

**"Do I Beat 'Em or Join 'Em?" Individual and Collective Adaptations  
Leading to School Success Among Minority Group Students in  
Australia.**

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### **Introduction**

The title of this symposium was inspired by a John Ogbu (1999a) invited paper for the American Education Research Association's Annual Meeting. Having presented a summary of three decades of anthropological research that led him to his *cultural-ecological* theory, Ogbu reflected on implications of his ideas for policy and curriculum change. He reiterated that his work was not a theory of pedagogy, nor did it offer strategies for teaching minority students. Nevertheless, in his concluding remarks he drew on his distinctions between *voluntary* and *involuntary* minorities and their different responses and adaptations to the education and schooling that they experience: "It's either beat them at their own game or change the rules of the game". That different minority groups experience and react differently to their current educational situations and anticipated educational futures is central to the analysis that Ogbu brings to persistent questions of educational diversity.

These questions have particular currency in ethnically diverse Australia for two reasons. First, there is the persistence of specific ethnic educational inequalities. Second, in the late 1990s there has been increased racial vilification and mistreatment of minority groups that seems to be encouraged or tolerated under a political rhetoric suggesting the majority, Anglo-Australians, are those "who are missing out". This is of major concern to educators serving diverse and poor communities. The issue of racial vilification brings us to the two minority groups that are the subject of papers in this symposium. On the face of it these groups seem to share very little in their relationships with education, schooling and Australian society, except they are both the most frequent targets of racist behaviour (Viviani, 1996).

The symposium takes up questions surrounding the nature and experiences of schooling for Australia's original inhabitants and owners in comparison to those of one of its most significant recent immigrant groups. These questions are considered in the light of research in progress among Aboriginal and Vietnamese secondary school students utilising frameworks and concepts of minority groups and schooling developed by Ogbu.

### **Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory**

Ogbu's anthropological work into minority groups and education spans three decades. He began by looking at differences between the school performance of minority and dominant group students before refocussing on attempting to explain differences in school success between and among minority groups. His research has looked at many different minority groups in different countries. What follows is a brief summary of some of Ogbu's key ideas. A more detailed discussion of his theory and implications for education may be found in Ogbu and Simons (1998).

The *cultural-ecological* theory attempts to understand the differential school performance of minority groups in the light of two intersecting factors. The first is *the system*: broad societal and school factors (policies, pedagogy, educational outcomes). The second are community dynamics playing out in perceptions and responses to schooling in the light of the conditions under which groups became a minority and remain a minority. Ogbu observes that collective problems faced by minority groups are differentiated according to their histories. These histories are influenced by both the way they became a minority group, and, often closely connected, their subsequent treatment by dominant groups. Relationships with education are then affected by how different minority groups work on collective solutions to their collective problems. Within his framework Ogbu classifies minority group as either *voluntary* or *involuntary* minorities, determined by their histories and power status in society.

### **Beating 'Em or Joining 'Em: Vietnamese and Aboriginal Students in Australia**

Vietnamese in Australia may be generally classified as voluntary minorities. They have moved to Australia expecting better opportunities and greater freedom. Initial school problems associated with language and culture are overcome and they would mostly have a view that hard work will bring about educational success and then success in the wider community. Learning English is seen to be an important part of the educational process that will help them achieve goals without compromising their cultural identity. In this symposium Faulkner's paper will discuss Ogbu's frameworks in the light of Vietnamese immigration patterns into Australia. Here there will be a challenge to viewing Vietnamese Australians as a homogeneous cultural group and in so doing will establish a research framework for investigating polarised school and community outcomes for Vietnamese Australians.

Aboriginal Australians fall into the classification of involuntary minorities. They had no choice about their position in Australia's society and have been systematically oppressed since invasion more than 200 years ago. Their school difficulties are more persistent and have certainly been affected by inappropriate (often extremely racist) policies and classroom pedagogy. Even those successful in the education system may not be rewarded for their success in terms of employment and status. Given both the lack of school success and the poor return on their educational investment, it is quite understandable that they would not have a strong belief that the education system works for them. Furthermore, English is an imposed language, and learning standard Australian English may be seen to be an issue that could threaten to separate them from their peers, family and community. Related to this is that collective identity is often defined by difference from the dominant white group. McFadden, Munns and Simpson's paper will focus on Aboriginal boys who remain in post-compulsory education, against seemingly overwhelming odds and statistics. In particular, there is a consideration of how school resilience threatens the position of being culturally accepted as both indigenous Australian and male.

The two research papers of this symposium draw attention to different factors influencing school relationships between two different minority groups in Australia. Considering this difference has implications for cultural questions in minority education. As Ogbu (1999b) argues:

... neither "cultural diversity" programs nor "multicultural education" pedagogy takes into account the nature of the cultural difference between immigrant minorities and the dominant group, on the one hand, and between non-immigrant minorities and the dominant group on the other. Therefore, neither movement will solve the problem of lower school performance of the non-immigrants.

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## **The Polarisation of Academic Achievement and Behaviour Among Vietnamese Australian Students**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

"Overall the fact that Indochinese experiences are so polarised, when compared to the experiences of other Australians, is a puzzle worth solving." (Viviani, 1995. p 2).

In primary school classrooms across the southwestern area of Sydney Vietnamese children are found to be compliant, hardworking, and academically achieving students. In schools where discipline policies rank students, Indochinese (or South East Asian) students, including Vietnamese are represented in the top levels. However, once in high school there appears to be a polarisation in the achievements, attitudes and behaviour of Vietnamese students. The level of academic achievement, or school success, is reflected in the occupational mobility of young Vietnamese. The participation of Vietnam born students at university is among the five highest of all birthplace groups and double that of the general Australian rate. Vietnamese students are over represented in the departments of the prized 'three professions' - medicine, law and engineering. Conversely, more than half the students at high schools local to areas of high Indochinese residential concentration in Sydney had Tertiary Education Ranking (TER) scores of less than thirty (out of a possible 100). Vietnamese youth are also over-represented in NSW prisons and in unemployment, with the rate for under 24s around 60%. Amongst Vietnamese youth homelessness is rising, drug use is widespread and the gang culture has taken hold. (Viviani, 1996). Since education is an important factor in the social mobility of any group, and is particularly recognised by ethnic Vietnamese who were part of a highly stratified traditional society in their homeland, the question here is why is there such a dramatic polarisation in the educational achievement of Vietnamese students in Australia?

This paper has three sections. The first considers the background of Vietnamese community relationships and experiences in relation to their academic achievement, drawing on the work of Viviani (1996). The second places that background information against Ogbu's (1992, 1998) theories on adaptations to school success. The third explains how the work of both Viviani and Ogbu underpin research in progress into the different responses to education of Vietnamese youth.

### **PATTERNS OF SETTLEMENT OF THE VIETNAMESE IN AUSTRALIA**

#### **Migration patterns**

It has been 25 years since the abolition of the 'White Australia Policy' and over that time the arrival and settlement experiences of Indochinese migrants, that is Vietnamese, Chinese from Indochina, Cambodians, Laos and Hmong, have been more diverse than any other previous migrant group.

Viviani (1996) identifies broadly four waves of Vietnamese migration to Australia between 1975 and 1995, corresponding to events in Vietnam as well as national and international factors (see Table 1). The first wave comprised refugees who had ties to the old regime and who left at the fall of Saigon in 1975 because they feared reprisals from the communists. They were mostly ethnic Vietnamese (both Southerners and Northerners), Vietnamese Catholics who expected religious repression, and some ethnic Chinese who feared their businesses would be taken over. The ethnic Vietnamese were mainly a well-educated elite

with high social status and have formed the nucleus of leadership in the Vietnamese community in Australia, due mainly to their early arrival and social status.

The second wave arrived between 1976 and 1978, although it has been described as a 'trickle', due to Australia's restrictive entry policies. This group, again predominantly ethnic Vietnamese, comprised a small number of those caught in refugee camps from 1975 and others who felt the new regime would constrict and control them.

The majority of the third wave were ethnic Chinese, who arrived in two parts. The first part of this exodus, in 1978, were induced to leave because of the closure of private business in Vietnam and a move to expel ethnic Chinese. The exodus grew due to the outbreak of war between China and Vietnam, and Cambodia and Vietnam. The second part, in late 1979, signaled the first high peak of arrivals from Vietnam. This was due in part to the Geneva conference in July 1979, where international resettlement quotas were negotiated. This group comprised petty and large traders, unskilled by Australian standards, who formed the trading nucleus of settlement in areas of residential concentration and settled in different ways from the first wave due to their connections to small business.

The fourth wave brought another new peak of arrivals in 1990/91, both ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese who had been in camps for long periods and were principally economic refugees, although about a quarter of these immigrants were political refugees. They were working class and lower middle class: small traders; rural workers; urban workers; and the unemployed, who sought to improve their situations by leaving Vietnam.

In addition to these four waves there have been constant arrivals of family reunion migrants, both from camps and directly from Vietnam. These family reunion migrants now form a majority of the Vietnamese in Australia because although until 1989 the majority of arrivals from Vietnam were refugees, currently less than 30 per cent of Vietnamese arrivals in Australia are refugees. In the 1990s most Vietnamese arrived under the Orderly Departure Program.

**Table 1 – Migration Patterns of Vietnamese into Australia**

ARRIVAL	COMPOSITION OF GROUP
1975	Refugees - mostly ethnic Vietnamese, and some ethnic Chinese.
1976 - 1978	Small number of refugees from camps. Others feeling constricted by new regime. Mostly ethnic Vietnamese.
1979	Ethnic Chinese - petty and large traders
1990 -1991	Economic and political refugees from camps. Ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese.
To present	Family reunion migrants from camps and directly from Vietnam. Majority of Vietnamese in Australia.

## **Differences in Settlement Experiences**

Viviani (1996) then identifies, within all these waves, groups who correspond to Kunz's 1985 classification of refugees. The 'revolutionary activists', who continue to watch politics and human rights in Vietnam, were amongst the first wave and are ethnic Vietnamese middle class political refugees. By far the largest group is the 'passive hurt', who have lost everything, including sometimes family members, and who struggle to make a new life in Australia. The 'integration-seeking realists' and 'eager assimilationists' can be found across the four waves and seek to put the past behind them and make a go at settling in Australia. Then there are the ethnic Chinese, who have been refugees at least one, and up to three previous times and are not interested in full integration. Their experience shows that family and ethnic solidarity matters more than minority rights.

Not only have these groups had diverse experiences of settlement, they have had significantly different experiences of settlement compared to other ethnic groups because who you are and when you arrived matters in living in Australia. The Indochinese arrived whilst Australia was undergoing vast economic and social change and "these changes in Australian society affected Australians' attitudes to Indochinese people settling in their midst and changed the life chances and structures of opportunity in the community for the new arrivals" (Viviani, 1996. p 34).

## **Impact of different experiences**

These differences in ethnicity, experiences and attitudes amongst the Vietnamese may be part of the reason why their migrant experiences are more diverse than previous migrant groups, and consequently why this group has a different type of relationship with Australian society and education resulting in a blocked social mobility.

Perhaps another important factor in the development of educational, occupational and consequently social mobility is that "Indochinese are 'visibly different', meaning that race matters, at least in the perceptions of Australians, and that this may prove a constraining factor in social mobility as it clearly has for Aborigines." (Viviani, 1996. p45).

## **The experiences of earlier migrant groups**

In contrast to the experience of the Vietnamese, there were many favourable structural factors contributing to the mobility of other migrant groups, specifically Southern and Eastern Europeans who arrived after the Second World War. These included the abolition of university fees and the changing of universities from elite to mass institutions, as well as high rates of employment that allowed families to support their children through tertiary education. There were also changes in occupational structures that assisted the occupational mobility of the second generation. In fact their level of occupational mobility exceeded that of Australians and the more favourably regarded British and West European migrants. All these earlier migrant groups to Australia have achieved a favourable outcome in educational, occupational and social mobility, in some cases a generation earlier than predicted.

A crucial part in the success of these groups may be the fact that they decided to make their children's education a priority, allowing them to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the favourable structural factors. Notwithstanding these favourable outcomes, this has not been achieved without problems. Even though broad social attitudes have shifted, the settlement of these groups did not occur without racism, discrimination and even violence.

## **The settlement experiences of the Vietnamese**

Viviani (1996) contends it is doubtful the experiences of the Indochinese, and the Vietnamese in particular, will mirror those of other migrant groups. Residential concentration is a very contentious issue, as are the persistently high rates of unemployment and the public perception of Vietnamese migrants, which is extremely and negatively stereotypical.

The residential concentration of the Vietnamese in the Fairfield area, and Cabramatta in particular, sits uneasily with the general public. In 1991 Vietnamese born accounted for 20% of the population of Cabramatta. In total 35% of the population was Indochinese, and that did not include any Australian-born children. It is likely that these proportions have risen, since the reasons for concentration have not diminished. Initially the attraction was a working class area with cheap housing, an area where friends and relatives were close, which helped alleviate social isolation and provided contacts for employment, and where there was provision for social services and English tuition. In actual fact the Indochinese experience is no different from other migrant groups, reflecting the classic situation, which is well understood from previous patterns of migrant settlement both in Australia and overseas.

Unemployment rates for Vietnamese remain unacceptably high at over 30%. Further, Viviani (1996) identifies a 'twin peaks phenomenon' of unemployment disguised in the overall rate. Youth unemployment, that is under 24, is about 60%, whilst the rate for those over 50 is nearly 80%. However, there are nine factors, interactive and dynamic over time, that affect these unemployment rates: period of residence in Australia; age structure of the community; appropriate skills and education; English proficiency; gender; ethnicity; refugee status; racial discrimination against Vietnamese in the labour market; and working while receiving unemployment benefits.

Unemployment and residential concentration are related. As unemployment rose so did the net rate of concentration. Additionally, as the community grew so did commercial services and enclave business, and the social milieu remained familiar to new arrivals who settled in this comfort zone. However continued media coverage highlighting the drug problem and violence around Cabramatta served to fuel the public perception that drugs, unemployment and Vietnamese residential concentration go hand-in-hand. The emergence of the gang culture in and around Cabramatta was further fuel for the stereotype fire. The general public had developed a firm and negative stereotype for all Vietnamese.

## **Educational, occupational and social mobility of minority groups**

The educational, occupational and social mobility of minority groups can be seen to depend on many forces that have complex interrelationships. Viviani (1996) has identified migrant experiences as crucial to the mobility of minority groups. In turn, migrant experiences impact on community relationships, which depend on education and employment, with education being the main key to better employment. The occupational mobility of minority groups is dependent upon education and community relationships. The consequence of these complex experiences and relationships is social mobility, perhaps the measure of 'success' of minority groups and their relationship with the dominant group. Education appears to be at the heart of this complexity because it interplays with community relationships, occupational mobility and social mobility.

This brings us to the research of Ogbu (1992, 1998) who sought to explain why some minority groups are more successful in their migrant experiences than others, and consequently why some groups succeed academically while others do not. Like Viviani, Ogbu concludes that migrant experiences and community relationships impact on adaptations to school success. He proposes that in addition to the complex and interlocking

forces of society and school that affect social adjustment and academic performance and the minority status of the group, there are 'community forces' within the minority group itself that impact on the educational success of some minority groups, and has developed a cultural-ecological theory to support his proposals.

## **VOLUNTARY MINORITIES, REFUGEES AND COMMUNITY FORCES**

Ogbu (1992) discusses the lack of success of some minority groups in educational achievement and reports this as a worldwide tendency. Further, he identifies that there are differences in achievement among minority groups, with some minority groups experiencing persisting disproportionate poor school performances.

To provide an explanation for the differences in adjustment and achievement Ogbu (1992, 1998) distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary minorities, and refugees. Voluntary minorities are those people who have immigrated to another country by choice. They undertake this because they believe that ultimately they will be better off economically, politically or have more opportunities. Despite the initial experience of subordination, their positive expectations influence their perceptions of school and society. Moreover, the children of voluntary minority groups do not usually experience disproportionate and persistent problems in social adjustment and academic achievement. Refugees are not considered voluntary minorities because they did not choose to immigrate, usually they leave under difficult conditions and have no prospect of returning to their homeland. However, refugees share certain features that are different from involuntary minorities, which make it easier for them than for involuntary minorities. Together with voluntary minorities, the culture, language and identity of refugees are different from the dominant group, not oppositional as for the involuntary minority. On the other hand, involuntary minorities are those groups that have been forcibly subordinated by slavery, conquest or colonization. These involuntary minorities experience the most difficulties with school adjustment and academic achievement.

This minority status influences the adaptations of minority groups and the relationships they develop with the dominant group, in particular their response to education. Ogbu (1992) identifies community forces as factors underlying educational problems of minority groups. Community forces are identified as products of sociocultural adaptation and are located within the minority community. "Community forces serve to differentiate minority groups facing similar barriers in society at large and in schools; and the options created by the community forces allow choices of action that result in individual differences in schooling outcome." (Ogbu, 1992. p287). There are four factors identified as components of community forces, which are essential in understanding the differences in school adjustment and academic performance of minority groups.

The first component is the cultural model a minority group has with regard to the dominant society and schooling, or their understandings of their world. These understandings guide their interpretations and actions.

The second component is the cultural and language frame of reference. Primary cultural references are non-oppositional because they are recognised as different to the dominant culture. "This frame of reference leads the bearers of primary cultural/language differences to interpret the cultural/language differences they encounter in school and workplace as *barriers to overcome* in order to achieve their goals." (Ogbu, 1992. p289). On the other hand, secondary cultural/language differences are oppositional or ambivalent because they have been subordinated. These groups look upon their differences as identity markers to be maintained.

The third component is the degree of trust or acquiescence a minority has with the dominant group and their institutions. The experience of some groups is that they cannot be trusted, or that the education they receive is different and inferior.

The fourth and last component is the educational strategies developed in response to the other three components. These strategies incorporate the attitudes, plans and actions used or disregarded in the attainment of formal education.

Ogbu maintains the most important feature of these community forces is that they are a group or collective phenomena, and in order to understand minority students' responses towards schooling we need to understand the community forces for each minority group.

### **Vietnamese responses to school: polarisation of achievement**

The Vietnamese are one of Australia's most significant recent immigrant groups and their experiences mirror that of the other Indochinese groups. Where earlier migrant groups have achieved a favourable outcome in educational, occupational and social mobility despite social and economic disadvantage and residential concentration, the Vietnamese may not share the same experience. The reasons for this may be found in the migrant experiences of both first and second generation Vietnamese and the relationship they have with Australian society and education.

There is a dramatic polarisation in academic achievement and behaviour for Vietnamese youth. They score at both ends of the TER scale, that is almost perfect scores in the high nineties or below thirty, which is reflected in their over-representation in tertiary education and on the dole queues. Viviani (1996) maintains they appear to take a stance educationally of beating the Australians at their own game, or by reacting in anti-social ways, whilst Ogbu (1978) states the response of lower academic performance is an adaptation of sorts to barriers in adult opportunity structure.

In considering the polarisation of academic achievement of Vietnamese students, as has been shown, it is crucial not to look at them as a homogeneous group but to consider the different ethnicities within the group. It would appear they have not taken an oppositional stance within their group, but that different ethnic groups have responded in different ways to their minority status and experiences.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

As mentioned above, both Ogbu and Viviani provide useful frameworks for research into Vietnamese youth and education. Ogbu provides a framework that can predict the response to education and academic success of a minority group when the factors of minority status and community forces are taken into account. He has identified some migrant groups as successful minorities in some countries, yet unsuccessful in others. It would appear the patterns of settlement, migrant experiences, minority status and community forces impact on the adaptations to success of each minority. In attempting to identify the factors that cause the dramatic polarisation of adaptation to school success of Vietnamese students, and to consider if Ogbu's theory is applicable to this group, it is proposed the responses and achievements of Vietnamese students will be examined with reference to Ogbu's (1992, 1998) minority status of migrant groups and how that impacts on their success. Moreover, their responses to education will also be examined within Ogbu's alternative framework of community forces.

## Research questions

This paper provides the background to a study that will consider the polarisation of academic achievement and behaviour of Vietnamese students. The study will investigate the responses to high school of a group of Vietnamese students, tracking them from their primary school to high school. It will involve interviews with the students and teachers from both school sites.

The questions that this paper has posed are centered on the polarisation of academic achievement and behaviour, and Ogbu and Viviani's frameworks.

- Is there a polarisation of academic achievement and behaviour of a group of Vietnamese students as they move from primary to secondary school?
- Does their response to education reflect their minority status?
- Do their minority status and community forces impact on their academic achievement and behaviour?
- Is there a difference between different ethnic groups from Vietnam?

The answer to these and other questions generated during the research will highlight some significant issues for those involved in the education of Vietnamese Australians.

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**The Battle to Remain on Higher Ground:  
School Curriculum and Pedagogy Versus  
Culturally Supported School Resistance.**

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**Abstract**

It is clear that indigenous Australian students reject school, and education more generally, in proportionally greater numbers than any other group in the Australian community (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995). There is evidence to suggest that school rejection occurs because students are consciously aware of their educational powerlessness and the social disadvantage that their particular cultural difference brings with it (see McFadden, 1995, Munns & McFadden, 1997). The evidence suggests that many Aboriginal students believe school is not a place that works for them, and reject their unequal educational experiences both individually and in groups. In rejecting school, many indigenous Australians choose a pathway to further inequality and exploitation. The study described in this paper considers school rejection among indigenous Australian boys as a culturally supported masculine response embedded within a complex community and educational context (see Munns, 1998). However, this research focuses on boys from the minority who remain in post-compulsory education, against seemingly overwhelming odds and statistics. It seems that for some boys the moment of school rejection (Willis, 1977, 1981, 1983) passes, and that, far from being naturalised, school resistance and rejection is itself opposed and rejected as an alternative. In this sense, the moment of school rejection becomes a turning point. Questions are then raised about the relationship between cultural, familial, peer and individual contexts with school curriculum and pedagogy which might lead to school success and a desire to stay on when others in the group have left. In particular, there is a consideration of how school resilience threatens the position of being culturally accepted as both indigenous Australian and male.

**I've gotta lot of mates out of school and they try to talk me out of it ...  
It's pretty hard, because you are sittin' up there, it's 10 o'clock at night  
and they say, "Just stay here the night, don't go to school." And I say, "I  
have to go home and go to school."**

## **Introduction: the Battle.**

School is a battle for the majority of Aboriginal Australian students.

The history of education of Aboriginal students in Australia is a shameful history of removal, racism, discrimination, exclusion, and inequality. The reality is that full access to public schooling and compulsory school education for all Aboriginal people in Australia has only been realised in the last two generations. It must be remembered that it was not until after a national referendum (held in 1967) that Aboriginal people were acknowledged as citizens of Australia. However, even after the referendum, principals in New South Wales still had the right to refuse enrolment to, and exclude Aboriginal children from schools on racial grounds: a practice which continued until 1972 when the offending regulation was withdrawn.

Since that time, officially sanctioned access to schooling for Aboriginal students has, however, neither resulted in equitable access nor educational outcomes. Aboriginal students continue to be excluded from schooling through processes of suspension, placement in low ability classes, tracking into 'soft option' curriculum choices, unproductive classroom relationships and by low teacher expectations. In the late 1990s, the educational battle for Aboriginal students in Australia is still about access, inclusion and equality.

Statistics illustrate that few Aboriginal students win the battle to remain at secondary school into the post-compulsory years. The last major government review of education for Aboriginal students reported that their retention rate in the post-compulsory years of schooling was 25%, while the retention rate for non-Aboriginal students was 78% (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995). It is clear that school is rejected by significant numbers of Aboriginal Australian students in communities throughout Australia. However, equally significant, particularly from a research viewpoint, is the minority who stay on at school in post-compulsory years against seemingly overwhelming history, odds and statistics.

The stories of these students, including what compels them to remain in schools and classrooms which historically have denied them access and equality, is a critical issue to address for those who want to enhance educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. In addition, why these students stay on, looking to win the educational battle, when they see most of their cultural peers not remaining at school is another central question to pursue. After all, history shows that the battle they are fighting is one that most of their community have been unable to win. There are also salient questions around whether there are cultural prices to pay for continued engagement and perhaps success in the *whitefellas'* world of education and what success in education has to offer.

These questions form the basis for the *Widdin Pindari* Research Project that informs this paper. The study looks at the interplay of community and school experiences among groups of Aboriginal Australian students who are remaining at school in the post-compulsory years. These students are from both urban and rural contexts. The purpose of the study is to identify the cultural, familial, peer, individual and institutional factors that encourage and support school retention for Aboriginal students. Although the *Widdin Pindari* project focuses on the stories of both Aboriginal Australian girls and boys, this paper takes up issues surrounding the cultural position of Aboriginal boys who choose to stay on at school.

## **Theoretical Orientation: the Battle Lines.**

### **Resistance and Response to Education**

Although focusing on Australian Aboriginal students who remain at school, *Widdin Pindari* is located in a research tradition which attempts to understand why certain groups of students

become disaffected and reject school and education. It is important to realise, however, that students may not so much reject school as experience a sense of being pushed out (Rumberger, 1995). The history of Aboriginal education in Australia confirms that students both reject and are rejected by school.

In attempting to tease out factors of engagement with schooling, the study draws on elements of Willis's (1977, 1981, 1983) theory of resistance and cultural production. Central to the theory is the relationship between structure, culture and agency in social change. It is argued by resistance theorists that school and education is rejected by individuals from educationally powerless groups who understand their educational reality and how that reality will lead to a certain kind of social position. In this sense, school resistance is considered a rational cultural response in the light of the consciousness of present and future social positioning. Resistance theory and its accompanying notion of cultural production has been applied to school settings serving educationally disadvantaged Black students overseas (Furlong, 1984, Mac an Ghail, 1988, O'Connor, 1997), and Aboriginal students in Australia (Folds, 1985, Munns, 1996).

### **Processes of Cultural Support**

While this study utilises elements of resistance theory it also brings different theoretical perspectives and research foci to the understanding of the educational experience of Aboriginal school students. This study is primarily interested in those students who remain at school. A critical theoretical difference to be applied to the analysis of issues surrounding those Aboriginal students who chose to stay on at school has been developed by Munns and McFadden (1997). Although they explored the complex group and individual processes around school rejection, they also focussed on what can operationalise a 'second chance' in education. Significant among their findings surrounded notions of *cultural support* which, ironically, they found could operate to entrench educational rejection. Support, however, was also critical in helping students reaccess education and was associated with mending a sense of *cultural fracture* when education had been previously experienced as a 'first chance' failure.

Importantly, there are two connected elements to cultural support. The first concerns students' feelings about school. The evidence suggests (see Munns, 1996) that the majority of Aboriginal students leave school because they believe that school is not a place that works for them. The second element of cultural support is concerned with the way Aboriginal communities respond to their students' leaving school. There is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal Australian communities accept both their students' being pushed out of school and school rejection. This is, however, no happy acceptance, more an understanding that their children have been let down by the system. Aboriginal communities do not want it to happen, hope desperately that it does not, but when it does, the student is not rejected by the family, peers or their community for being a 'failure' at school. Clearly, Aboriginal communities believe that the institutional offer to be educated does not include equitable access and outcomes (Munns, 1996).

For Aboriginal students, being pushed out of school and/or school rejection is often followed by cultural support from within their own community, and for the majority, leaving school early is seen as inevitable. For most Aboriginal students, it is argued that leaving school offers a sense of cultural solidarity; just another individual in the group struggling against oppression. However, and paradoxically, it is also clear that Aboriginal communities value education and it must be understood that they also support those students who remain at school. What makes the difference for these students in helping them to remain at school is at the heart of the *Widdin Pindari* study.

## **Culturally Supported Masculine Responses to Schooling**

This paper focuses on how a group of Aboriginal Australian male students who are remaining at school are socially and culturally positioned. As Munns (1998) proposes, there are notable empirical arguments for considering that leaving school for many Aboriginal Australian males may well be a culturally supported masculine response produced through the interplay of community, school and educational factors. However, what now needs to be considered are the critical issues surrounding those students who stay on. First, there is the tension and struggle between school and neighbourhood for those boys who have opted to stay on. Second, there is the issue of whether staying at school threatens boys being accepted as both Aboriginal Australian and male. Finally, there is the implication for educators looking to respond to the challenge to find a pathway for educational opportunity and success for Aboriginal students when educational rejection often has cultural support (Munns and McFadden, 1997).

### **Research Methodology: Behind the Battle Lines.**

*Widdin Pindari* uses ethnographic methodologies in one rural and two urban school settings. Data has been and will be collected primarily through open-ended interviews with the Aboriginal Australian students in each setting. This data will be complemented with observations of the students in school and in the community, as well as through interviews with family, close community members and teachers.

To collect the data, teams have been formed in each setting comprising Aboriginal Australian and non-Aboriginal Australian researchers. The Aboriginal Australian researchers are critical for the research, particularly in their role as intermediaries between the Aboriginal communities and other members of the project team. Their knowledge of their own communities assists in culturally appropriate entry into the field. They collect and are involved with data analysis, ensuring the data is interpreted from an Aboriginal Australian perspective, thereby protecting local ownership of the knowledge. In its design and implementation, *Widdin Pindari* recognises the epistemic responsibility of the researchers to the studied community: the challenge to reconceptualise objectivity, subjectivity and representation (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).

### ***Widdin Pindari*: Emerging Perceptions, Ironies and Tensions**

The *Widdin Pindari* study is at its beginning stages. Work already carried out at one of the rural sites, however, provides interesting data about why the Aboriginal male students at the site have chosen to remain at school and how they see themselves positioned in relation to their peers, their families, their community and the school. These students have strong rationales for their choice to stay at school and describe both the pressures and rewards, at this stage, of their decision to remain. In addition, they detail some of the factors that led them to making an 'against the odds' decision to stay on.

Importantly, they define themselves as different from those peers who have left but still feel connected to them. They describe the out-of-school activities of these peers as 'wandering' or 'walking around', highlighting a sense of aimlessness and lack of direction. Ironically however, even at this early stage in the project, the data gathered is raising significant questions for further exploration about, in particular, curriculum tracking and choices and the way in which school may be just another site for 'wandering around'. Here too aimlessness and lack of direction is a possibility.

The data which is the subject of this analysis was collected through interviews with seven post-compulsory students in one rural location in New South Wales. The site is a relatively

large rural comprehensive high school with a significant population of Aboriginal students. The interviews focussed on the students' perception of school, family and friends, and their relative role in supporting and encouraging the students' continued engagement with school.

An interesting feature of the Aboriginal student population at the site is that in the post-compulsory years there are 19 students (approximately 10% of the post-compulsory school population) of which the majority (12) are male.

### **Being at School - Doing Something and Wanting to Do Something**

Each of the students interviewed had a well developed rationale for staying on at school. The most comprehensively developed rationale related to jobs. Noone wanted to end up in 'dead end', 'part-time' or labouring jobs, although trades were considered by the few who mentioned them as being outside any definition of 'labouring'. Each was clear about the tightness of the labour market and believed that success in education was the way in which they would make the most out of a difficult and competitive job market. Perhaps the most engaging concept to emerge here was the notion of 'doing something' and 'wanting to do something' constructive rather than wasteful or aimless with your time. As Ernie says, "After I finish school, I just want to get a good job!" And John articulates the relationship between education and employment:

John: I know how hard it is to get a job (...) There aren't many places that give a 15 or 16 year old kid who's only just scraped in to get his Year 10 certificate a full-time job.

Although each student stressed the importance of the family in their decision to remain at school there are interesting tensions around family support that need further exploration. Pressure, and support, for these students comes both from families who have a recent history of school completion and from families that are breaking the barrier for the first time. Compare, for example, the comments of Michael and Ernie:

<p>Michael: I am the first one to do year 12 in my whole generation ... you've got pressure on you, you don't want to pull out.</p>	<p>Ernie: They say [his brothers and sisters] I should stick in there because they had to do it; I've got no choice.</p>
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There is also a fascinating tension developing in the data around sport, work (and jobs in a general sense) and academic work. This connects with an associated tension between academic curriculum choices and so called 'easy option' subjects which will be discussed in the following section.

Sport looms large in the lives of these young Aboriginal men. For a few, the chance to play football for the school was a "major reason" for staying on and assumed the status of "top priority". For the majority, it was a significant life interest and one around which critical choices were constructed. In Australian society, particularly for Aboriginal people, success in

sport has been held up as a pathway to opportunity and status. But most of these boys realised that there were "no guarantees" with sport, and placed the 'Australian dream' of sporting success in relative perspective.

John: Until about year 9 I thought sport, sport and don't worry about school and that (...) I woke up to myself because sports aren't going to take you very far.

The dream, regardless, remains potent and to a suggestion that a major sporting club would show some interest in him comes Michael's response, "Stink it [school]! I'd be up there training straight away."

#### Being at School - Relations with Peers and Teachers (Some Unexpected Turns)

The students in *Widdin Pindari* saw themselves as different from those Aboriginal peers who had left school early but they still referred to them as "their mates". Those who remained exhibited a quiet independence about the job ahead of both themselves and their school colleagues and saw school as a site for constructing new friendships and positive patterns of influence with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. In addition they exhibited a sense of support for their cultural peers who were "sticking in" and "doing good", as much as for those who were finding school work not so easy. At this critical point they were seeming individually to challenge the solidarity so often expressed through not becoming an achiever, and a "big noter". Although they did not go out of their way to talk about school issues and progress, they were sensitive to how their friends were going academically.

Intriguingly, the students saw themselves as positive role models for younger students and were clear that the younger Aboriginal students had to be careful not to "muck around" too much or things would "get harder" for them. Again we can see challenges to culturally supported school rejection.

Their attitudes to teachers were surprising. School, they said, was a place where teachers ruled. The game was theirs and they always came "out on top". But in the post-compulsory years, these students experienced teachers very differently from in their junior years. The rules of the game had shifted for the students too and "teachers actually say hello without staring at you." The students experienced a respect that was new and noted the shift in teacher expectations and responsibility. Regardless of this shift, almost all spoke about their reluctance to approach all but a few teachers for help with academic work or to ask questions about what they did not know. Here the concept of "shame" was crucial to a number of students.

#### "Wandering Around" Out of School. Wandering Around In School?

According to the students interviewed, those students who are not at school, "walk around all night ... just wander around". It is the aimlessness of the wandering metaphor that is both captivating and ironic here. Captivating because it characterises so well the directionless life these students wish to avoid through education. Ironic because school can, in itself, be a site for curriculum aimlessness and lack of direction. Sport is once again important here because it is central to the kinds of curriculum choices that face these students, choices that often come down to that between relevance and rigour. It is important here to understand that when students choose subjects they invariably do so under a considerable teacher influence. There is clear evidence to suggest that teachers were encouraging the students in their continued movement towards sport and sport related subjects. Perhaps this was to bolster their feelings towards school, perhaps it was to improve classroom discipline, perhaps it was about furthering the school's reputation as a top football school. Whatever

the motivation for this "tracking" by the teachers, there is a real danger that the Aboriginal students were being "side-tracked" at school into curricular options which might restrict their future academic outcomes.

So not only is sport seen by both students and teachers as an important reason for many Aboriginal students to remain at school, but it is used as a curriculum pathway in subjects like 'Sports, Leisure and Lifestyle'. Where that kind of pathway might lead is open to further exploration. Some students saw the kinds of curriculum choices that sport and leisure studies represented as "easy choices". Others saw such 'easy options' as timewasting and equated learning with intellectual challenge. Compare the comments of Ernie and John.

<p>Ernie: They [some other students] pick out subjects, real good ones that they know how to do and that ... the easy courses, trying to pick all the easy ones.</p>	<p>John: With all the new electives we got to choose from I chose business studies and legal studies ... I find that very challenging ... hard but I am learning as well.</p>
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### **Conclusion: Remaining On Higher Ground: A Pyrrhic Victory?**

The *Widdin Pindari* study promises a great deal. First, it promises to bring to light and make explicit the complex social and cultural support processes behind why some Aboriginal students are remaining at school when the majority of their peers are leaving. How Aboriginal males and females in urban and rural settings are differentially positioned in relation to school, and the consequences of that differential positioning, will be a central social and cultural complexity to be explored. Second, it promises to clarify how much needed strategies of support might be shared and reproduced for others so that pathways to educational opportunity and success may be broadened. Crucially, it will help answer the question whether education continues to be a false promise for Aboriginal Australian students. If, through processes of tracking and side-tracking, the school site is just another place within which to 'wander around', then one has to question who in the end benefits from these students' continued engagement with schooling, and indeed, whether winning the battle is in the end a pyrrhic victory.

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## **Appendix - What the Students are Saying**

### **Doing something**

John: You've got the kids who flip and find as easy way out ... But I wasn't coming to school and sit around, have two frees a day, I can't do that!

Michael: ... what's the use of quitting when you had nothing to do, just sitting at home just waiting for a couple of days to click over 'til you work a couple of hours.

### **Unsure of options**

Toby: I'm hanging on. I haven't really decided yet.

Michael: I don't want to be stuck in an office.

### **Family**

Michael: I said to mum, "What about pulling out?" And she say no, to stay in there. I keep on thinking to myself "I want to do it, I want to do it!" ... Because I'm Koori, she wants me to get the HSC, because you don't see many Koori kids achieve at that level.

### **Can't beat the teachers**

John: I've tried it [mucking up] plenty of times. I always come off second best. You've gotta play their game and play it by their rules. That's what I learnt.

### **Treated differently**

John: Teachers actually start talking to you with a bit of respect. A lot of the teachers that are pricks all of the time. Yes. That sort of swung me out: come to school with a big white shirt on and actually different from the rest of them. You would walk past and teachers would actually say hello without staring at you.

### **Peers, Support and Independence**

Ben: I just say schoolwork has got to be done. They [his mates] know that.

Toby: I was talking to her sister [of a girl who had left school] and she's supposedly got back on the right track and going to school and TAFE.

Ernie: I think they [his Aboriginal mates at school] are going OK. I don't ask them how they are going in class. They look like they are going OK. They are still sticking in.

Tom: In the seniors [the post-compulsory years] I haven't heard anyone put anyone down or like to bring anyone down, back down to their level. If someone is going good, then that's good.

Michael: ... the juniors kind of have a laugh [during meetings] and you just tell them to have a good listen. You kind of tell them not to muck around when they are mucking around.

John: You've got the little cheeky ones that are coming up through year 7 and that and they are just going to have a harder time, it gets harder for them

## **Sport**

Michael: Stink it! I would just go with Aussie Rules, I'd be up there training straight away.

Ernie: I just come here to see my friends and socialise and all that, mainly play football for my school.

Ben: Top priority [about the importance of football] ... Probably another major reason I am here too.

## **Walking around**

Ben: Since I started this year, I've come across a lot of new mates at school and started hanging around them a bit now and leave the others because when I hang around them all they want to do is walk around all night ... the ones that don't go to school just wander around ... and stuff like that.

John: If you don't have friends and just walk around by yourself. That's how most kids truant.

## **Tracking and side-tracking**

Tom: [In Sports, Leisure and Lifestyle] you like just do sports training ... and that and then the theory on it is all about preventing sports injuries and stuff and coaching.

Ernie: They [other students] pick out subjects, real good ones that they how to do and that. The easy courses, trying to pick all the easy ones.