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DRAFT PAPER ONLY

"I WANT TO START AGAIN."

THOUGHTS FROM SOME ABORIGINAL STUDENTS WHO ARE STAYING AT SECONDARY  
SCHOOL.

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ABSTRACT

Despite policies and programs introduced into all levels of Australian education over the last twenty years, Aboriginal students are still not achieving equitable outcomes from education. Statistics show that fewer

Aboriginal students get through to the end of secondary school than other groups in Australia. Research has often focussed on resistance by Aboriginal students, attempting to explain why many drop out of school. By contrast, this paper reports on a study which focuses on some Aboriginal students who remain at an inner city secondary school. The students tell in their own words why they are encouraged to continue at a school which is attracting increasing numbers of Aborigines. It is felt that by listening to what they have to say, insights are gained which could offer directions for school practices and curriculum aiming to increase retention rates for Aboriginal students in other school contexts.

NOTE THAT THIS IS RESEARCH IN PROGRESS AND DOES NOT REPRESENT A

COMPLETE STUDY.

#### INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The problem of student alienation throughout primary and secondary school continues to be the focus of extensive research. Studies show that a significant number of students, especially those from poor and minority group backgrounds, become alienated, disengaged from learning and leave school early. (See Cormack, 1996, for a summary of research.) Indeed, the position in the 1990s seems to have changed little since Furlong (1985:178) offered the following conclusion from his review of research into student deviance and disaffection:

Each year and every year in working class schools up and down the country a significant minority of pupils 'discover' the same truths about school ... that education, or at least schooling, is not for them.

In Australia, projects have been initiated at both Commonwealth and State levels to address the problem. Among these are the Student Alienation During the Middle Years of Schooling (1994), funded through the federal Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), and Staying On (1989-1996), set up by the New South Wales Department of School Education. Clearly, the issue is seen to be highly significant in Australia at both a theoretical and practical level.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the problem of student alienation seems to be most severe among Aboriginal students. Statistics show that, although participation rates appear to be improving in the earlier years of schooling with most Aboriginal children beginning and completing primary school, results from secondary school are not encouraging. Government reports (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995) indicate that a significant number of Aboriginal students drop out of school before completing Year 10. Official statistics indicate that Aboriginal secondary school enrolments peak in

Year 8 and then fall rapidly. The loss of under-age students between Years 8 and 9 is a consistent pattern which shows no sign of improving. Although national retention rates to Year 10 since 1990 have been close to 100%, among Aboriginal students the rate is generally lower than 80%. Moreover, by the time Aboriginal students reach the senior years (11 and 12), their retention rate is 25%, compared to 78% for non-Aboriginal students (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995: figures for 1993).

As discouraging as these figures are, participation in schooling for Aboriginal students can not be evaluated entirely on enrolment statistics. Although historically Aboriginal students have struggled to gain access to schools, educational equality is now considered to be the crucial issue<sup>1</sup>. Educators highlight the crucial distinction between merely having access to a school and participation in an education which is culturally sensitive and which offers equal outcomes. Although it is commonly believed that education is an institution with a critical role to play in improving the general living conditions of Aboriginal people, results indicate that, even for those students who make it to the end of Year 12, educational success in terms of HSC results and University matriculation continues to be comparatively low (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995). The complexity of issues surrounding Aboriginal students' relationship with the school curriculum and subsequent success at school are not shown by statistics which merely register enrolment numbers. Therefore, in submissions to the Federal Government the current thinking is that:

much more research is needed on participation, and that it must be qualitative, not just quantitative research - that is, research capable of identifying what actually fosters continuing engagement in education by indigenous students (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995:66).

This paper responds to such a need. It aims to explore the reasons why some Aboriginal secondary students are choosing to stay on at school when many of their peers have dropped-out. From a theoretical perspective, it is argued that there may be a benefit in focussing on those students who remain, against all odds and statistics. Considerable research energy over the last twenty years has been spent on examining the motives of students who are disaffected and resistant. While this approach has brought forward illuminating insights (see, among others, Willis, 1977, Walker, 1988), there now seems to be a need for a different focus. This supports Furlong, (1991:306) who notes that students "at the end of the line" invariably have a well developed rationale for rejecting school. Furlong argues that concentrating on these students risks ignoring the school conditions which contribute to the rejection. To extend this argument, if the intention is to find out how schools may develop practices which encourage Aboriginal students to stay on at school, it seems productive to consider the position of those who have not dropped out. While adopting this focus, the paper

recognises that students may be alienated from the school and education, but still regularly turn up. The tension between "hanging in" and making a final rejection is explored in the research.

This study is locatable in a research tradition which attempts to understand why certain groups of students become disaffected and reject school and education. In particular it draws on Willis's (1977, 1981, 1983) theory of resistance and cultural production. Central to the theory was the relationship between structure, culture and agency. Resistance to school was seen to be a cultural response to schooling. Students responded to their school situation using cultural resources available to them within their specific local contexts. Within this research tradition such responses are considered rational, whether or not the students decide finally to withdraw their allegiance from their school and education. Resistance theory and its accompanying notion of cultural production has been applied to school settings serving students from educationally disadvantaged groups. These have included working class (Willis, 1977, McRobbie, 1978) and black students, both overseas (Furlong, 1984) and in Australia (Folds, 1985, Munns, 1996).

#### THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Pacific High School is an inner city co-educational, comprehensive secondary school. Built originally to accommodate 700 to 800 students, the school was substantially modified in the late 1980s to include a Special Support Unit for students with specific disabilities. This reallocation of accommodation resources coincided with the Department of Education policy change which effectively "dezoned" schools, thus giving parents wider choice of where to send their children. A consequence for the school of these changes was a significant drop in enrolments.

The enrolment slump paralleled a demographic trough in the identified drawing areas but signalled significant community disaffection. The school has, during this time, struggled to maintain its curriculum. It has celebrated the comprehensive nature of its curriculum and the smallness of its population as positive advantages. As school enrolments have begun to increase, the school has spent funds on casual staff to maintain small class sizes in Years 7 -8 as an act of faith with its constituency.

The school has also worked on programs to overcome a gender imbalance in Years 7 to 10, where boys' numbers may be double those of girls. This is a feature of inner-city High Schools which continue as comprehensive and co-educational. The development of specific welfare strategies to support girls was consistent with the school's state and national reputation for welfare policies and initiatives.

The cultural mix attracted to the school in this period has seen an increase in two distinct areas. The school has always reflected the local cultural mix. Greek was taught for many years at the school. Italian, the community language taught in the drawing areas, is taught to all students. A significant number, perhaps 25%, of students come from a non-English speaking background. However, there is no longer any single group which stands out as dominant.

There has been a significant increase in the number of Koori students enrolled at the school during this period of low numbers. The 20 Koori students now represent the largest identifiable non-Anglo Australian cultural group in the school. As a result of this increasing Koori enrolment, the school became eligible for Priority Schools Program funding for literacy programs. When the Student At Risk Program was established, the school targeted some of its Koori students as well. The English Head Teacher at the school organised for the Learning Difficulties teacher to be in-serviced in literacy strategies by a Reading Recovery teacher. When funding became available under the Staying On Program some of this was also directed to Koori students.

The school "borrowed" an Aboriginal community from outside its drawing area for its first official attempts to celebrate NAIDOC Day. Soon there was interest from the "local" community. At first, this was two parents. The establishment of an Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Committee (ASSPA) followed. ASSPA funding has been available as a result and the level of involvement of Koori parents has increased significantly. The attendance by Koori parents at ASSPA meetings is, relatively speaking, significantly greater than attendance at Parent and Citizens meetings.

When a Koori community member who had expertise in literacy made contact with the school, funds from the available DSE programs were directed to employing her as an itinerant support teacher. This has been a most successful addition to the programs available for Koori students. One parent enrolling a student in Year 7 in 1997 from "out of area" gave as her reason for requesting consideration that she wanted her son to attend a school at which his Aboriginality would not be compromised.

While the school has been very careful to avoid the problems inherent in shrinking enrolments during a period when the curriculum is under pressure to expand, there has been one addition to the curriculum offered to students. The school decided to offer Aboriginal Studies as an elective choice in Years 9 and 10 in 1997. There were not enough students to form a class. Under normal circumstances the course would have been dropped. However, because the students who had chosen this option were Kooris, it was decided to run the class as a culturally important addition to the school curriculum.

## METHODOLOGY

The project had its genesis in a discussion with an Aboriginal student at Pacific High School. The School Captain, a Koori girl, had taken the

opportunity to have a yarn with the school's ASSPA Coordinator after the normal weekly Wednesday lunchtime meeting. This time was often used by students as personal pastoral time. This discussion was about her recently appointed ATAS tutor for Mathematics and Science. At the conclusion of the discussion she commented that the younger students were lucky to have so many options available.

"I want to start again."

Her comment focussed the attention of one of the researchers, who worked at the school and was involved in the Aboriginal programs. Here was a Koori student, who was not only staying on at school, but wanting to begin again. It was then decided that there may be value in considering whether there were other Koori students who had similar feelings about continuing at school.

Data was collected ethnographically. The original intention was to conduct a series of informal interviews with a number of Aboriginal students at the school. Interview data would be complemented with observations. The project was then discussed with Aboriginal parents at two meetings. The parents readily agreed to the project when it was suggested that the study intended to focus on positive, rather than negative aspects. They indicated that there was value in trying to understand the reasons why their children were choosing to remain at Pacific High.

At this point a third researcher was invited to participate in the study. This researcher was Aboriginal and a member of the local community who knew the school and its students. The role of this researcher was to be the principal interviewer and to become a key person in the analysis of data. It was seen to be important to have an Aboriginal researcher as part of the team for two reasons. First, it ensured that the research was not "owned" by white people, nor the data insensitive to alternative epistemological insights. Second, there was a belief that an Aboriginal researcher would be able to have greater access to information. There seemed to be value in eliminating the fact that relationships between interviewer and interviewees could be influenced by varying degrees of "Whitefella-Blackfella" tension, which would have affected the information that the students were prepared to share, no matter how cordial the relationship may have appeared. Added to this were cultural elements of Aboriginal English which also could have affected the amount of information which was offered. Direct questioning and answering, especially about sensitive personal matters (as education almost always is to Aboriginal people), is not always

culturally appropriate and may not bring out required and/or expected information. It has been suggested (Eades, 1993) that the sharing of information is very much dependent on the relationship between the people and invariably requires greater prior research on the part of the interviewer. Although the white researchers were aware of many of the features and significance of Aboriginal English, they readily admitted that this awareness was from a culturally different, and consequently less informed position.

The research design was discussed and decided upon in a series of meetings between all three researchers. The team (especially the white researchers) was conscious that the project should not be set up by "whitefellas", and then an Aboriginal researcher added on to strengthen the data collection and give black sanction to what was essentially another piece of white academic research. In fact, the Aboriginal researcher decided that the data be collected in the form of a joint construction between interviewer and interviewees. This construction proceeded in a series of informal yarns which would culminate in a series

of large format flow charts constructed over a period of time and to which all the interviewees would have access. The decision was that the students would decide what data would be included and what it would look like. Their ownership, as Aboriginal people with a story to tell was vital to the project. The focus of the interviews would be their biographies as Aboriginal school students, and their past and current feelings about why they want(ed) to stay at school.

Selection of interviewees was on the basis of their own apparent tension between continuing at school or dropping out. Two students (males) were in Year 9, the period indicated by the statistics (discussed above) during which many Aboriginal students are quitting school. Another two were in Year 11 (male and female) and dropped out during the study. Their data was seen to be significant because their reasons for dropping out seemed to be not educational. That is, they appeared to want to stay but in the end left for a combination of personal reasons. The final interviewee was in Year 12 (female), and the school captain. Although a small sample of students, the researchers felt that, within the research design, it would allow for manageable data. The project was discussed with all interviewees. They were told what was the reason for the study and the likely audience. When they agreed to participate they were given the opportunity to use their own names or a pseudonym.

## DATA

At this stage the research is still in its early stages. The researcher responsible for conducting the interviews has spent time yarning with the students. This was considered a vital step in allowing the interviewees to feel ownership of their part of the project. From these

informal yarns (sometimes one-to-one, sometimes in pairs) and observational data the school biographies have been drawn. The next step will be in the culmination stage of the joint construction of the data.

## Biographies

### 1 Bill

Bill is in Year 9. He is generally regarded as a student with high potential but is perceived as achieving well below his capabilities. Attendance and lateness to school are of concern but the difficulty he experiences with transport to school is also recognised.

Bill is part of a closely knit inner-city family but is likely to spend extended periods each year with other family members in rural NSW. Bill attended four schools in the last two years of his primary education. Three of these schools were rural.

Bill came to Pacific High as part of the Year 7 intake. His cousin Robert was at the school. His cousin Jamie had also attended the school, being awarded the HSC. His mother became concerned about the distance he was travelling to school and transferred him to a school closer to home. Bill only lasted a few weeks there. When Bill enrolled at the new school he had not completed any documentation from Pacific High. His new school placed Bill in the "slow learner" class. When the counsellor rang to enquire about his results at Pacific High she was informed that Bill was a very intelligent boy with some literacy deficits. Bill remained in the "slow learner" class. After a short period of non-attendance at school Bill returned to Pacific High to complete Year 7.

Bill's mum is supportive and ambitious for her son. She is a trained educator. At age 15 Bill is experiencing severe tension between the desire to remain at school and the lure of leaving school to become an adult. He wants to "pass" at school but has expressed his impatience with being told "what to do" by teachers.

### 2 Robert

Bill's cousin Robert attended Pacific High also. He is similarly a young man with potential who has experienced some problems fulfilling that promise. Robert's primary schooling was spent in a number of rural and coastal towns. He also spent part of his early secondary schooling in a rural school.

In 1995 Robert was awarded satisfactory gradings in all subjects in Year 10 except Science. This meant he was not awarded a School Certificate, only a "Statement of Attainments". Robert enrolled in

year 11 in 1996. He was doing extra to complete the necessary "catch up" work to satisfy the requirements for an award in Science which would have meant the award of the School Certificate.

Robert left school in 1996 in Year 11 after an incident involving violence towards another student. The school thought the problem had been resolved but Robert could not give the Principal certain guarantees of behaviour necessary to return to school.

Robert did not want to leave school. During his suspension interviews he constantly returned to the statement that what he wanted was to resume school. His impatience to get the answer he wanted, to be allowed to return to school eventually caused the outburst which convinced the Principal that extra guarantees of behaviour would be necessary. At that stage Robert walked out.

### 3 Rae

Rae completed her Higher School Certificate at Pacific High School in 1996. In 1995 she was elected School Captain. She had previously been SRC Chair on a number of occasions. In Year 9 Rae had been a notorious trouble-maker and bully. Rae has been brought up by her grandparents. She admits that her family is dysfunctional.

Rae came to terms with her Aboriginality when a cousin who was very obviously Aboriginal, and proud of it, enrolled at Pacific High School. Rae was proud to claim him as her cousin, and in doing so reclaimed her own Aboriginality. Rae then established a relationship with her father. This seems to have been of reciprocal benefit, adding new meaning to her father's life as well.

Rae has become a role model for younger students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, at Pacific High School. It was Rae's parting comment after a lunch-time pastoral meeting at which students had been given the opportunity to apply for tutoring help that inspired this project.

### 4 Daniel

Daniel enrolled in Year 9 at Pacific High School in 1996. He is 15 Years old. He came to the school because it was perceived as a place where Koori kids were looked after.

Daniel is intelligent but not achieving his obvious potential. He has

stated his determination to satisfy requirements, to "pass". His outstanding sporting ability has involved him in many absences from school, but he is managing to keep people happy by catching up work

missed.

Daniel is fiercely independent but also vulnerable. He does not give his trust or confidence easily, yet has charm which has endeared him to many staff members.

There is concern that he is at risk of leaving. Like Bill, he exhibits the same signs of yearning to be an "adult", free of restraints from teachers; the same tension between needing schooling but rejecting school.

## 5 Malinda

Malinda spent the first year of secondary schooling at an inner-city state High School before coming to Pacific High in Year 8 in 1993. She was awarded her School Certificate at the end of Year 10 in 1995.

Malinda is a very capable student of above average intelligence. She is also talented in Visual and Performing Arts.

Malinda was not allowed by her mother and step-father to identify as Aboriginal but had secretly defied their objections by attending Koori activities and meetings at school. The staff of Pacific High accepted her right to confidentiality on this matter. At age 16 in 1996 she decided she would no longer hide her identification from her parents.

Malinda had experienced problems at home which put pressure on her ability to attend school and to complete her work. The award of the School Certificate was in question in 1995 because of her attendance record, but the quality of her work when at school overcame this problem. Her determination to satisfy requirements, to catch up, also convinced the school that she was entitled to the award.

Unfortunately Malinda's home situation deteriorated in 1996 to the point where she was forced to move out. The Abstudy living away from home allowance was not available to her without her disclosing why she needed to leave home. She was not prepared to make her reasons public. Consequently she chose to leave school and seek employment. She has plans to resume her education at a later date.

## Early Observations

At this stage in the research only tentative observations can be made. What is evident across the biographies is the interplaying of outside personal and social and cultural factors with the factors they are facing at school. Most biographies indicate that there is considerable tension between staying at school and leaving. This tension reflects the need to gain qualifications ("to pass") on one hand, or to leave and work. In some cases (Bill and Daniel) leaving is associated with being an adult and free from the constraints of school and teachers.

They felt that often the teachers seemed to emphasise this tension.

Choice are, when you're fifteen, you're out. The teachers said it to me and all my mates. (Daniel)

Yeah, that's right, when you're fifteen you pass or you're out. (Bill)

It is interesting to note, however, that all students seem prepared to make sacrifices and/or do extra work to satisfy school requirements. Even the two students who have dropped out spent considerable time

"catching up" on their work. Both left school against their wishes. Robert left because he could not come to terms over discipline issues: perhaps he was more rejected than rejecting. Here the school may not have considered the symbolic threat of the interview in the Principal's office (Munns, 1996). Malinda dropped out because of a combination of financial and institution reasons.

There are indications that there are some common factors encouraging these Koori students to remain at Pacific High School. The first of these surrounds feelings of cultural identity. It seems important that these students attend a school where their Aboriginality is accepted and supported. Having other Aboriginal students (friends and cousins) around is seen to be a great advantage. Closely coupled with this is the need for the support of caring, confident adults, both Black and White. Bill spoke about this in an interview:

[The other school had] no Koori kids, no Koori teachers. The teachers care for you. Mr Jones (White Teacher) is great. He's a good teacher, he always looks after us. Other Aboriginal kids and the Aboriginal teachers makes this school good.

This is supported by the comments made by Aboriginal community members in previous research (Munns, 1996):

That is what turns the Koori kids right off, there will be one or two good teachers who are trying real hard to help them through the system and there will be half a dozen or a dozen racists that are as soon as they walk in to their classroom it is an exercise in demeaning them because of who they are and where they are.

Yeah they [Aboriginal parents] would like to think that they have got a couple of white teachers there in the school who know what they are going through, who understand what they are going through  
But they don't expect the whole school ...

If there was one or two that would be a big difference, and that's what a lot of schools don't realise, they've got to understand the problem that the Koori people are going through.

As well as the support to cater for their needs and give them

encouragement, there seemed to be a need to address seriously the issue of academic achievement. Placement in appropriate classes with teachers who offer interesting lessons and treated Koori students with respect was considered an important factor:

My grades aren't good. Mostly I fail English. All the teacher does is read, read out loud. Serge argues with the teacher. The idiot just distracts him and just talks. The teacher sits there and talks to him and the other kids muck up and I get bored. Anyway this class is dumb for me. I would like to be in Ms Smith's class, it's better. They do better work, why can't we be in that class, we could at least work better, and get our work done.

I passed English [at another school] because I was interested, the teachers were good, there were no distractions, didn't read at you.

If they want to teach kids they have to learn to respect them. Some teachers who are really high up really hate kids. At home I'm treated like an adult. I can smoke but mum says not to do it at school. We're treated like an adult at home. (Daniel)

I don't like English and Science. They treat you like a kid. My mum doesn't treat you like that. They talk down at you. (Bill)

The contrast between schools and teachers is emphasised in the story of Bill at his new school where he was put into the slow learner class simply because he was an Aboriginal. Exclusion from classes and curriculum is still a factor in the mid 1990s, despite changes in policy.

#### THE NEXT STAGE

The research will continue into 1997. Interviews will be completed and the data will be culminated with the joint construction. What final form that will take is uncertain. It will be decided by the Aboriginal students and their interviewer. That group have expressed interest and establishing a product through which they can encourage other Aboriginal students to stay on at school. That they should feel that way says much about their commitment to their own education and to the education of other Aboriginal students.

Getting through the first time is better than having to start again.

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1 See, among others, Harris, 1978a, b, for a history of Aborigines and public schooling.

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