ex. Stay.	Pos. Stay.	Unex. Stay.	
RA	AEW and /or AERT appointed to the school	3	2	1	1	0	2	9
RA	School offers special courses for Aboriginal students or students "at risk"	1	2	1	0	0	2	6
RA	School has implemented the ED Social Justice Action Plan	1	1	1	0	1	1	5
RA	Aboriginal Studies or Aboriginal perspective in Aust. Studies important	0	1	0	1	1	2	5
A	Student receives AITAS tutorial assistance	3	1	0	0	0	0	4
A	School has or has had a Homework Centre for Aboriginal students	2	1	0	0	0	1	4
RA	School offers Aboriginal St. and/or special subjects for Aboriginal students	2	1	1	0	0	0	4
RA	Student has been involved in ASSPA sponsored activities	1	0	1	1	0	0	3
RA	School has put/kept special group of Aboriginal students together	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
A	School has special awards for academic excellence of Aboriginal students	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
R	AEW chases up students absences	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
R	AEW is a good sounding board	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

A - relates to identity & attainment only R - relates to identity & retention only
 RA - relates to identity & both retention and attainment

Table 4. School factors seen to be related to the students' Aboriginal identities and to their retention and/or attainment.

Conclusion

All the student participants experienced their "Aboriginality as a relation to non-Aboriginality" (Dodson 1994: 9), as a result of the racism to which they and their Aboriginal peers were subjected. However, there were some positive outcomes for the student participants from this, particularly in terms of their retention and attainment, because their schools dealt with the issue of racism and gave the students opportunities to express their Aboriginality. Therefore, the students became more secure in their Aboriginal identity (Jordan 1983) and proud of it (McKenzie cited by Pring 1990). In fact, the participating students would have been unlikely to have stayed at school and achieved success if this had not been the case.

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Category	Peer Identity and Retention &/or Attainment Factors	2 Aboriginal parents (6 students)			1 Aboriginal parent (4 students)			N
		Ex. Stay	Pos. Stay	Unex. Stay	Ex. Stay	Pos. Stay	Unex. Stay	
RA	Student prefers to work with other Aboriginal students	3	2	0	1	0	0	6
RA	Student was part of a special group of Aboriginal students in Junior HS	3	1	0	1	0	0	5
RA	Student has special Aboriginal friend who is like-minded	3	1	0	0	0	0	4
RA	Student has been encouraged by his or her Aboriginal friends	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
A	Aboriginal friends help each other in class	1	1	0	1	0	0	3
A	Student and special group of Aboriginal peers in friendly competition	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
R	Student supports other Aboriginal students	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
RA	Special group provides strength to resist negative pressures	1	0	1	0	0	0	2

A - related to attainment only & identity R - related to retention only & identity
 RA - related to retention and attainment & identity

Table 5. Peer factors seen to be related to the students' Aboriginal identities and to their retention and/or attainment.

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