

“Because I Stayed”: Australian Indigenous Secondary School Students Who Remain at High School

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Introduction

This paper is based on the recognition that there is much to learn about the successful paths that some Indigenous students are negotiating through school and into further studies and the workplace. It reports into qualitative research with a number of Indigenous students in both urban and rural settings. The students, in the post-compulsory years of secondary school, were identified by their schools as likely to complete their schooling. In taking up a focus on those remaining at school, the paper offers a different perspective from the large body of research into resistant and disengaged Indigenous students (see, for example Malin, 1990, Keefe, 1993, Munns, 1996, Munns & McFadden, 2000). While this previous research has told us much about the reasons leading to Indigenous students leaving school, it has offered few insights into why some remain at school and try to win the educational battle that has defeated many in their communities. This paper takes up the challenge of listening to and learning from a particular group of successful students and so bringing forward important insights into how more students from Indigenous backgrounds might become engaged with school and education.

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

The research was undertaken as part of a larger federally commissioned study into the educational aspirations of Indigenous students and the support and advice they received from schools, teachers, family, peers and community to realize these aspirations. Within this study the research reported in this paper deliberately oriented itself to the stories of successful Indigenous students. Such an orientation is consistent with a developing research tradition that challenges the “conformist blindness” (Riseborough, 1993) of much of the sociological literature on educationally disadvantaged school students. The increasing recognition in this tradition is that a continuing research focus on those students who become disaffected and drop out of school may actually distract attention from what many educators would argue should be the original research intention (see Nieto, 1994, Levine & Nidiffer, 1996, Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996, National Commission on Education, 1996, O’Connor, 1997). That is, if there is a need to encourage more students from poor and minority backgrounds to remain at school¹, the feeling is that the research concentration should be on finding out what encourages students to stay, on rather than reject school. The research reported in this paper builds on a previous study into the educational, familial and community factors influencing successful Indigenous students (see Simpson, McFadden & Munns, 2001). The starting point for both of these studies was that, despite all the obstacles, some students in disadvantaged groups succeed and find in education a gateway to opportunity rather than a pathway to further oppression (McFadden, 1996).

¹ There is little doubt that this need remains an issue of national significance for Australia. The Commonwealth of Australia (1995) identified that the school retention rate into post-compulsory education for Indigenous students was 25% compared to 78% for non-Indigenous students.

What is particularly interesting in both studies is the consideration of processes of *cultural support* for resistance to school and education (Munns & McFadden, 2000). Cultural support has two intersecting pivots: the negative feelings many Indigenous students associate with school; the community acceptance offered to the students when they reject what school purports to offer them. Thus, among Indigenous communities cultural support is a critical condition of school resistance that anticipates, accepts, ratifies and catalyses disengagement from school and education. It is important to understand that this is not a ‘happy’ acceptance. Simpson, McFadden & Munns (2001, p.158) make it clear that this is more accurately a

Perception that their children have been let down by the system. Indigenous Australian communities do not want it to happen, hope desperately that it does not, but when it does, the student is not rejected by the family, peers or the community for being a ‘failure’ at school.

Ironically, despite the strength of cultural support as a disengaging force, it can conversely operate to encourage some students to remain at school and engaged with education. This contrary direction of cultural support was used as a centralizing analytical concept for the stories of the Indigenous students interviewed in the study discussed in this paper.

In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of upper secondary Indigenous students (Years 11 and 12, males and females) from diverse geographical regions (two urban and three rural) in New South Wales. Target participants for these interviews were students who had been identified by teachers as being “solid students”, that is, likely to complete their senior years of secondary school. Students were interviewed informally by an Indigenous researcher following a semi-structured schedule. This informal approach allowed space for the interviewees to explore their own ideas without being restricted to a formal set of questions. The names of students interviewed and their school were changed for the discussion that follows.

The Research Contexts

There are significant contextual factors impacting on the current and future educational lives of the students interviewed for the research. Participants were drawn two urban and three rural contexts. Each of the contexts is described in detail as an important backdrop against which the data is analysed.

The inner-urban school (referred to in this paper as City High) is located in an inner-urban Sydney community where people live in public and private housing. It is an area that has had a long association with Indigenous people and over time has had members of the local Indigenous community struggle with “systems” of police, law, education and employment. The school’s numbers have been steadily declining and, of the fewer than 200 students attending, more than 50% are Indigenous. There is a strong commitment to Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum as a means of encouraging students to remain at school and complete their education.

The outer-urban school (referred to in this paper as Western High) is in Sydney’s outer-urban Western Suburbs. Housing is a mixture of public and privately owned, and many of the families living in privately-owned housing have high mortgages and are “cash poor”. Like many suburbs

in Sydney's West, there is high unemployment. There are over 900 students in the school including a 50% school population of students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) population and an 8% Indigenous population. Interestingly, Indigenous students make up 10% of those in the senior years, although they are described by their school as being "not high achievers". The school views their main priority as raising educational expectations of teachers and students.

The school referred to as Coastal High is in a mid-sized town on the North Coast of New South Wales. The Indigenous community is interspersed throughout the town and outlying areas. Some Indigenous people live "in town" while other Indigenous community members live in enclaves away from the town centre. These enclaves have concentrations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous low SES families. Another community is an Indigenous mission 50km from town away from the coast. Students travel to the school daily by bus (2 hours each way) from this community, but there are no students from this community attending the school beyond Year 9. The absentee rate of students attending school from the mission is twice that of the rest of the school population. The school population is comprised of 675 students and within this population there are 120 Indigenous students. This Indigenous enrolment figure is rising, but mainly from those living in coastal areas that are closer geographically to the school. Indigenous students as a whole are not faring as well as the non-Indigenous students academically. The school talks about Indigenous students as having low levels of literacy and low educational and future expectations. This is in contrast to the fact that more Indigenous students choose to stay on at school – the retention rate (completing secondary school – Year 12) for Indigenous students is 50% compared to 25% for the rest of the school population. Youth unemployment is high in the town, though there are good prospects for those who get through secondary school. For those who do not complete secondary school, there are few options. The town also identifies crime and young pregnancies as significant social issues.

The school referred to as Rural High in this report is one of three secondary schools in a large inland country city. Transience is an issue in the city, especially among its Indigenous population. Many Indigenous people come from outlying towns looking for employment. Their situation generally contrasts with the "established" Indigenous families who have had a longer association with the area and are more likely to have family members in employment. There are clear divisions in the community between the established Indigenous people living in the city and the more recent arrivals. Another division is between those living closer to the city centre and those living in a low SES enclave separated from the rest of the city by the railway line. There is a "wrong side of the tracks" stigma attached to that part of town. The school has a population of over 900 students, 90 of whom are Indigenous. It wrestles with its main challenge of keeping the Indigenous students at school past the age of 15. In particular, Indigenous boys are most likely to leave school early. The smaller numbers (below national average) of Indigenous students who are in the senior years and "getting through" are from the established families. Youth unemployment is high, with many school leavers going to larger cities looking for work. This, coupled with the movement of successful school leavers to TAFE or University adds to the transience of the town.

The school referred to as Outback High is in a large rural centre in Western New South Wales. The town has a history of crime and other social problems (eg "kids roaming the streets") but has

recently embarked on a program of “reclaiming the streets” which has included capital expenditure on improving the town’s physical environment and employment programs. Most of the Indigenous families live in either the “mission” or a public housing enclave. A creative educational solution to the “bad school good school” situation that had developed in the town has been recently to combine both schools into a multi-campus institution. This means that senior students who had previously languished in the “bad school” now come to the Senior College in the centre of town. This has had a significant positive affect on the Indigenous students who comprise 40% of the 540 total school population across both campuses. Although the school still identifies that the Indigenous students are generally not as confident as non-Indigenous students, it has seen small but positive gains in all areas of their schooling. Changing attitudes of Indigenous students and their parents towards school and education is the main school priority. The school has an active careers’ program including an Indigenous school to work strategy in association with town businesses and local government organisations.

Remaining at School: Culturally Complex and Challenging Negotiations

Community Relationships

Despite the differences in physical environments and geographical locations of the students interviewed, a number of common themes emerged from the interviews about the nature of the Indigenous students’ relationships within their communities. It was particularly clear that racial factors heavily impacted on the lives of all the students. Indeed, multiple negotiations around their racial identities appeared strongly to occupy their thoughts. The “battle” against the “system” of police, law, education and employment persisted for all of these young people. Mostly this “battle” was fought against a subtle and relentless racism that daily affected their lives. Occasionally, however, there were serious confrontations.

One time I went up to a funeral at Narrabri for one of my dad’s friends and I got back to school on Monday and I got called into the deputy’s office. The police were there and he goes “You’ve broken into school and we’re going to finger print you for it”, and I just laughed and walked out. And the police came to my house and tried to finger print me for it. I told them I was in Narrabri and there were so many thousand witnesses for it and it was a pretty big funeral and lots of people saw me, but yeah, the day before they thought I was a drug dealer at school.

(Jamie, Western High).

Tensions were not confined to conflicts with authority. Many of the interviewees talked of racial tensions between youths on the streets, despite being taught otherwise in their schools. Nathan’s (Coastal High) comments were typical:

I don’t know how it’s different. It’s just that in school we’re taught to mix, but out on the street it’s like basically everyone for themselves. And some people are racist.

Richard (Outback High) also experienced the problem: “*People are always fighting out there. It all depends on what mood the kids are in I reckon*”.

As well as more open conflicts, many of the Indigenous students faced critical dilemmas over their current and future employment. As described above, all of the students lived in locations where youth unemployment was high, so getting any work was difficult. This difficulty was dramatically heightened because of racial issues. Consider the following dilemma Emma faced in her part-time work at a supermarket that she resolved by denying her identity.

They always follow the blackfellas around the shop and always think they're stealing. The other day they come up to me and said I'm to go and watch a blackfella, because, "They're thieves and you know what they're like". So I said, "I don't know what they're like, sorry", and walked off.

Do they know your background?

No.

And you don't feel like telling them?

Uh uh.

Why do you think?

Cause they'll probably fire me. (Emma, Coastal High)

By contrast, Nathan, from the same town did not hide his identity even though he accepted it might not help him gain or keep employment.

Yeah, it's hard to find a job, I've got on my résumé that I'm Aboriginal.

So what do you expect once they see the word Aboriginal?

I feel that since I've got Aboriginal in there, they'll still think about the ones they've previously employed that didn't turn up, and I feel that's a bad side when you do go for a job cause they've left that opinion in employers' minds.

How would you deal with it?

Keep trying. Try to change that opinion that they've got

(Nathan, Coastal High).

Furthermore, community experiences impacting on identity extended beyond interracial negotiations. There were issues about where to live and who to associate with, and this involved relationships within the Indigenous community. For example, Emma continued her apparent racial denial in the workplace into her social dealings:

What's your relationship like with Blackfellas?

I don't know really, I'm nice, I live in the right part of town and all my friends are White. (Emma, Coastal High)

Others pointed out that they lived "uptown" away from the poorer and rougher areas. Anita (Outback High) when asked about whether she lived in the mission was quick to reply with, "No, I'm not down that way, I'm up this way". Similarly, Amanda (Rural High) had little association or knowledge about the enclave over the railway tracks: "No I don't know anything about that area – people that break the law and swearing and fighting and all that kind of stuff".

While it is beyond the scope of the current research to speculate on how these disassociations might adversely affect future thoughts about identity, there was clearly a common

determination among all Indigenous students interviewed that they would not turn out like others who had rejected or been beaten by the system. Indeed, the frame of reference between those in their communities “going nowhere” and their projected future situations seemed a powerful force holding them at school. They were commonly looking for a better life and in doing so were working against the forces of cultural support for school resistance. As Amanda (Rural High) expressed it, “Yeah, getting stuck and ending up basically with no money”. Similarly Mark (Rural High) thought, “I didn’t want to be a bum and sit around doing nothing, you know”. Anita (Outback High) saw it the same way:

I just thought of it one time. I’m not going to be like all the other people around here playing cards in the park and two-up. Walk around with a baby, on the dole, on the pension. No way.

The data showed that life for these Indigenous students was culturally complex and challenging. They were constantly dealing with racism both in the personal lives and their relationships with the Indigenous and the wider community. There were difficult cultural negotiations surrounding their position as successful Indigenous students. Interviews showed that for some Indigenous students, the social and cultural problems that many of their community faced, not only did not seriously interfere with their studies but rather provided an incentive to work hard at school to achieve something “better” for their lives.

Family Life

The family situations of all the Indigenous students were similarly diverse but with common themes of support for their education and wanting them to have opportunities for the future. Cultural support here was crucial for their staying on at school.

Most of the families were working poor: employed but living in low SES conditions. The majority of the parents had not completed school. The exception was Cathy’s (City High) mother who had an education degree and was teaching. Of the others, Jamie’s (Western High) remarks were typical, “Mum, she dropped out in Year 10, went to TAFE for a bit. Dad, he didn’t get his HSC”. Their lack of school success had generally kept them in lowly paid, low status work (council worker, nurse, mechanic, labourer, painter, storeman). Many of their mothers were young when they first had babies. The students were encouraged in their homework and given support and advice about their future careers (see below). Most reported lack of room and quiet spaces for study, though the family helped out. Paula (Western High) explained this: “It’s quiet, ‘cause my sisters know when I need to study and they always go and play in the back lanes and stuff.” The majority did not have a computer in their home.

Interview data showed that despite a general lack of school success of their parents, they valued education and provided strong support for the Indigenous students to complete their schooling. None of the students saw that there were serious barriers in their home lives to their future academic success.

Life at School

Attitudes and Relationships

The interviewees, as discussed above, displayed a determination to get through their senior years and do something for themselves. Neither unusually nor unexpectedly, they all felt the weight of the challenge in front of them. Most appreciated and were a little surprised that they were now treated differently at school as seniors. Nathan (Coastal High) summed it up when he said, “You get a lot more respect which is good and they expect more. You find it easier to go to class and you can express yourself more”. Ironically and tragically, many Indigenous students do not make it through to the senior years to experience this different “respect” from their teachers.

Despite a general feeling that school was now a better place for them, all students interviewed still believed they experienced racism in the playgrounds and the classrooms. Sometimes this was from peers: “I get a few funny names like ‘black bitch’ and all that kind of stuff” (Paula, Western High). Or it came from peers and teachers:

A couple of the students, they don't get on with us and they all speak down, and a couple of the teachers speak down. Well, like they're not really racist, they've just been speaking down to my little crew

(Anita, Outback High).

Other times it was more formally expressed through reactions to their responses to the curriculum.

A couple of times we got in trouble for raising opinions, just ordinary talk about Stolen Generations in English and stuff. We ran one point of view and we got in trouble for it. Like, “No that's not what happened”, and we get force fed this bullshit
(Jamie, Western High).

What was interesting was the common way that the Indigenous students dealt with these experiences. They all talked about how they had learned to cope by just “taking it”. It was as if they had all reached the conclusion that responding would only lead to trouble and thus get in the way of what they wanted from their schools. Richard (Outback High) put it this way:

I used to cop all the crap.

And what did you do about it?

Just took it.

Anita (Outback High) adopted the same tactic. She explained how she maintained her concentration: “*Oh, just take it. Don't worry about it. Focus on school and don't worry about it.*”

The difficulties that most of the Indigenous students experienced contrasted with the more culturally sensitive situation at City High. Cathy had noticed the difference when she moved from a neighbouring school. Now she thought

School was good, heaps of support for Koories, more lenient and understanding of family stuff. When I was at [the other school] and that was a mainstream school, oh I hated school. But here is mad. The majority are Blackfellas and we do our own culture and stuff.

It seemed clear from comments like this that schools can be different and viewed differently by students when they challenge existing structures and relationships.

The students interviewed were also aware of their position in the minority of Indigenous students who were aiming to finish secondary school. There were pressures of staying on and succeeding when many of their peers were struggling or had given up and were now at risk on the streets. Consider the following three comments.

There is only two of us, the rest of my mates left.

Why do you think they left?

Babies ... Heaps of my mates left because of their babies. Other things too. But I don't understand why, because I stayed.

Is it hard with your mates gone?

Yeah because they stay at home and you have to get up and go to school.

Do they say anything to you?

Nah, we all accept each other's choices, but it's hard because the majority aren't here (Cathy, City High).

A lot of the blackfellas have dropped out, at least 20. There's no more than 7 in the seniors.

How does that make you feel?

Bad, cause I know a lot of them who have dropped out, and they've dropped out because of drugs (Nathan, Coastal High).

Do you have a lot of your friends still at school?

Yeah, some dropped out.

How does that make you feel?

Oh well a bit wild, cause all the stuff they wanted to do in life it's all just gone. They think their Year 10 Certificate is going to help them and they could have been in Uni, go to TAFE or something. But now they just hang around because they're bums. They don't want to get up and do what they want to do (Paula, Western High).

It was also apparent from the interviews that quite a few of the Indigenous students had reached moments in their school careers where they had made decisions to stay on against all the statistical odds. These decisions rejected the more common resistances to school that saw many of their friends and peers apparently opt for cultural solidarity over success at school. Usually this meant that the students were changing the ways they responded to their classrooms and teachers. For Nathan (Coastal High), this meant being a different kind of student:

Yeah, up until Year 10 and as it got harder I lost interest in it. Like I found it harder and sort of gave up on it and started being the class clown. I wouldn't listen, wouldn't

do my work, nothing. And now I've settled back down and I have to do the work to get my HSC.

Anita (Outback High) also realised that she had to do things differently:

I used to mess up a couple of times when I was younger. I regret it, not doing what I was told and everything. Not listening to the teacher, causing a distraction. It's fallen back on me. I just want to focus on school and get an education.

It was a complete turn around too for Cathy (City High), now working hard to get Indigenous students to stay at school.

Yeah I grew up with all of these fellas, I know all their families and that. So I just try to encourage them, in the playground and stuff. If they were truanting I say, "Get back to school and stuff".

Do you think that you would be saying that a few years ago?

Nah, I was all for leading the posse. I was the first up and running out.

Again the data indicated that the students had a determination to overcome personal challenges and achieve their educational goals. This often meant they had to ignore personally directed and institutional racism and just "get on with it". They had resisted and overcome the pressures of joining many of their friends who had dropped out of school and were resolved to succeed at school and in their careers.

Education and Employment Aspirations

It has already been clearly seen that the Indigenous students interviewed were determined to work hard to achieve something in their lives. Education was accepted as a gateway to opportunity and they were motivated not to turn out like others among their peers or community who had given up on or been beaten by the system.

All students had chosen future work which depended on them completing secondary school and obtaining the Higher School Certificate. These seemed, in the main, to be potted decisions about one future job, rather than career paths that would open up other opportunities. There was no evidence in the interview data that these students had benefited from a carefully planned career strategy. Once a decision about a future job had been made there appeared then to be reactive processes that would help them achieve their goal. These processes included subject choices and advice from teachers, career advisors and friends and family. Only a few of the students had a "fall-back" employment aspiration if they could not achieve their primary employment goal. Of interest is the number of students choosing armed services, police or teaching, part of what is often seen as the oppressive mainstream "system".

Career Paths

Teachers and Subject Choices

Having decided on their future employment goals, the Indigenous students then worked on the pragmatics of matching paths with UAI scores. This was invariably a haphazard process, with no clear connection between test projections and chosen subjects. A number of influences impacted on this process. In some schools, subject choices were restricted because of the size of the school. This disadvantaged Cathy at City High:

That's the thing, there is only certain subjects available. You have to do other stuff through distance education. That's really hard ... Like they only do General English and General Maths.

So what if you have to do [subjects] for Uni?

I don't know. They couldn't do anything for me. I wanted to do 3 Unit English but they didn't have enough students. I had to do it by distance ed but I found it too hard.

In all schools another significant influence seemed to be teacher judgment and expectations. There was not any evidence to suggest that teachers had helped them plan their courses strategically with their career options in mind. Interviews revealed much about the students and their chosen paths, with many finding out that they were not necessarily on the right track. Consider Jamie's (Western High) comments:

I'm doing English, maths, music, ancient history, drama, and that's it I think.

That's going to help you in your job?

Oh I don't know, cause I don't know exactly what I want to do. Like some of the courses I wanted to do they were full. But if I can't I'll just try to do something at TAFE or try to get into Uni or something.

Paula (Western High) similarly had not had a clear path organised for her to get into University to undertake a teaching degree. Rather it was now about adjustment to get it right: "Yeah, well I'm doing 2 units now but my careers advisor is going to talk to us, cause I'm interested in doing that kind of course, like what I need to do, what courses I need to do". For Nathan (Coastal High) the situation was worse in his quest to get into the Police Force:

What subjects are you doing to get in there?

Maths, English, they're the ones that are going to get me into the Police Force. But then I found out at the start of this year that I didn't have enough units to get a UAI, so now I have to find an apprenticeship or get in as an Aboriginal.

How did you find that out?

Cause I wasn't quite sure at the end of last year, so I saw the careers advisor and he went over it with me and explained everything and told me I didn't have enough units.

The preceding remarks highlighted the common dilemma for all the Indigenous students. They had remained at school against considerable odds and statistics and had committed themselves to the hard work they hoped was necessary to succeed. As previously observed, what seemed to be

missing for all of them was systematic advice to plan paths through school to employment. In all interviews it could be seen that the students were plotting courses with little coordinated institutional advice. Emma's (Coastal High) experience sums the collective situation up:

Did you get advice about what subjects you should choose?

I can't remember.

Did you choose them yourselves?

Yeah. PE (Physical Education), maths and English and hospitality, because I've always liked cooking and food, and a little bit of art because I like painting and stuff. They were some subjects I liked.

Did you talk to your parents?

Yeah, mum and dad had a look and said, "Yeah it should be good". But when you do your first round of picks then they'll tell you can't do that because they're on the same time. So I had to pick out of art and biology ... biology is pretty hard.

When you've got your career worked out, did a school teacher sit down with you and say I think these will get you the mark that you're after?

Nope. Well I spoke to my PE teacher and she said with the marks I've done, I can get in pretty easy without trying too hard.

It was clear that combinations of uninformed advice (parents) and advice applied after a career had been chosen (teachers) seem highly inadequate in the fragile school-to-career environment that most Indigenous students find themselves in. On top of the complex cultural negotiations around community and school relationships this presented another layer of difficulty that the students had to overcome. A startling parallel was seen between these students and those described by Simpson, McFadden & Munns (2001). This was to do with the image of "wandering around" that captures the irony of both the students who have left and those who remain at school:

It is the aimlessness of the wandering metaphor that is both captivating and ironic here: captivating because it characterizes so well the directionless life these students wish to avoid through education. Ironic because school can, in itself, be a site for curriculum aimlessness and lack of direction

(Simpson, McFadden & Munns, 2001, p.163).

Careers Advisors

Given this curriculum aimlessness, the work of the school careers advisors could have been extremely valuable for the students. However, data indicate that this was not always the case.

According to the students, the work of the careers advisors (with one exception discussed below) had three aspects: organising a variety of work experiences; providing general information in the form of notices and pamphlets; reacting to their career choice with information about what they needed to do. Each of these appeared to be influenced by teacher and industry expectations of what the Indigenous students could achieve.

The nexus between work experience and teacher expectations is illustrated by the following story from Jamie (Western High).

There was a careers' expo and we came on the bus and there wasn't much there. There was like how to be a cement renderer and stuff like that. Gee I want to do that. And the kids were so happy to get the trowel and scrape it square. It was like, yeah, make cement. Yeah like westie stuff, like you can be a labourer all your life.

More specifically focused was the advice given to Emma (Coastal High) that discouraged her from following a career path.

The work experience when I was in Year 10. I wanted to go to the vet but he told me I wasn't smart enough to go to the vet and maybe I should think about a vet nurse or something. And then he put one of my friends who's pretty much the same in for the vet.

What about science lab, other animal stuff?

I don't know.

So you didn't get advice, you just took the score [UAI] and that was it?

Yeah.

Emma accepted the advice and changed her mind. Ironically, later in the interview she revealed that she was achieving very high marks, "I did pretty well last year, I was 5 marks away from dux".

The careers advisors in all schools provided a lot of information for the students about career possibilities. However, the impression given in the interviews was that the onus of following things through was mostly put back to the student. At Western High the advisor talked to the students individually or as a group.

I got something off the careers advisor. He explains what we need to do, like to get into that kind of course. If we like leave school or anything, and stuff like that ... We usually get a selection sheet of all the courses we want to do, but we have to do the right courses so we can get the UAI or whatever they call it ... He usually calls a meeting on what courses we need to do

(Paula, Western High).

Information about careers was also available at Coastal High. Much of this was for temporary or casual work, though specific help was also available for students.

The school careers person, they put ads in the notices every now and then for jobs. Then they'll leave little forms or something up there to go and get ... They could probably give you a bit more information about Uni and that sort of stuff (Emma, Coastal High).

It's got apprenticeships and traineeships that are going or part-time jobs. I look up there every week when I've got a few minutes ...

All my life I've wanted to be a policeman.

Did you get some advice from the school about it all?

Yeah, I've seen the careers advisor. He got a lot of information for me, he wrote away to Charles Sturt and got some information

(Nathan, Coastal High).

The situation was similar at Rural High, though involvement with the careers advisor seemed to be an individual student issue. Amanda reported a strong involvement of the careers advisor in helping her with her plans.

We have a careers advisor who helps us choose our career, who helps us whether we can go to TAFE or go to Centrelink for an apprenticeship. He tells us all a different program and gives us a tax file number and anything else that pops up ... All these coupons and booklets about what we want to do and tells us how we should go about it. Plus advice: he tells us how to act in an interview. We actually had a rehearsal. It made me feel confident of getting a job. He's given me advice to try to pick up my skills to be an air hostess at the same time. That way if I can't get one job I can always do the other job.

By contrast, Mark had little contact.

What about the relationship with you and the careers advisor?

I don't really, haven't really sought guidance from the careers advisor.

You don't speak to them at all?

No I don't speak to them.

At City High and Outback High there seemed to be a more energetic and strategic careers program supporting all the students, particularly those with Indigenous backgrounds. At City High they were mindful of the propensity of the Indigenous students to leave school early:

Does the school's careers advice start in Year 10?

Earlier, from Year 9. They know a lot of kids drop out by Year 10 so they had this advice about traineeships and hospitality courses and stuff like that.

Cathy (City High) also reported that there were attempts to help with longer-term plans. Note that she still felt, however, that in the end she was on her own in finding information.

The Careers lady, she just helps you find out about Uni courses, for your career.

Does she help you much?

Yeah she gives you information about the Uni of NSW and the law out there. She rings up and organises for you to go out there. But you find out what you want to do on your own.

What else did she help you with?

Well she comes down at the beginning of the year and helps you to work out a plan. You know, what you want to achieve this year, what you want to achieve in 5 years

...

The careers advisor at Outback High was appreciated by the students, though again her individual role appeared to be of a supportive reaction to careers choices.

Yeah she's [careers advisor] good value, you've only got to ask her something and she'll give you the whole history, pretty much. She goes away with us and yeah, pretty well does more stuff than a co-ordinator does ... She helps out and it's like kids can go to her and ask her for help and she'll do anything. She'll just drop what she's doing and help us ...

With your ship's catering job, how did you find out about it?

Well I told her and she told me what it was and what I had to do and I read up on the information in the library and that was that (Richard, Outback High).

There was a very conclusive picture of the central role of teachers in the career processes and aspirations of the Indigenous students. There is still much work to do on raising teacher expectations given their strong continuing influence on subject choice and career paths. As well, despite the assistance that most of the students received from their schools in finding out about their chosen job, there is little doubt that this would work better if it operated proactively rather than retrospectively.

Other Advice and Support

The pattern emerging from the interviews was that many of the Indigenous students would "hit on" a future job and then be helped retrospectively to see how that could be realised. While the advice they received from teachers was often helpful in seeing the pathway to further studies and/or employment, it was then left to the students themselves to fill in the gaps. This was invariably achieved with the assistance of family and friends. On top of this, encouragement from the family to stay on at school provided a bolster for their own determination. In many cases the Aboriginal Education Assistant at the school helped with school and careers advice.

Information was obtained from a variety of sources. Paula (Western High) got some information from TAFE in the form of pamphlets, even though she really needed to go to University for her teaching degree. Amanda (Rural High) used the internet at school to look for advice. Cathy (City High) had been involved with Aboriginal youth gatherings and had found out about the "big picture" of world-wide Indigenous issues. She had also tapped into local Aboriginal community organisations who had helped many Indigenous students with job-seeking and writing resumés. For Anita (Outback High), it was the University Admissions Guide (UAC) guide and then a long trip to find out more.

I've got a book at home.

Where did you get the book from?

Job guide, Miss. Yeah she gave one to us all and I was just checking and I looked up what you had to do for it ... There's a thing in Dubbo [4 hours' drive] next week and it's about the Police Force and I asked mum about it. But the only thing is I've got to get my own way over there because mum has to work.

So how do you think you'll get there?

I don't know if the school is taking anyone. I asked Miss yesterday about it. She didn't know anything about it though.

Richard (Outback High) was similarly persistent in finding out what he needed to do.

No you have to go to Sydney, I was reading and the only place you can do it is Sydney. At TAFE.

Which one?

I'm not quite sure, I've got to look it up. I've got it all at home in a folder.

So the careers advisor gave you the job guide?

Yeah. And then I got some information, some books in the library ... I'm trying to look into it more. I'm going to TAFE next week and talk about it with them.

Have you spoken to the careers advisor since you got the book off her.

Yeah, about a few things, she told me to be a ship's captain ...

So this is pretty much your own, once you've got the info.

Once I got the info, working into, sort of planning and doing.

So you're working out a strategy.

Slowly I am, I've looked at a few other places. I've been onto ships to see what they do and got onto the P&O and looking at their websites.

In some cases the school played no part in the student's choice of career or in providing career advice. Mark's (Rural High) army aspirations were informed first from the media and then from a contact through a friend.

Did you speak to the school about going to join the army?

I didn't, I sort of found it out all for myself ... The ads on TV you know, the cricket ad., just ring the 13 number. I just rang the number. It was when my pop was sick, it's when I really did some changes in my life. Getting to know what I wanted to do, I really didn't talk to anyone ... I've got a mate, he's got a mate who's a Major in the army, he took me to see him and I talked it over with him. That was all right.

It was seen that the Indigenous students displayed tenacity and resourcefulness in finding out about their school-to-work paths. However, there are also serious equity issues surrounding students from oppressed, poor and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds being left to their own devices to gather information about their future careers. It follows that these are the kinds of students that need more resources to assist them in matching career aspirations to educational strategies and support. This is a social justice issue of critical proportions.

Family Support

While family were not generally able to offer informed career advice, largely because of their own school and work experiences, they offered critical moral support for their children remaining at school and holding onto their aspirations. The recurring theme of doing something better than others in the community occurred in the students' comments about the value of education. Consider the following comments:

How do they [parents] support you?

Try to encourage me to get to the end of year and showing me what happens if I quit school early. I'll end up on CDEP or work for the dole plan². Or I could end up working for the pension and I really don't want anything to do with that (Amanda, Rural High).

Cathy (City High) received similar advice from her family:

What sort of support do you get at home?

My Aunties and Mum. Because Mum's a teacher, she is really into education. She reckons education's the key. Dad encourages me all the time but Dad didn't have a good time at school.

Do your folks talk about school?

Mum does, talks about what I am doing and how I'm going. Especially if she thinks I'm bludging. She gets full on.

So you spend time talking, not just being told to study.

That's my Dad's advice: study otherwise you will end up working for the CDEP, if you don't finish school.

In the same way Nathan (Coastal High) highlighted the strength of support and value for education that he received from his family.

What held you [at school]?

My parents.

What did they say?

That I should stay in school. And then they explained to me how hard they've had it since they left school, that they went straight into a job. But they said that school is the best years of your life ...

You went through a bad period before, and you mentioned some of your mates are dropping out. Do you ever feel like dropping out?

Sometimes but my parents are always there to pick me up and lead me in the right direction. That keeps me at school.

The clear picture from the stories of these successful Indigenous students was that their families were providing critical support for their career aspirations and their staying on at school. It is interesting that this occurs, showing that despite a general lack of success in their own school lives, the parents value education and see it as vital for their children.

Barriers to Preferred Futures

Getting the Marks

Final marks were identified by all students as the greatest barrier they now faced in getting the career or job they wanted. In the same way as many had accepted the cultural difficulties of relationships with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peers and teachers as something to "put up

² Community Development Employment Program: a scheme whereby people work for their unemployment benefits.

with”, they now appeared to accept the vagaries and lotteries of final year school situations. It was now up to them. Nathan’s (Coastal High) comments were typical:

What do you think will stop you?

My marks, my address, my attitude sometimes, that’s about it.

Some, like Anita (Outback High), were hopeful but aware of past resistances to schooling.

What made you change your mind [about school]?

Getting a good mark in my HSC, my senior years and going ...

Getting a job in the future, made you change your mind now?

Yeah, before it’s too late, if it’s not already too late.

For Cathy (City High) it was now about finishing school and putting something back into her community.

Just to get school over and done with. That is my major focus. I just want to finish Year 12 and that’s when I will go off and do some work ...

Have you seen anybody finish school and go back and help the community?

Yeah, that is what it is all about. You are supposed to get your degree and come back and help the community. That is the only thing school is good for.

Away from Cultural Support

However, completing school and gaining the “right” mark did not mean that students perceived an end to their career difficulties. They were all aware that there were other barriers that they would continually have to address and overcome. For the students attending the rural high schools, gaining the mark they wanted generally meant they had to leave their families and communities to go to University or TAFE. Not an easy prospect for most students, but arguably more challenging for Indigenous people to give up cultural support and solidarity to face academic study in a predominantly non-Indigenous institution. It would also inevitably mean financial hardship for the family and the students were conscious of that. Emma (Coastal High) knew that “it’s pretty expensive too, I think mum and dad will work out some way to pay for it”. The cultural and financial costs were seen but had to be met and overcome. It was a continuation of the determination that they had needed to get them this far in their educational careers.

Do you think it would be important to have your family around if you have to move away, or friends?

Yeah, friends and family, yep, you need a lot of that.

So you think that will stop you from moving out ...if you didn’t have any family out there?

No, it wouldn’t stop me.

What would stop you?

What would stop me? Nothing. I’d just keep going till I got what I wanted.

(Richard, Outback High)

Anita (Outback High) was just as determined:

How do you feel about having to go away?

I guess I'll just have to do it ... Finish my HSC, just go for it. Not going to sit around.

I'll be on my way.

What's going to stop you?

Um, family, if something happens to the family or something.

Not worried about moving away ...you're pretty happy about that?

Yeah, pretty happy about it. All I need is a car. I'll be right.

Based on data presented in this section and from previous sections, there is a clear picture that the educational and career futures for participating Indigenous students were planned to a certain extent but often not based on accurate information. They had made important decisions, had been given at least some advice (even though the quality of advice varied) and worked independently to discover what else they needed to know. A key barrier to their future careers was that alternatives weren't apparent and often were unrelated to their original interests. Unlike many of their peers, they all seemed to be committed to completing Year 12 of secondary school. Like most students they faced the uncertainty of the results of final examinations to finally determine their post-school pathways.

Conclusions

The interviews with the Indigenous students across the different urban and rural locations revealed much about their school and community experiences and their aspirations for the future. The analysis has to be read in the light of their intention and likelihood of finishing secondary school. They were in the minority in their schools and communities and their "success" and aspirations were against local, state and national statistics and trends.

Getting this far had not been easy for any of the students. School was a place that continued to challenge them socially and culturally but where they had learned to "get on with it" and accept injustices so as to get through. They had to do this while many other Indigenous students dropped out or were pushed out of school. Life in their communities was similarly difficult. Negotiations over identity were continually undertaken in the face of cultural challenges on the streets and in workplaces. Despite the enormous obstacles the students displayed a quiet determination to get through and make something of their lives. The culturally supported forces that had taken so many of their peers and community members away from the offers of school, had been so far resisted and indeed, had even appeared to bolster their academic and vocational ambitions. These students appeared to have made conscious and culturally difficult decisions to ensure that they would not turn out like others in their community who had left school early and were experiencing social difficulties associated with drugs and damaging personal relationships. This had put them on a long and demanding educational road. While there was the critical landmark of the end of school and the HSC in sight, there was a feeling that they would still have considerable future educational challenges to face.

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