

**Unlocking Indigenous Educational Disadvantage: Indigenous Community Members'
Perceptions of Self-Concept Research as a Potent Potential Key**

Rhonda G. Craven and Adrian Parente

**Self-concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation Research Centre, University of
Western Sydney, Australia**

**Paper presented at NZARE AARE, Auckland, New Zealand November 2003
PAR03762**

Unlocking Indigenous Educational Disadvantage: Indigenous Community Members' Perceptions of Self-Concept Research as a Potent Potential Key

Rhonda G. Craven and Adrian Parente

Self-concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, Australia

The aims of this research project were to elucidate New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's (AECG) members' perspectives of: a) the importance of undertaking self-concept research to address Aboriginal Education issues from an AECG perspective; b) the potential influence of self-concept on other desirable educational outcomes valued by Aboriginal community members; c) strategies that help/hinder the enhancement of Aboriginal students' self-concepts in schools; d) some areas of Aboriginal students' self-concept that are valued by Aboriginal community members; and e) some strategic research directions in relation to self-concept research. Focus group discussions were held with 18 AECG regional representatives, and 20 members of the AECG. Individual follow-up interviews were conducted with 11 AECG regional representatives deriving from 7 AECG regions and the State Secretariat. Focus group discussions and individual interviews were transcribed and content analysis undertaken by two coders to identify key themes and narratives illustrative of these themes. Results were scrutinized by the State Executive of the AECG who served as experts in checking the results. The results of this study were illuminating and offered insights on strategic directions for future research and strategies to enhance current educational practice. The results demonstrated that AECG members view the attainment of a positive self-concept as a vital goal and outcome of schooling. Self-concept research was also perceived as critically important for addressing the enduring educational and economic disadvantage Aboriginal students experience as a good self-concept was perceived by AECG members to be an important goal in of itself and to have a causal influence on other desirable educational outcomes valued by Aboriginal community members. AECG members also identified a number of strategies that could enhance and hinder the development of Aboriginal students' self-concepts in the schooling context along with some key facets of self-concept valued by Aboriginal community members. In particular AECG members emphasized a wealth of strategic research directions that attested to the significance and viability of a concerted self-concept Aboriginal Education research program.

The Vital Role of Self-Concept for Aboriginal Students

NSW AECG cannot think of a single problem plaguing Aboriginal children – from alienation from school, high rates of absenteeism, enjoyment of school, significant under-achievement, reduced educational and career aspirations, youth depression and suicide, conceptions about employment prospects and ability to secure rewarding, productive careers – that is not traceable, at least in part - to the failure of education systems to maximize our children's identity self-concepts as Aboriginal people, proactively enhance our children's academic self-concepts, and ensure our children in general feel good about themselves. We feel that maximizing Aboriginal children's self-concepts is absolutely fundamental to enhancing and ensuring as individuals they reach their full potential.

(Charles Davison, President, New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG) quoted in Craven and Tucker, 2003, p. 1).

In fact, Aboriginal Elders and communities have emphasised for decades that a vital outcome of schooling should be that children feel positively about themselves and their capabilities. “Importantly, NSW AECG members believe that a key reason for Aboriginal children being the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia, is that current education systems fail to acknowledge the vital importance of maximising Aboriginal children’s self-concept as the critical link between schooling and successful outcomes” (Charles Davison, President, NSW AECG, quoted in Craven and Tucker, 2003, p. 1).

Aboriginal community members believe that children’s self-concepts need to be enhanced in terms of identity and specific academic areas in order for Aboriginal children to attain academic outcomes commensurate with other Australians. “Members firmly believe that improving our children’s self-concept directly impacts on and improves other desirable educational outcomes (e.g. academic achievement, school attendance, enjoyment of school, motivation to succeed, general optimism, undertaking further education and training) that are highly valued by Aboriginal community members” (Charles Davison, President, NSW AECG, quoted in Craven and Tucker, 2003, p. 1).

Nationally there is a dearth of research being undertaken in Aboriginal education (Bin-Sallik, Blomeley, Flowers, & Hughes (1994a, 1994b). Whilst self-concept research is prolific with non-Indigenous populations (see Hattie, 1992) and advances in self-concept interventions have emanated from Australian research (e.g. Craven, 1996; Craven, Marsh & Debus, 1991; Craven, Marsh, Debus, and Wijesiri, 2001; Craven, Marsh and Burnett, in press, Marsh and Craven, 1997) it has only recently begun to be applied to Indigenous populations.

Over the period of 2001-2002 NSW AECG and the Self-concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Research Centre have collaborated on research to elucidate NSW AECG members’ views on the importance of self-concept research for Aboriginal children and identify potential research directions in this area that will advance Aboriginal Education issues. The purpose of this article is to report some of the findings emanating from this study.

Aims

The aims of the study were to elucidate:

1. The importance of undertaking self-concept research to address Aboriginal Education issues from an AECG perspective;
2. The potential influence of self-concept on other desirable educational outcomes valued by Aboriginal community members;
3. Possible strategies that help/hinder the enhancement of Aboriginal students’ self-concepts in schools that the AECG might be able to explore further;
4. Some areas of children’s self-concept that are valued by Aboriginal community members; and
5. Some useful and appropriate possible research directions in relation to self-concept research.

Research Design and Procedures

The research design involved gathering qualitative data by conducting a series of interviews with NSW AECG members. An interview instrument was developed to address the aims of the study and guide the discussions with participants. This instrument was specifically designed to elucidate the aims of the study by focusing the gathering of data based upon the following three issues:

- What aspects of self-concept (e.g. identity, reading, mathematics, relationships with peers/community) are important for Aboriginal children?;
- What can schools do to enhance/inhibit self-concept of Aboriginal students?; and
- What further research needs to be undertaken to enhance the self-concept of Aboriginal students?

Eighteen people participated in two groups of focus group discussions of AECG regional representatives. Twenty people participated in focus group discussions held in Shellharbour. Eleven AECG regional representatives participated in individual interviews. The latter participants came from 7 AECG regions and the State Secretariat. Three of the participants were male with eight being female. Results were discussed with the State Executive of the AECG who served as experts in checking the results.

Results and Discussion

Content analysis was undertaken to determine the key themes raised by participants in the contexts of interviews and focus groups. Content analysis was undertaken by the two authors of this report and inter-rater agreement was high being 95%. In this section we report the key themes that emerged from the data based upon participants' responses to the semi-structured interview and focus group questions.

Aboriginal Students and Self-Concepts

Participants emphasised that they felt it was vital for Aboriginal students to develop good self-concepts in order to reach their full potential.

It is really important for Koori kids to have a good self-concept. I feel that the kids won't reach their full potential in education with the way things are situated [low self-concepts of Koori students] at this point in time.

It's in schools where they interact with other kids and if they feel good about themselves then they're able to compete at a better level. Whereas kids who are not confident in themselves, with low self-esteem, well they're going to be behind the eight ball before they start.

It is important to note that all participants identified self-concept and self-esteem as crucial to the success of the child at school. Participants identified enhancing the self-concept/self-esteem of Aboriginal students as a fundamental priority of schooling.

A Key Concern: Schooling and Self-Concept

Participants were particularly concerned that rather than enhancing students' self-concepts the predominant paradigm experienced by Aboriginal students was one whereby schooling experiences served to reduce Aboriginal students' self-concepts.

I think that it's getting better but on a daily basis our kids are still faced with often being told either by other kids or by teachers that who they are is not ok.

They never do enough [to enhance self-concept]. They never do enough until they're all fully in-serviced the whole staff, from the office staff right through.

This negative impact of schooling on Koori children's self-concepts was felt by participants to have dire repercussions for students. These consequences included the severe impact on their self-esteem that subsequently was felt to impact on all other aspects of their schooling and by extension their lives.

Self-concept was suggested as beginning to breakdown some time in primary school such that by the time students reached high school they no longer enjoyed school.

It seems to me that, we get kids that uh, really enjoy school and they go along, somewhere in the primary area there's a breakdown, because when our kids get to high school, then they want to just toss it all in.

Hence it is particularly disturbing to note that participants reported that schooling often seemed to serve to decrease Aboriginal students' self-concepts, that this was perceived as having dire consequences for participation in schooling, and that this occurred as early as the primary years of school.

The Impact of Self-concept on Desirable Educational Outcomes

All participants agreed that good academic self-concept was vital to the attainment of educational outcomes and enhanced life opportunities.

If they have high self-esteem then they perform better.

When kids are more confident and they're more aware of what they can and can't do - they have the ability to do it [secure good careers].

If you don't feel good, you don't do well, you're not doing what you are capable of. That's the outcome.

The importance of high self-concept in increasing persistence and effort on tasks was illustrated by one participant's juxtaposition of sport and academic self-concept as follows:

Then you look at both those things Aboriginal kids mightn't be doing real well in school because of their low esteem but in sports they've got a high one because everyone is chasing them for it. And they're willing to put in the time and effort.

Hence participants emphasised that a high self-concept influenced educational outcomes such as school achievement, persistence and effort on tasks, school attendance and participation,

and securing a good career and ultimately was vital for Aboriginal students to achieve their full potential.

Important Domains of Self-Concept for Aboriginal Children

Identity

Participants emphasised that a healthy concept of identity is crucial for Aboriginal students to achieve at school.

One of the most important and key things is their concept of Aboriginality, who they are, where they come from. The acceptance of that! Their ability to perform at school is affected by this.

The underpinning significance of a good identity self-concept was summarised by one participant as follows:

Writing and reading and mathematics can be important, but until such times that they feel good about themselves, good about where they come from, positive about their background and all that, what's 2 and 2 mean.

Hence participants emphasised that a good identity self-concept for Aboriginal students was a necessary prerequisite for attaining desirable educational outcomes.

Reading

Participants also suggested that teachers needed to do more to enhance Aboriginal students' academic self-concepts particularly in relation to literacy. Participants also suggested that Aboriginal students were not being given enough help at school as illustrated by the following comments:

A good self-concept in literacy is especially important. A lot of the kids are not being helped in reading. They put their hands up for help and it's ignored and I feel that's going to keep the kids back down in numeracy and maths and other things as well.

Participants also felt that schools often did not acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal English and use this as a basis for enhancing Aboriginal students' reading skills and self-concepts.

You've just got to accept people's language for what they are. The thing is to balance your language, to know that, that in school you speak this language but at home your normal language and there's nothing wrong in speaking your language, and sometimes when Aboriginal kids write their essays it's the way it comes straight out of their mouth. So instead of being marked down for it, they, they should acknowledge them for it, and then say well this is the way you should do it with the school, which again is not wrong, but in school this is the way we do it, so the kids can see that, yeah their language is ok and the way they write It it's ok, but when you're in a school situation, you've got to, instead of always knocking them down, 'cause the more you knock people down, the more and more self esteem goes down.

Hence participants emphasised that enhancing Aboriginal students' reading self-concept needed to be seen as a priority by schools and in particular Aboriginal English needed to be viewed by schools as an important basis from which to enhance literacy skills and reading self-concept.

Leadership

Leadership self-concept was also identified as an important domain of self-concept and an important area to target for enhancement as is illustrated by the following comment from a participant:

The same thing happens with leadership, a student that was nominated for leadership and the suspect person said to me this kid has extreme potential you know and amongst Aboriginal kids was a born leader, but when he got with SRC kids he got very quiet, and didn't participate because his leadership skills weren't acknowledged by that peer group and they obviously thought he was just an Aboriginal person and couldn't possibly have leadership skills so then straight away as soon as he came into the group he was obviously treated that way, and they're the things too that are sub-standard out there in the system, that just knock your self esteem right out.

Hence whilst leadership self-concept was acknowledged as important, participants felt that Aboriginal students' leadership self-concept was often not being nurtured appropriately.

Peer

Developing a good peer self-concept was also considered as important by participants but often negatively influenced by racism based upon skin colour. Participants also noted that such forms of racism could be generated from non-Aboriginal students as well as Aboriginal students.

There's some that can't mix in, and peer pressure from the others might put them down a bit because of the colour of their skin or however you put it. Call the other ones coconuts or you know because you got fair skin.

Participants generally espoused that students needed to be encouraged to develop good peer self-concepts in relation to both non-Aboriginal students and other Aboriginal students who may look different to themselves.

Sport

Sport self-concept was considered as an important self-concept domain, as sport was often the area that students excelled at as is illustrated by the following comment:

At the moment I have two sons in Year 4 - they are taught by the school to play football, to play union, to play basket ball, to play soccer, and there are people in Year 12, this has been happening right through their school life, any sports that come out, you can bet your life that the kids are going to be pulled out to represent the school. Take Australia wide rugby league knock out last week - 99% of those kids were Koori.

Sport was also viewed by participants as a means to develop positive relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students which was considered fundamental to community well-being and harmony.

I think it's important for kids to participate in sports, whether it's in school or outside the school and to become involved in the different organisations that are available now. Like the Police Boys Club or the basketball stadium they run competitions there. Touch football is done, they play touch football 3 times a week. All these things and our kids are starting to participate in them. It's building up their friendship with the non-Indigenous kids because they're playing on the same football teams in school as well as outside of school, they play in the same basketball teams. It just makes schools a very happy place and it makes the community a lot more happier place because you're not going to have as much vandalism as you normally would when you've got the 2 factions fighting with one another.

Hence sport was deemed by participants as a valued area that fostered both positive self-concept and performance in relation to Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students' social, community and schooling acceptance was often seen by participants as driven by their level of success on the sporting fields. Therefore, sporting success was perceived by participants as contributing to positive participation in the broader school and community climate. Sport was also perceived as an important means for establishing positive peer relationships that extended beyond the sporting field and enhanced the well-being of communities.

Health

Participants also considered that a good health self-concept was vital for Aboriginal students. However, participants often lamented that Aboriginal students experienced more health problems than their non-Indigenous counterparts and coupled with this higher incidence Aboriginal students were also reluctant to seek help when suffering a health problem. It was generally expressed that many Aboriginal students had a low health self-concept. This issue is illuminated by the following comment:

Yeah health that's a very important one and you know if you haven't got it, once again the kids are reluctant to speak out if they've got any health reasons and they carry it to school and they work through it, they try their best to work through it but it's a handicap on them you know.

Active and full participation in schooling is dependent on good health. It is of concern to note that participants felt that in general Aboriginal students' often had low health self-concept, experienced more health problems than their non-Indigenous counterparts, and was reluctant to seek help when they experienced health problems.

Barriers to Enhancing Aboriginal Students' Self-Concept

The Need for Schools to Reinforce and Support Identity Self-Concepts

Participants expounded the need for schools to have a vital role in reinforcing Aboriginality and supporting the positive development of Aboriginal students' identity self-concepts through appropriate programs and initiatives.

Participants lamented that a key problem in schooling was that Aboriginal students' identity self-concepts were not being supported in the schools and in fact in some schools Aboriginal students were being made to feel ashamed of their Aboriginality.

But also being made to feel shame of their Aboriginality, some kids feel shame.

I think they're very confused, the kids when they're asked to come in to school and you leave your Aboriginality there at the gate.

Participants felt that not reinforcing identity self-concept resulted in a number of Aboriginal students not openly identifying so as to not attract the stereotyping that participants suggested went along with identifying as an Aboriginal person.

So much so that a number of students do not openly identify.

I mean there's some kids out there, you know they know they're Aboriginal but you know, but they're not going to say actually, if, they'll come and tell us on the quiet.

They're not going to tell anybody else in the school because they don't want to attract that attention and what comes with it.

Hence participants suggested that enhancing Aboriginal students' identity self-concept should be perceived as an important goal of schooling. It is of concern to note that at least in some schools, Aboriginal students are still being alienated from schooling and being treated in a racist manner whereby they are made to feel ashamed of their Aboriginality. This situation has seemed to result in a number of Aboriginal students choosing not to identify to avoid being exposed to racism.

The Need for Teachers to Enhance Individuals' Self-Concepts

Participants considered that teachers did not seem to know enough about individual students' self-concepts and the rationale for enhancing Aboriginal students' self-concepts.

I think the issue is not about Aboriginality and self-concept it's about the whole issue of self-concept and the importance of self-concept as an individual person, and the need for teachers to understand that you need to work with the whole child and self-concept or self-esteem or whatever you want to call it, is just so, so important. I think that teachers really don't know enough about it.

It was felt that more attention needed to be directed to individual's needs.

You can't look at any student unless you know that real personality, it doesn't matter whether they're black or white or what they are, if you don't know that little personality, you won't achieve for the student because you're not getting at what that little personality is capable of doing.

They see themselves as individuals first, Aboriginals second.

If I were to talk about where I work and all the schools I work with, where I see the kids are being individuals and achieving is because they don't let anything impact on them. Whereas the group oh we're Aboriginals we've got to get this we got to get that aren't.

A common theme was that participants expressed frustration that teachers often espoused that they treated all students the same. Participants felt that such statements did not acknowledge the need to address individual needs and self-concept nor the unique difficulties Aboriginal students faced in the schooling sector. These sentiments are illuminated by the following comments:

I'm a great one for saying I hate it when teachers say to me that I treat everybody the same, as soon as they say that to me I know that there's a problem because if they did treat everybody the same there wouldn't be a problem and how do you treat a person who is blind to a person who is not blind.

I think the strength in a person's identity whether its got to do with cultural identity or personal identity is very, very integral to the wholeness of that person, and it makes you who you are, it really does, and I think everybody needs to accept that and respect that. While I acknowledge the fact that many teachers say that they treat all kids the same that to me is not good enough, because every single student is different and every single kid has issues that they face in relation to self-concept, and I don't think the teachers themselves understand the issues about self-concept.

Hence participants emphasised that enhancing each individual child's self-concept was of paramount importance in the schooling sector. In particular, participants were concerned that teachers did not seem to know enough about the importance of enhancing Aboriginal students' self-concepts nor understand the need for identifying individual levels of self-concept.

Peer and Teacher Misconceptions and Stereotypes.

Interviewees also suggested that the perceptions of Aboriginality held by classmates and teachers impacted on the formation of Aboriginal students' self-concept. In particular, participants felt that fair Aboriginal children's identity self-concepts were adversely affected when peers and teachers held stereotypical views of Aboriginality.

Well we had a lot of problems with the identity but once again it's not encouraged or accepted fully you know. I think we've still got a long way to go on that. There are still lots of the name-calling going on around schools. I know a kid in year 10 who was being held back by remarks in regards to his Aboriginality being a really fair kid and he's fallen right back in his school lessons and all that.

The other side it is to, Aboriginal people come in all colours, you know all colours and yet people refer to them as 'White Aboriginals' or 'Half-caste Aboriginals' - that's where it can be very insulting to kids when people are saying that to them. It also affects their self-concept on their identities, they're trying to come to terms with who they are and I mean we've been rubbished on and off for so long, trying to get that self esteem back in there is hard. You go to school and you're hit in the face with it every day, 7 hours a day.

Our light Kooris who seem to have big issues because they're caught in between, they've got Aboriginal heritage within their family and then um, try to accept themselves as being Aboriginal, you got Aboriginal people who don't accept them because they think they're too white and then you got the non-Aboriginal community that won't accept them.

Participants also expressed concern that some teachers were reinforcing rather than rebutting common misconceptions and stereotypes as is illuminated by the following comments.

Where a teacher began a conversation about benefits and Aboriginal people. And then the kids, the girls in this class all jumped in and had their ten cents worth and the teacher actually encouraged that and furthered those misconceptions. There's some really underneath foundation stuff that needs to happen in shifting the attitudes of teachers.

I think teachers still stereotype a lot of our kids. What I'm noticing is kids, our kids are still stereotyped, um, because it's an Aboriginal kid they think that it's uh, it's an Aboriginal problem.

It is also disturbing to note that participants also suggested that some Principals hold and expound stereotypical views.

I sat down with a Principal, my first day on the job and he said to me, his exact words were 'Oh we have problems with the black Aboriginals but not with the white Aboriginals' and I thought how am I going to come back at this, so I said 'Do you have any trouble with the white-white kids and the black-white kids', honestly and I went back to work and told my boss about it you know and I was just blown away by that. We've still got some of those people in our schools, so it's real you know.

Participants also felt that there was a need for more emphasis on the positive characteristics of Aboriginal culture in the schooling sector.

Instead of the positive ones - belonging to a race that has the oldest tradition in the world and you know a country that goes back for thousands of years - yet it's not highlighted to the kids as being a positive. It's a drawback, and that's a real problem.

Hence participants identified stereotyping as adversely impacting upon Aboriginal students' self-concepts. It is important to note that stereotyping was perceived by participants as being pervasive in some schools, in that students, teachers and the school executive were identified as reinforcing stereotypical views. These results suggest that at least in some schools a

systemic problem exists that permeates the schoolyard, classroom and the decision-making structures of schools. It was also suggested by participants that schools should consider emphasising the positive features of Aboriginal culture to a greater degree, rather than focusing on what was often inappropriately stereotyped as negative.

Expecting Aboriginal Students to be 'Black Experts'

Participants suggested that when Aboriginal students are expected by teachers to be experts on all things Aboriginal, this has a negative impact on their self-concept.

They feel good about themselves being Aboriginal until they're asked questions, something to do with Aboriginals, teachers expect them to know it because they are Aboriginal.

And they especially feel shame when they don't know anything about their culture.

Quite often questions are asked in a way that's really difficult for someone to answer to you know what I mean? They're sort of put on the spot and it's assumed that they've been lucky enough to be given information, that even the experts are finding hard in some cases to trace, you know what I mean it's kind of condescending actually.

The issue of treating all Aboriginal students as if they are all experts on everything to do with Aboriginal culture, history and issues has been raised anecdotally by Aboriginal community members and Aboriginal Studies teachers for many years. As such it is of concern that participants expressed that this issue seemed to be enduring and was perceived as having an adverse impact on Aboriginal students' self-concepts.

Conflict in Expectations between Home and School

Participants also noted that the school environment in some schools could tend to impact negatively on students' self-concepts due to a conflict in expectations between home and school.

Because, our kids are a lot freer at home and in the community, they go to school and there are certain restraints in the school that they're not experiencing in home life. I'm talking about boys that are the males, that are the head of the household, in the home. They go to school and they're back down to that lower you're only a student! And, it kind of makes it difficult sometimes, I think that way.

Hence participants expressed concern that at least in some schools a conflict between school and home expectations served to undermine Aboriginal students' self-concepts.

Contexts that Enhance Aboriginal Students' Self-Concepts

Holistic Approaches

Participants suggested that holistic approaches were necessary to create contexts that facilitated the enhancement of Aboriginal students' self-concepts. Participants emphasised that a range of people contributed to creating desirable contexts and as such more educational training activities needed to be undertaken with both a wider range of school staff than solely just teachers and also with members of the broader community.

You get all the teachers in, but never mind about the clerical staff, the cleaners or any, or anyone else. And they, and it's really important that they do the training because, in lots of cases, they're the people that turn the kids away from school.

It needs to be a whole community, school approach. It's a whole cycle while you need the community, you need the parents, you need the kids, you need the schools and you need the Principals.

Hence participants identified that education training programmes that targeted a broad range of people who interacted with Aboriginal students could help to facilitate the creation of contexts that were conducive to enhancing Aboriginal students' self-concepts in both the school and broader community.

Praising Students

Participants emphasised that Aboriginal students' self-concepts could be enhanced if students received more praise and their individual talents, strengths and efforts were acknowledged. The potent impact of such strategies is illuminated by the following comment:

Well I find that our kids like lots of praise. Now I'm not bragging but I can tell you about this incident. It has to do with my family. I had a grandson in year 1 and um, he is sort of a mad Michael Jackson fan. Recently they've picked up on James' talents, and it's got a lot to do with the teachers in the school. The teachers saw that James had this, this like passion for Michael Jackson and dancing and all that sort of thing, so they decided for education week, they would do Michael Jackson songs and incorporate Years 1 and 2. James was Michael Jackson and he performed it, he danced and all the other kids were the monsters in that Thriller, you know that video. Well, James has always been confident, you know but it just kind of developed him.

Participants also identified adverse consequences that resulted when reinforcement was absent.

When a kid turns up late for school, you know that puts a lot of pressure on kids, but not so much in primary as in high school, if you come late you get a slip. If you come late 2 or 3 times a week you're on detention. You know, and rather than come late to school, kids don't come at all. They stay at home. They sort of beat the system. Instead of schools saying we're glad to see you here, and letting them get on with some work.

Yeah, so there's an overall problem it's just not in Maths or English or the self-concepts low or I don't know. I think one, one goes on to the next one. I think once your self-esteem goes, you don't try any more. And the Aboriginal kids get a dislike for teachers as they are not making them feel good about themselves. And it just rolls on to the next teacher.

Hence participants suggested that schools could consider praising Aboriginal students more as a key strategy for enhancing self-concept.

Respecting Students and Holding High Expectations

The need for teachers to respect Aboriginal students and Aboriginal culture was seen as fundamental to enhancing their self-concepts.

Respect is such an important part in that child's life even as Aboriginal teachers it's an important part of their life and that's why they have a better understanding with these students because they can see that, and they know how to address it and how to utilise it, to the positive. To respect and be committed in what they do.

Participants also emphasised there was a need for teachers to set high expectations for students to encourage students to set their post-school aspirations higher and to ensure Aboriginal students participate fully in schooling.

A good example is people who want to know what they're going to do when they leave school instead of when you finish Year 12 are you thinking of going to Uni or doing that sort of, not giving the kids a high enough bench mark to aim for, they lower their expectations they don't care.

A lot of people who have been in classrooms know that there's an Aboriginal kid sitting there willing to ask a question, and a white kid puts his hand up after him the non-Aboriginal kid gets asked first all the time.

Teachers' expectations are quite often really low and it is an insult. I know of someone who had really bright children of Aboriginal descent, now when they moved their children from one school to another they went 'Oh, Aboriginal you know tick the box type of thing', the school was full of enthusiasm, those kids went down hill, like that, because the teachers believed that if they were of Aboriginal descent, they didn't know what they were doing, they never once tried to see what they knew.

The need for senior education staff to have high expectations for Aboriginal students was also proposed as beneficial for enhancing students' self-concepts and academic outcomes.

We've just got a new superintendent for this area and I think with his enthusiasm, and his expectations of schools, they've really lifted their act.

Hence participants considered that teachers and senior executives could consider setting higher expectations for Aboriginal students in order to enhance their self-concepts, participation in schooling, and post-schooling aspirations.

Consistent Standards and Expectations in Schools

Participants indicated that schools should have consistent standards and expectations for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Not being consistent in some of the issues that happen at school, and I must admit that gets me very very angry and just in the last couple of weeks I've actually taken up some issues with Principals. One day kids can get away with blue murder and the next day they're suspended from school for it. What message is that sending to those kids, what message is it sending to the other Koori kids and what message is it sending to the non-Aboriginal kids.

Hence setting consistent expectations and standards was seen by participants as a strategy for enhancing students' self-concepts and participation in schooling.

School/Teacher Relations with the Local Community

All participants identified the relationship between the school/teacher and the Aboriginal community as being crucial to the development of the self-concept of Aboriginal students.

Well I think schools have a big role to play. They have to make schools more accessible, to the Aboriginal parents in a way that parents feel a part of the school and not like in the past when they were in institutions and Aboriginal people had no rights to be in there. Now we have a partnership agreement with the Department and the State AECG. It gives us an ownership of it so that parents are able to go into the schools and question what they're teaching their kids and if they don't agree with what they're teaching the kids they sit down with the staff and work out programs that are going to be relevant for our kids.

How many times have we said if kids like their teachers they'll learn. That's what it comes back to.

Hence participants felt that the establishment of a good relationship between teachers and the local Aboriginal community was fundamental to enhancing the self-concepts of Aboriginal students.

Positive School Climate

Participants noted that it was important to value Aboriginal student's culture in the context of the school to enhance students' self-concepts.

A lot of our kids speak Aboriginal English, they'll explain it, if the teachers ask. Asking a question, they'll explain it in the way they see as right for their language, and then the teacher will say well you're speaking wrong. And then, and then um, that knocks their self-esteem about when people start knocking their language.

Yeah well that's again valuing kids and their culture in schools. I mean you can see just in this school the Aboriginal culture's valued here, and this is one of the schools where the Aboriginal kids are really achieving.

A positive, friendly school environment was also considered important.

If a school is a friendly place to go and it's not just programs that are put in place as far as the academic side of it. Particularly if there are programs that are put in place that address issues of Aboriginality, culture and so on. That's what makes the difference, just the environment of the school makes a difference in the physical environment that the kid's and the community may see in the school.

Hence participants identified the establishment of a positive school climate as facilitating the enhancement of Aboriginal students' self-concepts. Strategies suggested for the establishment of such a climate included valuing Aboriginal students' culture and Aboriginal English and incorporating Aboriginal Studies content into the curriculum.

Parental Interest and Support

All participants agreed that a parent's interest in their child's education is crucial to the success of the child at school.

Those kids whose parents take an interest in their education are leaps and bounds ahead of the one's whose parents don't see any value in education.

Just thinking about kids in um, in the local area and the kids that I know, those that have got supportive parents and that, the parents that are there for them all the while, will go on. Last year we had 14 sit the HSC, the year before that we had nil.

All participants agreed that parents generally want the best for their children, however, it was suggested that many Aboriginal parents were restricted financially by what educational resources they could provide at home.

I don't think there's anything much different, the only difference I would see is in the home life, where you see, with non-Aboriginal families they've got heaps of reading material, they buy the newspaper every day, they buy books, they buy CD's, videos, they've got all that there for their kids to access whereas, not a lot of Aboriginal homes can afford those sorts of things.

Hence whilst participants acknowledged that parental interest was a central factor in assisting students to succeed at school it was also expressed that often Aboriginal families could not financially afford to provide their children with educational resources commensurate to those provided by non-Indigenous families.

Positive Relationships with Teachers

The relationship between teachers and students was also identified as an aspect that had the capacity to enhance or denigrate Indigenous students' self-concepts. A relationship that engenders trust and communication was identified as being central to Indigenous student success in the education system.

Cause the one thing we know if you've built the relationship and the trust is there, the kids will take risks, they will do things they don't think they can do, because it's for you, it's not so much even that it's for themselves, initially, when they're taking the risk, it's because they've got relationship with you and they think they can trust you, so they'll do anything for you if that's already there.

They need to be able to put their views across and have somebody to listen to them because they have problems that are sometimes hard - sometimes teachers' attitudes, some have home problems, some don't go home they sleep at relations and that sort of thing.

Effective teacher communication was identified as fundamental to establishing a good relationship between students and teachers.

Yeah, they [teachers] talk at them and they talk them like their dumb, like it's any kid whether they've got an education or not, if you can talk to them you get a better response.

They're not giving enough attention to them you know when the kids ask for attention, that's the main thing that's blocking them I think. They're just ignored or put your hand down and wait or their backs turned on them you know. I think they've got to be more open and receptive to what the little ones want. Even in pre-school and kindy they just totally ignore them you know. The teacher needs to be more attentive, they just chuck their hands up in the air and walk away.

And then the teacher will say oh you know like what's their problem, you know like then we try to tell the teacher, well, you know Aboriginal kids sometimes won't get up in the class you've got to make it comfortable. You just can't demand a kid, to say well, you know, at 3 o'clock tomorrow you're getting up no matter what. You know what the students do - they just leave.

Participants identified effective teacher-student relationships as central to enhancing students' self-concepts. Participants emphasised that such relationships should be characterised by trust and effective communication strategies. Concern was also expressed that often Aboriginal students were not being provided with appropriate levels of teacher attention.

Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Culturally appropriate curriculum was seen as absolutely vital to enhancing students' self-concept.

Where they've got a big contingent of Aboriginal students and they put an Aboriginal perspective to it and a fair dinkum commitment to it, not just put it in one strand like they normally did in the past and that was their commitment to Aboriginal education as you are full aware. If they'd put it right across the curriculum in every area that they teach, maths, science, English whatever, there's a fair dinkum component of Aboriginal context within it. Because the books and that they had in the library prior to the AECG becoming as powerful as it has, all the stuff that was in the libraries was all negative stuff as far as Aboriginal kids was concerned. Now they've got books in there with the Aboriginal colours on them. Aboriginal kids would go in and read them, they're picking them up, they're reading them and that's what they need to do more of so that our kids feel a part of the whole thing.

Hence participants identified the need for Aboriginal Studies to permeate the curriculum. Participants particularly emphasised that relevant curriculum needed to include a focus on the local Aboriginal community and Aboriginal life.

Aboriginal Role Models

Participants also felt there was a need to get more Aboriginal people involved in schools to serve as role models.

Well they should get more Aboriginal people involved. At the front desk as well as in the schools, in the classroom.

They need to employ more Aboriginal people because, especially in the front office. If a parent comes into the front office all she sees is white faces, she'd turn around and walk back out the gate and the kids going to miss out on lunch or recess. If she'd had an Aboriginal face there that she knew and she could talk to it'd make it a lot easier. You'd get more black parents coming into that school and they'd feel as though they owned it, that the partnership was working.

The other thing is to talk about role models you can go into any store any book store anywhere in Australia and you can buy a book on Indigenous sports people, yet you cannot walk into a book store and buy a book on Aboriginal scholars.

Hence participants emphasised that Aboriginal role models both internal and external to schools were valuable in enhancing Aboriginal students' self-concepts. However, participants also lamented that often role models seem to be sport celebrities rather than scholarly mentors.

Research in Aboriginal Communities

It is interesting to note that all participants reported that no educational research was being conducted in their communities.

No one's doing anything.

If there is any research I'd like to know who comes to our district and does it?

No, no nothing gets up in there it's um, it's like a hidden, hidden community up there, you know, there's about, they reckon there's about 8000 people, Aboriginal people living up there.

Participants emphasised that there should be a lot more research conducted in order to demonstrate to teachers what is and is not working.

I don't think that we have enough.

I just think there should be more of it mate

I think research is invaluable.

I mean it's amazing how people react to stuff when they can see it in black and white.

And they can see the things that aren't working. Sometimes I think, we really need to shock people. They think things are going along smoothly and they're doing the right things by the kids. If they see something in black and white where kids aren't achieving, it makes a lot of difference.

Participants also suggested that one of the reasons research was not happening is because experienced non-Aboriginal researchers were too reluctant to engage in Aboriginal Education research.

I think they're afraid. Well there's fear of the Aboriginal people jumping on them.

It is interesting to note that participants reported that they were not aware of any research being conducted in their communities. It is also important to note that participants emphasised that they felt that research was invaluable and there was a dire need for more research to be undertaken in order to inform teachers of both effective and ineffective Aboriginal Education strategies.

Using a Self-Concept Questionnaire

Participants felt that it would be very useful to use a quantitative questionnaire like the Self Description Questionnaire (Marsh, 1990) to measure Aboriginal students' self-concepts.

I think it's very important because if we've got that data there and we've got it set out in a way that we can identify where our kids are, where their weaknesses are and that, then we can identify them straight away, we can develop strategies to overcome those areas of low self-esteem. Without the data and that there, without the research it's near impossible. We have to have research, we have to have data collection.

It would, it would be a great advantage for teachers. If a teacher could come into a school and pick up 2 A4 sheets of paper of his classroom and it had outlined on the 2 sheets of paper the strengths and weaknesses of each kid, then he can go away and he can develop his program to cater for each one of those kids. It's going to make his work a hell of a lot easier and that's why research is so important.

There was also a real sense of excitement in relation to the possibilities of self-concept research based on a questionnaire and a need to encourage people to think beyond the square.

No-one's actually offered I think the sort of research like this. I guess one of the problems is that we've got to convince people to think outside of the square.

Possible Research Directions

Participants emphasised there was a need to conduct self-concept research with children. They emphasised asking them about research was useful but what was more important was to work with children and find out what their self-concepts are like. They also emphasised that there was a real need to demonstrate to teachers how important it is to enhance students' self-concepts and show them some strategies that work. Participants noted that self-concept research could have a powerful role in helping to improve life chances.

It's all about improving the life chances of many students, particularly the Aboriginal students. Research into improving their self-concepts and what direction they're going to head after school.

Participants were concerned that current research capitalised on was based on results from overseas and was narrowly focused on system perspectives in relation to programs rather than independent research.

I think one of the problems is that for example within the education system is that they do their own research into what's up to date as far as curriculum and so on and a lot of that research is done overseas looking at other systems and how they operate. When the system itself does that research but it's all still based on the institutional perspective on what's important rather than what research shows to be important.

How can you develop a program without sound background research in a particular area. It is fundamental.

Possible research areas mentioned included:

Number 1 priority should be researching and developing culturally appropriate ways to enhance Aboriginal children's self-concept.

Developing something that teachers could find out where a child's self-concept was low.

We need to research to find the best way to fix it [enhance low self-concept].

Identifying the impact of racism on Aboriginal children's self-concept.

Aboriginal students' self-concepts and the importance of this for enjoying school.

Showing that improving students' self-confidence or self-concept improves other important things like liking school, wanting to go to school, wanting to put in effort.

Absolutely, that's the sort of research [relationship between self-concept and educational outcomes] that you need to develop and be able to give practicing teachers so they can see how important self-concept is.

Yeah and the types of programs that they're teaching in the schools, how they're teaching it.

Research evaluating the impact of an AEA on Aboriginal students' self-concept.

Having a look at attitudes of other students and staff towards Aboriginal people.

Programs where the Aboriginal students are more or less doing things.

Hence participants offered a wealth of viable suggestions for future research.

Summary

The results of this study are illuminating and offer insights on strategic directions for future research and strategies to enhance current educational practice. Clearly the results demonstrate that AECG members view the attainment of a positive self-concept as a vital goal and outcome of schooling. Self-concept research was also perceived as critically important for addressing the enduring educational and economic disadvantage Aboriginal students experience as a good self-concept was perceived by AECG members to be an important goal in of itself and to have a causal influence on other desirable educational outcomes valued by Aboriginal community members. AECG members also identified a number of strategies that could enhance and hinder the development of Aboriginal students' self-concepts in the schooling context along with some key facets of self-concept valued by Aboriginal community members. In particular AECG members emphasized a wealth of strategic research directions that attested to the significance and viability of a concerted self-concept research program.

James Wilson-Miller a renown Aboriginal historian and respected teacher educator has contended that "Australia is better than it once was for Indigenous people but not as good as it might become". Overall the results of this study suggest that Aboriginal Education self-concept research has the potent potential to really make a difference to the enduring educational and economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal students. The challenge is now for governments to recognise their moral responsibility to recognize that Aboriginal Education research is indeed a national priority.

References

- Bin-Sallik, M., Blomeley, N., Flowers, R., & Hughes, P. (1994a Vol.1; 1994b Vol. 2). Review and analysis of literature relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Part 1 Summary. Canberra: DEET.
- Brophy, J. (1981). Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 51, 5-32.
- Craven, R. G. (1996). *Enhancing Academic Self-Concept: A Large-Scale Longitudinal Study in an Educational Setting*. Doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Sydney. USA: UMI.
- Craven, R. G., and Tucker, A. (2003). *Enhancing self-concept and educational outcomes for Indigenous students: AECG members' views and suggestions for strategic research directions*. Stanmore, Australia: NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated.
- Craven, R. G., Marsh, H.W., & Debus, R.L. (1991). Effects of internally focused feedback and attributional feedback on the enhancement of academic self-concept. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83, 17-27.
- Craven, R. G., Marsh, H. W., Debus, R. L., & Wijesiri, J. (2001). Diffusion effects: Control Group Contamination Threats to the Validity of Teacher-Administered Interventions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93, 639-645. ISSN: 0022-0663.

Craven, R. G., Marsh, H. W., & Burnett, P. (in press). Cracking the self-concept enhancement conundrum: A call and blueprint for the next generation of self-concept enhancement research. In H.W. Marsh, R. G. Craven, & D. McInerney (Eds.). *International Advances in Self Research*. Volume 1. Information Age Press: Greenwich, CT.

Hattie, J. (1992). *Self-concept*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Marsh, H. W. (1990). *The Self Description Questionnaire-I: SDQ-I manual*. Sydney: University of Western Sydney.

Marsh, H. W., & Craven, R. G. (1997). Academic self-concept: Beyond the dustbowl. In G. Phye (Ed.) *Handbook of classroom assessment: Learning, achievement and adjustment*. US: Academic Press, (pp. 131-198).