

**Self-Identity and Positive Outcomes of Schooling for Indigenous Australian Students**

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

**PUR03796**

# **Self-Identity and Positive Outcomes of Schooling for Indigenous Australian Students**

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This paper reports on an investigation of the role of positive self-identity in affecting school outcomes for Australian Indigenous students. Positive self-identity has been suggested as one of the factors which result in greater commitment and connection to schooling by Indigenous students, leading to better school outcomes. Consultations were conducted with a national sample of Indigenous community members (students, parents/carers, teachers, Aboriginal and (Torres Strait) Islander Education Workers—AIEWs), and non-Indigenous teachers. Overall, the students expressed positive self-identity as Indigenous people, but this did not necessarily translate into successful educational outcomes. The crucial link to school outcomes seemed to be positive self-identity as a learner. A number of factors involved in developing positive learner identity were proposed by study participants, including those related to (a) teachers; (b) school climate, organisation, and curriculum; (c) family and community support; and (d) role models.

Self-identity has been conceptualised from a range of perspectives, but there are several key characteristics that emerge repeatedly in the literature. First, self-identity concerns both who we are, and what we think of who we are. That is, it has both knowledge and evaluative components (Tajfel, 1982). The knowledge component (often referred to as self-concept) pertains to the total set of perceptions one has of oneself. The evaluative component (often referred to as self-esteem) is the value judgement a person places on him or herself. It is how good a person thinks he or she is. Second, self-identity is multidimensional. In this respect, Baumeister and Muraven (1996) described identity as “a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self, including social roles, reputation, a structure of values and priorities, and a conception of one’s potentiality” (p. 406). Third, as well as there being multiple dimensions or aspects of self, there are multiple influences on its development including family attitudes, physical characteristics, self-perceptions, and socialisation experiences (Helms, 1990). Finally, because both personal characteristics (such as physical appearance) and context (such as the school) are constantly changing, self-identity is also a dynamic rather than a fixed phenomenon; it is something that is always in process and constantly being formed (Grotevant, 1987).

Identity formation is dependent upon both personal factors and the contexts within which individuals operate. Erikson (1968) proposed that contextual factors, including the core of the culture as well as the core of the individual, are integral components of identity formation and that the successful outcome of adolescent development constitute a coherent integration of the separate aspects of functioning within one’s social group. More recently, Baumeister and Muraven (1996) proposed that, whereas societies play an important role in shaping identities, individuals also exert choices that influence their identities. They regarded the role of adaptation as pivotal in this process and conceptualised individual identity as an adaptation to a social context.

## **Self-Identity, Achievement, and Australian Indigenous Students**

Much of the self-identity literature suggests that positive educational outcomes are linked with positive self-identity (Ainley, Batten, Collins, & Withers, 1998; Day, 1994), and

negative educational outcomes are associated with negative perceptions of self (Cole & Sapp, 1988; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986).

In the Australian context, although there is a growing literature dealing with good educational practices and ways of achieving positive outcomes in Indigenous education (e.g., Craven, 1999; Hudspith & Williams, 1994; Malin, 1998), there is also an extensive literature which discusses the inadequacies of schooling for Indigenous children. For instance, evidence from a range of sources indicates that Indigenous students have markedly lower participation, retention, and success rates than their non-Indigenous peers (Bourke, Rigby, & Burdon, 2000).

The research reported in the current paper was part of a larger study commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, now DEST) in 1999. The overall purpose of that study was to examine the role of positive self-identity in affecting school outcomes for Indigenous students. The current symposium paper addressed two major questions. (a) What factors contribute to the development of positive self-identity for Indigenous young people? (b) What is the relationship between positive self-identity and successful school outcomes for young Indigenous Australians?

## Method

### Participants

Consultations were conducted in all States and Territories with a national sample of Indigenous community members (students, parents/carers, teachers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers, AIEWs) and non-Indigenous teachers. Table 1 presents a summary of the sample characteristics.

**Table 1: *Sample Characteristics***

Participants in the Consultations	
Students	623
Indigenous staff (Teachers and AIEWs)	97
Non-Indigenous staff	143
Parents/carers	75
Number of Schools by Sector Type	
State	31
Catholic	8
Independent	3
Number of Schools by Level of School	
Primary	22
Secondary	12
Combined	8
Number of Schools by Location	
Urban	21
Rural	17
Remote	4
Number of Schools by Proportion of Indigenous Students	
Less than 10%	12
10-50%	18
More than 50 %	12

### **Focus Groups/Interviews**

The consultations consisted of individual and focus group interviews. Interviews centred on issues identified in the literature as being important to the development of positive self-identity. Issues included those related to (a) the school environment (e.g., teachers, curriculum, structures, discipline, achievement); (b) current and future expectations about self (e.g., career goals and ambitions); (c) role models; (d) kinship and relationships; (e) peers; (f) important life events and experiences; (g) things that have strengthened one's identity; (h) things that have diminished one's identity; and (i) the wider community.

Consultations were conducted over a five week period by five teams of people, each team consisting of two facilitators who had been trained in the use of the consultation protocol. At least one person in each team was an Indigenous Australian. Before commencing interviews, facilitators briefly explained to participants the background to, and purpose of, the project. Participants were assured of confidentiality. Conversations were recorded (written notes and/or audio-taped) with participants' consent.

### **Data Analysis**

The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was used to analyse the transcribed interview data. This method involves a series of iterative steps in which data are read and reread, and words and statements are grouped and regrouped on the basis of similarities and differences until they are reduced to a set of themes and categories that encompass and summarise the data. The identification of themes and categories can also be guided by sources external to the data—in this case, we were guided by (a) the literature on self-identity and related constructs; and (b) the two research questions.

## **Results**

What factors contribute to the development of positive self-identity for Indigenous young people?

### **The School**

*Significant People Within the School.*

One of the most important contributors to the development of a positive sense of self as an Indigenous person within the context of the school was the extent to which individual teachers exhibited an acceptance and valuing of Indigenous people and their culture. Students perceived great variation amongst their teachers in this respect. When asked who their heroes were, some students nominated their teachers. Some students commented also on what they perceived to be a reciprocal obligation in their relationships with their teachers.

Typical of comments about the importance of teachers were those made by a group of parents/carers in one school in which the population of Aboriginal students had grown from 6 to around 100 in recent years. They noted that Aboriginal students wanted to come to this school because it had good teachers, and a good program. They said that even if the parents of the students moved to another town, students would choose to live with a relative so they could continue to be with the teacher/s they had grown to like and respect.

*It's important to get the right people. Things like having a bus to bring in the kids who don't come is a good idea, but it's a simple answer, just a bandaid. People are the important thing. We need teachers to have a better understanding of the culture. Teachers need to learn about the culture, not only those who are training*

*at university but also those who are already in schools, who have been teaching for a long time. Teachers need to be aware of the social problems.*

How teachers reacted to students' use of Aboriginal English at school was also an important factor.

*Students need to continue to use (and feel good about using) Aboriginal English. Standard Australian English needs to be an addition to their linguistic repertoire, not a replacement... Students who constantly have their speech corrected quickly learn that it is easier and less harrowing just to say nothing. Such corrections inevitably affect how they perceive themselves and force them into a dilemma: what parts can be revealed at school and what parts must be hidden for fear of further disapproving correction.*

*(State Education Department, Curriculum Support Officer)*

It was clear that the presence of Indigenous adults in the school promoted positive self-identity among Indigenous students. AIEWs were seen as people who students could relate to and who understood them better than non-Indigenous teachers. The AIEWs provided welcoming home rooms, and liaised between the students, the teachers, and the parents. Students in schools with low numbers of Indigenous students felt disadvantaged by not having an AIEW.

Some schools actively promoted the continued contribution of students who had graduated and gone on to develop successful careers elsewhere. In these cases, the current students said they were inspired by the talks that these local Indigenous people sometimes gave at school, and they felt motivated to follow in their footsteps.

If the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program had a high profile in the school, invariably there was a strong sense of the valuing of Indigenous cultures by the non-Indigenous students and teachers, and a strong sense of positive self-identity by the Indigenous students.

The Indigenous peer group also influenced how students viewed and felt about themselves at school, although there were mixed views about whether small or large numbers were preferable.

*The good thing here is that there are lots of Nyungars . . . We all stick in a bunch, all us Nyungars. It's wicked being a Nyungar. We stick together. If you get hurt, they all come and help . . . You feel good with your cousins.*

*If classes or schools are all Aboriginal, how will our kids mix when they get out in the world?*

### **School Systems**

The broader school philosophy, structures, and school-wide systems (for example class groupings, homework centres, behaviour management programs, ways of dealing with racism, inclusive policies and actions) were influential factors frequently mentioned by students, parents, and teachers.

*Our children gain so much from the caring primary school environment, where we are part of the school community. We all benefit from the support of the Aboriginal Education Resource Centre . . . the community emphasis and the selection of appropriate literature.*

Hudspith and Williams (1994) contend that it is up to the teachers to let Aboriginal children know they are valued and to recognise their work and potential. They suggest that this can be achieved by building positive affiliative relationships with students and facilitating positive relations between students. In the current study it was apparent that many primary schools, in particular, worked hard to accomplish this. However, some parents/carers and teachers were concerned about the effects on children of the transition to what was perceived to be the more impersonal environment of the high school.

Homework centres were seen as important in helping students develop an image of themselves as successful students. Although homework centres were in existence long before the introduction of Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program committees, they are now generally the initiative of ASSPA groups. When adequate facilities were provided by the school and when teachers as well as parents contributed their time after school, the success of the centres was even more marked. Government initiatives, such as Homework Centres and ABSTUDY, have sought to address the high attrition rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Byrne, Buchanan, Grant and Beyers (1997) reported that during the period from 1989 to 1993, there was a slight increase in participation by Indigenous students in secondary and tertiary education that could be attributed to such initiatives.

The ways in which classes are grouped was also seen as important to the development of a positive image of oneself as a student. Several schools had a flexible grouping arrangement whereby it was easier for teachers to provide work appropriate to students' needs and levels of attainment than it was in the more standard single or combined grade system of classes. In terms of classroom groupings, it was noted that adolescent males who had undergone initiation rites within their community were sometimes inappropriately grouped in classes with female students taught by female teachers, thereby reducing the likelihood of continued attachment to school.

### **The Curriculum**

The most significant aspect of a school's curriculum in relation to the promotion of a positive sense of self as an Indigenous person concerned the teaching of Indigenous studies and languages. In general, there was agreement that all school students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) should be involved in such programs as part of the compulsory school curriculum. While there were conflicting views about the content of such programs, how they should be taught, and who should teach them, the consensus seemed to be that Indigenous studies programs should be taught by Indigenous people. However, there was concern about the involvement of people who were not teachers because of the possibility of unreliability of presentation (people not turning up, or not feeling comfortable in the context of the school). In New South Wales, Aboriginal studies have been introduced in high schools as a means of promoting self-identity among Indigenous students (Herbert, Anderson, Price & Stehbens, 1998). The Board of Studies also promotes an Aboriginal perspectives approach to syllabus design and content so that Aboriginal knowledge is more pervasive throughout all subjects. In the current study, parents and AIEWs generally thought that Indigenous studies programs for preservice and inservice teachers should be taught by Aboriginal people, and the content

should include Aboriginal history, communications, kinships, roles within the family, child rearing practices, and ways of teaching and learning.

The importance of language to self-identity has been discussed widely in the literature, and was similarly highlighted by participants in this study. In this respect, a number of schools taught local Indigenous languages, but these programs were dependent on the availability of suitable people. Most people believed that it was important to maintain Indigenous languages because “*so many stories had already been lost*”. In situations in which English was a second language, particularly in the early years of schooling, there were sometimes circumstances in which students needed “*someone to explain things in their own language.*” This underscores the important role of Indigenous teacher aides in this respect; it also highlights the need to place trained ESL teachers in classrooms, particularly in the early grades, where there are children whose first language is not English.

“Alternative” programs were developed in some schools to counter the negative attitudes that so many Indigenous students had to “academic” programs of study. Schools in which there was a strong focus on vocational education were seen to be offering programs of greater relevance to students who had histories of absenteeism and failure but who had been encouraged to remain at school. The emphasis on the development of practical skills such as cooking, woodwork, carpentry, sewing, mechanics, and agriculture was seen by many to lead to greater career opportunities for Indigenous students. The range of work experience opportunities available to students, and their preparation for successful entry into the workforce also was highly valued as a way of promoting a positive self-identity within the context of the school.

Schools differed in the degree to which they promoted Indigenous cultural activities. Two types of activity could be differentiated—those directly linked to the broad cultural ethos of Indigenous people in Australia, and the more specific activities linked to the culture of the local Indigenous community (as in remote communities with specific forms of painting, dance, bush food, hunting, and so on). In some schools, the only noticeable cultural activities occurred during NAIDOC week. Students in urban schools said they felt proud of their Indigenous identity when non-Indigenous people within the school were supportive of the activities and events that are organised during NAIDOC week. Fotiadis (1995) describes culture as a complex mix of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional factors that characterise a society. It is possible that the pride that was evidenced by students in their Indigenous culture is reflective of the recognition by others that their culture matters. This underlines the importance of Indigenous cultural celebrations such as NAIDOC week. Unfortunately, for some students, the event went unnoticed in their schools.

*I didn't even notice NAIDOC week here. I just forgot about it because no one did anything.*

Some schools actively promoted Indigenous cultures in other ways. For example, in one urban high school the ASSPA Program group had erected a ‘Hall of Fame’ in which the achievements of local Aboriginal people were exhibited and promoted. Some schools had Indigenous art in prominent positions around the school (for example, as murals on school buildings), or had the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags flying. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance groups existed in some schools and these were a particular source of pride. Some groups had travelled within states, nationally, and internationally and had achieved considerable recognition at competitions.

### **The Home/Community**

The family and/or the particular Indigenous group to which young people belong has a profound influence both on how they think about themselves as Indigenous people and how they perceive themselves as school students. For the students in the current study, the home/community influences were linked mainly to young people's exposure to specific Indigenous cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices; the sorts of role models to whom they were exposed; and the extent to which education was both valued and supported.

Students reported that, in terms of identity as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, it was generally in the context of the home that they heard the stories and learned the skills associated with their culture. Some students regretted that they could not understand their parents or other community adults when they spoke their language or some words and phrases from it. Some students said their parents or grandparents tried to teach them.

*I have a big chart on the fridge with Nyungar words. I also have a T-shirt with words on it.*

Some communities have maintained aspects of their traditional lifestyles, and links with the land and the sea, such as the strong link with the sea in the Torres Strait Islands where fishing and related activities are still of major importance. This is in keeping with the observation by Synott and Whatman (1998) that the islands and waters of the Torres Strait unite the Islanders through spiritual bonds. In the current study, young Torres Strait Islander students spoke with great pride about this aspect of their culture.

*We know how to catch crabs . . . white people catch crabs with a scoop . . . we do it with our hands . . . our dads teach us.*

Although students frequently mentioned family or community members as the people they most admired or respected, their influence was seen to be confined largely to the home. Many students and parents advocated extending this influence to the context of the school so that students could maintain a positive sense of self as Indigenous people in that setting. Further, they believe that this would allow a two-way exchange of knowledge and the development of an understanding of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Some believed that it may also reduce the conflict that students often experience between home and school lives, and help promote identity as a learner, as distinct from that of Indigenous person.

There is a history of Indigenous sporting personalities being held in high esteem by Indigenous people and this sentiment was echoed strongly in the current study. Parents, teachers and AIEWAs, however, frequently noted the disadvantage associated with promoting such models—not every Indigenous child/student will become a sporting personality; and the careers of sporting personalities are often short-lived. It was proposed that Indigenous children and adolescents need to know that role models vary—that a role model is not only a person who reaches the pinnacle of his or her chosen career, but can be a local Indigenous motor mechanic, their home/school liaison officer, an Indigenous nurse or health worker, an Indigenous teacher, artist, tertiary student, and so on. A distinct advantage of promoting local role models is that they are seen more often, and might agree to be mentors for Indigenous students. Thus, it was thought that schools should be encouraged to promote a range of local role models for Indigenous students.

### **The Relationship Between Positive Self-identity and School Success**

It became abundantly clear in the course of the consultations that Indigenous identity was differentiated from learner identity. That is, Indigenous students generally expressed positive feelings about themselves, their culture, and their family, but their feelings about school and about themselves as students were frequently ambivalent. High self-esteem and a positive identity as an Indigenous person was not necessarily linked to successful educational outcomes.

*When I am with my people I feel really proud. But at school it's different, like I'm not much good at doing my work and stuff.*

Many students spoke about their own or their friends' absenteeism as being associated with the different sense of self experienced in the two contexts of home/community and school.

*I know school is important to learn stuff, to get a job, to get education but I don't usually feel like I fit there. When I stay away I have much better fun with my friends.*

Identity as a member of the wider Australian community appeared to be linked to students' persistence at school and recognition of the importance of getting a good education for future careers.

*I'm an Australian and I want to have a good education and get on in life. That's why I study hard.*

However, many participants spoke of the difficulty of achieving the balance between maintaining a strong sense of one's Indigenous identity while at the same time achieving in the broader Australian society.

*The majority of students here come from traditional backgrounds. If they are here for long periods, they learn to walk with one foot in each world. Conflict is experienced by being in this environment, compared to back home.*

So, the findings of the current study support the view that school success is likely to be associated with a positive sense of *self as a student*. However, it did not seem to follow that a generic sense of positive identification as an Indigenous person would automatically result in positive educational outcomes. Irrespective of how positive one's cultural self-identity may be, the amount of effort that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are likely to expend on the pursuit of academic success is dependent on such factors as how much value students attach to schooling, and their personal goals and aspirations (McInerney & McInerney, 1998), the influence of families, peers, community (Grotevant, 1987; Bandura et al., 1996), the relevance of the curriculum (Malin, 1998), the attitudes and skills of teachers (Fanshawe, 1989), the suitability of teaching strategies (Malin, 1998; Partington, 1998), and the appropriateness of the learning environment (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1997; Malin, 1998).

### **Concluding Comment**

The findings of our study support the notion that self-identity is multidimensional and has multiple influences on its development. In our conversations with Indigenous students, parents, and community members we found ample evidence that it is possible to achieve a

positive self-identity both as an Indigenous Australian and as a competent and confident student within the school system. However, the achievement of a well-integrated identity is dependent on a number of factors that are related, in particular, to the school and home environments. The extent to which schools and individual teachers recognise and incorporate the cultural identities of students into the school environment and curriculum is critical to the development of a positive cultural identity among Indigenous people. So, too, is the recognition in the home of the importance to young people of an education that equips them for life in a complex and constantly changing world. Thus, the more symbiotic the relationship between the home and the school, the greater the likelihood that young people will value themselves both as capable students and as members of a rich Indigenous culture.

The challenge for educators is to ensure that schools are places where Indigenous students want to be, where their presence and participation is valued, where they feel successful, and where they see value in completing their schooling. The participants in the present study provided many insights about the kind of schooling that appeals to them. Perhaps what stood out most was the individual influence of teachers in developing learner identity amongst Indigenous students who clearly respond positively to teachers who are warm, encouraging, respectful, and make realistic demands (Fanshawe, 1989; Malin, 1998; Munns, 1998). Hence, there are implications for teacher recruitment and training, and for the ongoing support and professional development of teachers who work with Indigenous students.

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