

**Supporting Indigenous students as “smart, not good” knowers and learners:
The practices of two teachers**

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Quintessential to having a sense of personal and group identity is pride in culture ... pride in your people. This is the issue that lies at the heart of so much of the Aboriginal struggle today. It is the area of the social construction of identity that many believe schools have an important role. (Herbert, Anderson, Price & Stehbins, 1999, p.19)

According to Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson and Hurst (2000, p. 48), “the ‘core business’ of secondary schools, regardless of whether it is intended, is youth identity formation”. Issues of identity can be especially significant for adolescents from minority groups (Groome, 1995, p. 4-5) as they seek to find a place within a society in which they may not feel valued or represented. However, for many Indigenous people, “identity” is also a political issue, an integral part of self-determination, wherein Indigenous people work to retain and regain control over their identities.

Recognition of a people’s fundamental right to self-determination must include the right to self-definition, and to be free from the control and manipulation of an alien people. It must include the right to inherit the collective identity of one’s people, and to transform that identity creatively according to the self defined aspirations of one’s people and one’s own generation. It must include the freedom to live outside the cage created by other people’s images and projections. (Dodson, 1994, p. 5)

In light of this link between identity and rights, Indigenous education advisory bodies have rejected education based on assimilation and instead have included “security of identity” (Carol Fisher, Education Officer, Education Queensland, lecture at James Cook University, 24 October 2003) as an integral part of their vision for equitable education for Indigenous students (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989, National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985).

This paper draws on a qualitative research study which investigated exemplary teaching practices for Indigenous students. The study was set in “Bay High”, a secondary high school, in a regional city in northern Australia. Indigenous students constituted around twenty percent of the school enrolment. The study relied on a community nomination process (Ladson-Billings, 1994) whereby exemplary teachers were identified by Indigenous students and their families and by school administrators. The research methodology further recognised the expertise of Indigenous students and their families through interviews which generated stories exploring what constituted good teaching for Indigenous students. This information then formed the starting point of the analysis of observations and interviews of the teachers.

At Bay High, adolescent Indigenous students appeared to be constantly engaged in identity work as they sought to “become somebody” (Smyth et al., 2000; Wexler, 1992) in their family and peer groups, in the school and in the wider community. However, my research is on exemplary teaching practices and so, in this paper, I focus on the work that teachers do to support academically successful Indigenous identities. I begin by arguing that the concept of “Indigenous identity” is complex and contested, thus providing particular challenges to teachers who seek to support the identities of their Indigenous students. I also discuss recent research into the relationship between Indigenous identity and school success. I then examine the ways in which two teachers recognised as employing exemplary teaching practices with Indigenous students worked to support the identities of their Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander students in ways which also allowed the students to take on identities as knowers and learners in their classrooms.

Indigenous identities: Complex and contested

While pan-Aboriginality has played an important political role in the struggle for Indigenous self determination, Torres Strait Islander peoples and Aboriginal peoples have also asserted the diversity of their identities and cultures. Indeed the rejection of homogenised, essentialised Indigenous identities has been a feature of recent Indigenous scholarship as exemplified by Marcia Langton (1994) in her exploration of Indigenous representations in the media, by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) in her critique of non-Indigenous feminism, by Gordon Bennett (1993) in his exploration of identity within his own artworks, and by Martin Nakata (1993) in his critique of the place of “culture” in Indigenous education policies.

The rejection of an essentialised, homogenised, reified Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity is supported academically by post-colonial and post-structural critiques which have “stripped ‘identity’ as a concept from its elevated status as the fundamental inner core of ‘me’ or ‘us’, representing the true, inalienable self of the subject, individual or collective” (Ang, 2000, p. 2). However, as Ang notes,

no matter how convinced we are, theoretically, that identities are constructed not ‘natural’, invented not given, always in process and not fixed, at level of experience and common sense identities are generally expressed (and mobilized politically) precisely because they *feel* natural and essential.

While many Indigenous people have rejected essentialised, reified identities, there is also some suspicion about the ways in which non Indigenous academics have used post-structural and post-colonial critiques to negate any possibility of collective identity. For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 97) rejects the post-colonial focus on fragmented, multiple and shifting identities and Wendy Holland (1996, p. 105) reports that for many Indigenous Australians, cultural hybridity, as celebrated by post-colonial theorists, is an extremely sensitive issue given the legacy of past classifications of Indigenous people.

Mick Dodson (1994, p. 9) draws on post-colonial themes as he recognises that Aboriginality has been defined by the colonisers as “other”, according to the needs of the colonising culture as it “plays with itself”.

It is as if we have been ushered onto a stage to play in a drama where the parts have already been written. Choose from the part of the ancient noble spirit, the lost soul estranged from her true nature, or the aggressive drunk, alternatively bucking and living off the system. No other parts are available for ‘real Aborigines’.

However, Dodson argues that, while dominant representations of Aboriginality have reduced it to a relational concept, Aboriginal people “have never fallen into the hypnosis of believing that those representations were our essence” (p. 9). Dodson recognises that there may be some strategic use of essentialism in Indigenous constructions of identity, but sees the practice of charging Indigenous self-representations with ‘essentialism’ as yet another form of the politics of control (p. 10).

Ian Anderson (1997), in the ironically titled “I, the ‘hybrid’ Aborigine”, is also critical of anti-essentialist critiques of Indigenous identity by non-Indigenous writers. He reports that Indigenous people mobilise aspects of racial discourse in their discussions of identity. Further, he acknowledges that “Aboriginal identities are formed within the context of colonial relations” and so it is inevitable that there are

echoes of the hegemonic discourse of race in Aboriginal self representations (p. 11). However, for Anderson,

the very act of naming is an essentialising process. Even the most radical post-structuralist in attempting to dispense with essentialism in identity formation ends up essentialising non-essentialism. So we might expect that in forming identities Aboriginal people may 'essentialise'. The problem is not, as I see it, with essentialism, but with the type of essentialism. In a colonial context that emphasises invisibility and fragmentation, the task for Aboriginal people is to re-present themselves with a sustainable historised subjectivity. (p. 12)

As Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 97) argues, "fragmentation is not an indigenous project, it is something we are recovering from".

Given the significance of identity to Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is understandable that such an important issue would give rise to debate within Indigenous communities as well as in the wider community. While Indigenous people have contested, and continue to contest, imposed identities, Indigenous identity is also contested within and between Indigenous individuals and groups (Oxenham et al. 1999; Mudrooroo, 1997; Holland, 1996). This contestation was evident at "Bay High". Some of the parents had challenged the inclusion of poetry by Roberta Sykes in the Year 9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies unit within the Social Science program. The Indigenous parent support group asked questions about a newly enrolled student who had identified as Aboriginal on the enrolment form. Students in day-to-day conversations accused others of "you think you're white", or being "too flash for us blacks". The ways in which Indigenous identity was considered and contested is evident in this discussion of Indigenous identities on television by three Grade 10 girls, two who identified as Aboriginal and one as Torres Strait Islander.

What about that chick on *Totally wild*

Which one?

The dark one with curly hair, der...

She's a Murri?

Her family's from TI.

You related?

No

could be a "Haddon"

What's her name?

Can't remember – not Islander.

I think her dad's white

but I don't know if she identifies.

In this short discussion, the girls draw on physical appearance, family, name, place connections and self identity to assess Indigenous identity, referring particularly to the family knowledge of the Torres Strait Islander girl in the group.

While the concept of Indigenous identity is complex and contested and tied to issues of self determination, teachers concerned with providing equitable educational outcomes for their Indigenous students also need to consider the relationship between Indigenous identity and school success.

Indigenous identity and educational success in secondary school.

There is a prevailing belief within Indigenous education that support for, and development of, strong Aboriginal identities and Torres Strait Islander identities will contribute to improved educational outcomes (Purdie, 2003; Herbert et al., 1999; Russell, 1999; Hudsmith, 1997; Groome & Hamilton, 1995). However, the connections are not always clear cut as evident in the study by Purdie, Tripcony,

Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe and Gunstone (2000). This large scale study, based on consultations with students, parent/ carers, school principals and teachers in 44 primary and secondary schools across Australia, as well as self-concept survey data, examined the relationship between positive self identity and school outcomes for Indigenous students. The study found that the relationship between self-identity and school performance is complex (p. 46). Students in the study showed positive self-identity as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islander people but their feelings about themselves as students were frequently ambivalent. Thus positive Indigenous identity “was not necessarily linked with successful educational outcomes” (p.36). Further, the study acknowledge that the social disadvantages experienced by Indigenous people, such as poverty, domestic violence, poor health and substance abuse, directly affect most Indigenous families and so will affect the self-identity of Indigenous students. However, they also argue that to develop positive self-identity as students, “Indigenous students need to perceive value in schooling” and experience school success (p.36). They suggest that there is a need to consider the interplay between the multiple aspects of students’ identities, and so schools need to ensure all aspects of the identities of Indigenous students are valued and this means “that the identities of students as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people need to be valued as much as their identities as students” (p. 45).

Mercurio and Clayton (2001), in a study of sixteen out of the forty six Indigenous students who had successfully completed the senior secondary certificate in South Australia, found that these students were able to “imagine” themselves in the role of “the successful student”, “the Indigenous person”, and “worker and citizen” and their success began with their acceptance or imagining of this persona (p. 104). Through narrative analysis of interviews with these successful students, Mercurio and Clayton found that the students described their own success in terms of “commitment, dedication and organization” and having high expectations of themselves (p. 101) plus support (also described as faith, belief and encouragement) from family, teachers and friends. While these students appeared comfortable and positive with their Aboriginal identity, they were also grappling with what it might mean and they frequently were called on to justify their identity. They had established clear goals linking the gaining of the senior certificate to their future aspirations. Several students identified the support of individual teachers and school administrators as important in supporting them as “the successful student”. However, the data presented in Mercurio and Clayton’s study provides limited evidence of how teachers and schools supported students in their imagining of “the Indigenous person” or the “worker and citizen”. Indeed, much in this study suggests that success had little to do with school and classroom practices.

While the students in Mercurio and Clayton’s study were able to integrate Indigenous, successful student and citizen/ worker identities within their persona, there is also evidence that, for other Indigenous students, the development of an identity as a successful student can be at odds with their identity as an Indigenous person. Reflecting the tradition of resistance theory as described by Willis (1983) in relation to working class males in the United Kingdom and the work of Obgu (1978) in the United States with what he termed involuntary minorities, it has been argued that Indigenous students when faced with an education which does not value their Indigeneity will take on an identity that adopts an oppositional position to school and to school work (Munns & McFadden, 2000; Folds, 1987). Based on a study set in an inner urban school where the majority of the students were identified as Aboriginal, Munns (1998) argues that this oppositional or resistant positioning is a rational response to an education which offers the “false promise of school success” (p. 178). Further, in this study, the oppositional position reflected the cultural themes of oppression and powerlessness within the community. The school was seen as part of

“the system” in which Aboriginal people struggled daily and the failure of schools to deliver educational results for the students was yet more evidence of the failure of the system to meet Indigenous needs. Thus, while families and the community were keen for the students to succeed at school, there was support and understanding for student opposition and resistance and a sense of solidarity in resistance (Munns & McFadden, 2000).

Associating Indigenous identity with opposition to school can mean that successful Indigenous students run the risk of being seen as “acting white” as described by Kevin SIRRIS:

There is another problem for Indigenous kids achieving academically. For me, there was always the concern with what your Indigenous friends thought of you if you achieved well at school. The point I am making here is some Indigenous people might see that as acting white, you know? That has an influence on your cultural identity. If there is a black person doing all the top subjects, you get that stigma of acting white and being a coconut. ... You know, black on the outside and white inside. (in SIRRIS, Lenoy & Alloway, 1997, p.47)

Purdie et al. (2000, p. 19) also reported that there was a culture of anti-intellectualism among many of the students in their study, where doing well in school was seen as “being of little value or something to be ashamed of”.

Certainly there was evidence of oppositional identities among the Indigenous students at Bay High. This was apparent in the retention rates to year 12 which, according to one of the deputy principals, was “not as bad as some places, but still pretty woeful”. The Indigenous Community Education Counsellor reported that many of the students just reached “breaking point” and left. Families also talked of the tensions between the adult identity that the students had in their families and community compared to their adult-controlled identity at school.

At home,
My girls are adults.
They have a lot of responsibility.
especially for younger children
At school,
they still have to ask a teacher
and that gets their backs up
and they won't do the work.

Mrs Jacobs, Torres Strait Islander parent

According to Ms Stephens, Indigenous students were involved in “finding their place” and that was more pressing than academic work.

I've got five children -
yeh, I need a psychiatrist -
and the two boys are at high school.
When they get to high school
it's all about survival.
Academic work is way down the list.
They've gotta establish themselves,
gotta find their place.
For Murri kids, that means dealing with racism
and it's especially hard for the fair ones.
I really see that with Mikey.
My children know why a good education is important
and they've got plenty of role models.

But in high school?

I think all their energy goes to getting through the day

Ms Stephens, Aboriginal parent

Most of the students interviewed in this study claimed that it was acceptable to do well at school as long as students did not “big note” themselves, or position themselves as “too good for us blacks”. While students wanted to do well, they reported putting on a show of resistance so “they don’t say you’re sucking up”. Students worked to avoid being seen as “sucks”. It was fine to be “smart”, but not to “be good”.

The studies by Mercurio and Clayton, Purdie et al. and Groome and Hamilton all highlight the diversity of Indigenous youth identities and so challenge the notion of a homogenised, fixed, unitary Indigenous identity within school contexts. They report that there was a both a wide range of perceptions about it meant to be Aboriginal and a wide range of approaches to the formation of cultural identity (Groome & Hamilton, 1995, p. 34), that there was diversity in the ways that students conceived, comprehended, envisioned and therefore lived their Aboriginality (Mercurio & Clayton, 2001, p. 80), and that Indigenous self-identity was “dynamic and multifaceted” (Purdie et al., 2000, p. 45). The diverse nature of Aboriginal identities and Torres Strait Islander identities was also evident at Bay High. Students and families drew on a variety of themes in constructing their identities, including place, both traditional country or island and particular missions or reserves, language, family affiliation, sporting prowess and political activism. Many also claimed multiple Indigenous identities, e.g., Kunggandji and Bindal, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Many families also acknowledged their non-Indigenous family connections.

Challenges for teachers

Ang (2000, p. 2), drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, reminds us that “while we may have discarded ‘identity’ in theory, we cannot do away with cultural identities as real, social and symbolic forces in history and politics”. And, while Indigenous identities may be *constructions*, dynamic, changing, multiple and diverse, it appears that they need to be viewed by teachers as real, social and symbolic forces which Indigenous youth draw on in the process of “becoming someone” within and against the context of the classroom and the school (Smyth, et al., 2000, p. 76). However, “both the necessity and ‘impossibility’ of identities” (Hall quoted in Ang, p.2) provides particular challenges to teachers working to support Indigenous students as they become somebody. Rather than working with some pre-determined notion of what it is to be Indigenous, teachers need to provide the conditions in which students can be proud of their Indigeneity and at the same time, determine what that might be for themselves in their particular family and community contexts. Thus, supporting Indigenous identities involves teachers in both valuing Indigenous cultures and, at the same time, providing opportunities for diverse ways of being Indigenous. As well, they need to value Indigenous students as knowers and learners within the context of the classroom in ways that are consistent with the students’ diverse Indigenous identities.

Supporting Indigenous students as knowers and learners: Exemplary practices

The two teachers featured in this paper had been identified as exemplary through a community nomination process which relied on the expertise of Indigenous students and their families as well as the school administration and the Indigenous Community Education Counsellor at Bay High. These teachers were well regarded by Indigenous students and their families and, based on school records, Indigenous

students in their classes were achieving high levels of academic success. Mr Morgan was a Maths teacher with thirteen years teaching experience, including five years at Bay High. Ms Parkinson had taught business and legal studies for four years, including two years at Bay High. Neither was Indigenous. Indeed, there were no Indigenous teachers at the school. Interviews with Indigenous students and families revealed ways in which they perceived these teachers valued Indigenous peoples and cultures and supported the students' Indigeneity. Interviews with the teachers and observations in classes provided data on the ways in which teachers both understood and practiced the support of the Indigenous students in their classes.

The interviews with students and families supported the many other research studies that have highlighted the importance of positive personal relationships between Indigenous students and their teachers (see, for example, Harslett, 2000; Herbert, et al, 1999; Munns, 1998; Hudsmith, 1992). This was frequently expressed as liking Indigenous students as a group and through the ability to share a joke with students. However, the students and families in this study also acknowledged that positive personal relationships were insufficient unless supported by appropriate learning or "work".

You can tell she likes us Murries.
Her family is real rich but
but she'll have a laugh with us.
Still makes us work but.

Grade 9 students

You can tell that Dennis likes my kids.
Not just my kids,
the Black kids.
I see him at homework program
laughing up with the kids.
But they still seem to be doing lots of learning.

Mrs Simpson, Aboriginal parent

Word of mouth (or the Murri grapevine as the families and students described it) and endorsement from the Indigenous Community Education Counsellor meant that Indigenous students entered these teachers' classrooms prepared for a positive experience and expecting to learn.

The teachers acknowledged the value of positive personal relationships with the students but were more focused on what could be termed "pedagogical relationships" (Hatton, Munns & Nicklin Dent, 1996, p.41) whereby academic achievement is seen as an outcome of the relationships between teachers, students and community.

Oh, I get on well with the students and their families.
Considering the racism that some of them cop
that's important,
but from my point of view
getting good learning outcomes,
that's how I want to show I care,
making a difference for their future.

Mr Morgan

I was surprised how well I get on with the Indigenous students
and their families.

My background is so, so different.
But I have had to kind of steel myself,
get stronger,
get tougher,
to insist that they put in the work
and get the results they are capable of.

Ms Parkinson

Students and families also identified these teachers as valuing Indigenous cultures, although this was built on the premise of positive relationships with the students and their families. "You can't like the culture if you can't like us" (Mrs Jacobs, Torres Strait Islander parent). To do this, they evoked two criteria. First, the teachers participated in Indigenous programs in the school. Mr Morgan and Ms Parkinson were involved in the homework program organised by the ASSPA (Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness) committee, they played various roles in organising NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observation Committee) week activities and also participated in weekend study skills camps organised for Indigenous students. Second, each teacher spent time with and showed respect for Josie Abraham, the Indigenous Community Education Counsellor, a factor mentioned by eighteen out of twenty one of the families interviewed.

Mrs Abraham and Miss Parkinson have lunch together sometimes
and they talk all the time
so you know she knows what's going on
and Mum knows her now through Mrs Abraham

Grade 9 students

I go up to the school
in the side way
to see Josie
and Dennis is often there
just sitting,
listening.
That says a lot.

Mrs Wilson, Aboriginal grandparent

While the students' families valued the inclusion of Indigenous studies and Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, the families saw this mainly in terms of the compulsory Year 9 social science unit in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies and were unsure of the possibility of Indigenous perspectives in the subjects taught by Mr Morgan and Ms Parkinson. The students themselves were somewhat ambivalent about the inclusion of Indigenous issues in the curriculum, as indicated in the following story told jointly by four Grade nine students, two boys who identified as Aboriginal, a girl who was a Torres Strait Islander and a girl who identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Some teachers make you shamed because they think you're going to know
cultural things
and when you don't they're disappointed
and have to give out a worksheet instead of you doing their job
and they'll ask you stupid questions
like about bush tucker.
Remember when Jonesey asked you what your skin name was.

Yeh yeh!
and then he cracked a shit because I swore him
“What sort of fucked question is that?”
I didn’t know what he was goin’ on about.
But Mum did.
She explained it to me
and about our family totem from Nan’s side.
But she was mad too
because skin name isn’t how we talk here.
It’s more a Territory thing.
Yeh and when we have NAIDOC
you can tell some teachers think it’s crap
Yeh like most times they can’t wait for the end of the lesson,
but once it’s NAIDOC,
they bitch on about losing class time
and have that real bored look on their face.
Like we’re proud of our culture,
but sometimes the other kids jar you up
like when we have dancers they’ll say
“You dance in a fuckin’ skirt, you gay native”
but this year we had Ms Parkinson after the dancers
and she told everyone about how great it was
and how much she had paid to see our dancing in some big
theatre in Brisbane
and said about all the different people who were there
and talked about how some people were making heaps doing –
What she call it?
Cultural tourism
Yeh then later on she brought in an article about Tjapukai theatre
and we had to work out what sort of jobs they’d need.

In this story, the students resist constructions of identity imposed by teachers. At the same time, they indicate how the other students in the school can inhibit their opportunities to take up Indigenous identities in class contexts. However, they also show how Ms Parkinson worked to value Torres Strait Islander dancing and also link the experience to further learning in business studies by making use of an article about Tjapukai theatre, an example of cultural tourism well known in the region.

Both teachers claimed to do little on Aboriginal culture and Torres Strait Islander culture, as indicated by the following from Ms Parkinson.

It’s hard to incorporate Aboriginal culture or Torres Strait Islander culture in business studies.
I mean it is an artefact of capitalism.
What I do is keep an eye out for news items
where Aboriginal people are involved in things to do with business.
I’ll cut articles and jobs from the newspapers to help the Murri students see
where it is relevant to the community
Like when there’s talk about the need for financial skills in community organizations.
And I’ll say to them,
“You could do this”
“You could fix that”
“You could make a big difference if you understand commerce”.
But I have to be careful and do a lot of it on the quiet

because a lot of the articles refer to the failure of Indigenous people to manage finances according to government guidelines and that would confirm the stereotypes among the other students.

Classroom observations showed that the teachers incorporated Indigenous perspectives more frequently than they acknowledged, as Ms Parkinson's discussion above suggests. For example, in Ms Parkinson's Grade 9 class, students were required to undertake an assignment around the hiring of staff from both the job applicant's and the employer's point of view. The class worked in friendship groups and each group received a different package of three jobs, including job descriptions, advertisements and selection criteria, as the basis for their work. Two of the groups included Indigenous students. In their group packages, Ms Parkinson included one job which required knowledge of Indigenous cultures and ability to communicate with Indigenous people as well as a statement in the job advertisement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were encouraged to apply. (Other groups' jobs included other employment equity groups.) These jobs sparked much debate among the Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends in each group and students were encouraged to evaluate equity employment policies and strategies. The Indigenous students began to recognise that they had specific knowledge and skills that were not available to their non-Indigenous peers.

Miss, could I put I speak Creole in my resume?

Sure, many employers see being bilingual as an advantage.

Bilingual?

Yes, being able to speak two languages.

Hey, Rose. We're bilingual.

Deadly, eh.

In general class discussion, Ms Parkinson emphasised that the ability to work across cultures was becoming more important in a globalised job market. She highlighted how much learning was involved in developing cross-cultural competency so helping the Indigenous students position themselves as experienced cross-cultural learners and knowers.

Ms Parkinson and Mr Morgan also worked with the Indigenous Community Education Counsellor and Greg Langley, one of the Aboriginal parents, to develop a series of learning activities for their Grade 10 business studies and maths classes based on stolen wages, a frequently occurring discussion point in the community around the school. The issue of stolen wages was a direct consequence of Indigenous people living "under the act". The act was in reality a series of Queensland parliamentary acts dating back to 1897. Although ostensibly aimed at "protecting" Indigenous people from the effects of colonisation, the acts also restricted their economic, cultural and civil rights. The act allowed employers to pay Indigenous workers much lower wages than legislated for the rest of the community and also allowed a raft of minor bureaucrats to place any proportion of wages earned into trust accounts over which Indigenous people had no control (Kidd, 1997). Greg Langley was working with local elders to obtain compensation for their stolen earnings. The activity sequence began with a general problem: "What would happen if you weren't paid the proper rates of pay?" "Would it matter if it was a long time ago?" Students had an opportunity to discuss issues of principle before the example from recent Indigenous history was introduced. These activities were particularly valuable for three of the Grade 10 boys who were able to maintain their preferred personas as "radicals" while still engaging in considerable learning in maths as they worked to determine what would be an appropriate level of compensation. Martin, a Torres Strait Islander, told the class about his great grandfather being paid "second

rate” wages while in the army in the second world war. Clint reported how his great grandfather was expelled from Palm Island for striking for wage justice. The boys had a competition between themselves and others in the class to see who could work out the “best” formula for calculating compensation, frequently referring to this as “screwing justice out of the government” and aligning themselves with a tradition of Indigenous activism.

Ms Parkinson and Mr Morgan recognised that the identity positions Indigenous students took up in their classes would be influenced by how they were positioned and how they positioned themselves beyond their classrooms. They were particularly conscious of the resistant identities adopted by some of the Indigenous boys in their classes. Each teacher tried to find ways that these resistant students could take identities as learners and knowers.

You have to forget turning them into “good” students.
They have already rejected that role
in front of their peers
and you need to remember that peers and family are much more important
than we are
in how the kids see themselves.

Ms Patterson

In the following lesson segment, reconstructed for observation and journal notes, Mr Morgan provided opportunities for one of the Indigenous boys, Kelvin, to take up a position as an expert problem poser and solver in ways that were consistent with other aspects of Kelvin’s identity.

This Grade 9 maths lesson began as one of those lessons that initially made me wonder why Mr Morgan had been recommended for this study.

“Open your textbooks to page 87.

Read the paragraph under the heading “Time zones” please, Amanda.

Look at the blackboard.

We’ll do exercise one together.....

Should we do the next one together.

Right ...

Now, you try the remaining ones for yourselves.”

Students began working individually, but as was the usual pattern in Mr Morgan’s classes, they gradually moved into various patterns of working – individually, in pairs or in threes. Mr Morgan spoke quietly to Ricky assuring him that his absence the previous week would not hinder his ability to do these exercises, he then threaded his way to the back of the room, asked Miranda if she was feeling better, responded to Gavin’s procedural question before returning to his desk at the front of the room.

“Mr M, Sir!”

“Kelvin?”

“How does this stuff work?

Like for the superbowl?”

“The superbowl?”

“Yeh, like betting on the superbowl?”

“You know I don’t gamble, Kelvin.”

“Yeh, but we could make a killing.”

“Yeh.”

“Yeh.”

“Could we, Sir?”

The room erupted into a chaotic series of discussions about the possibility of using time zone differences to make money betting on the superbowl which was on in the

next couple of days. Mr Morgan announced. "Right, you've got five minutes to really think this through". Some of the students continued with the textbook exercises, others kept talking through this money making possibility. Kelvin, and two other Indigenous students, Marley and Beryl used the blackboard to try to solve this problem. I could see a rough map of the Pacific emerge and chalk lines going from Australia to the USA and between the east and west coasts of Australia.

"Mr M, what about when you phone?"

"Well, what about when your Auntie went to that Indigenous education conference in Canada?

Did you phone her?"

The three students did some more discussion. Mr Morgan worked with another group of students, then Beryl turned to him and announced,

"Looks like we'll still need jobs, Sir."

"Yeh, it ain't going to work."

"Still, if you know what time the game starts here, you could work out what time it would be where they are playing."

"Yeh, sir, that affects form."

The group went back to the board to work on this problem together.

"We've got it under control now, Mr M."

"Do you think you could explain it to some of the others."

"No problem-oh. I am the man."

Beryl glared.

"We are the man."

Mr Morgan then announced to the class that Marley, Beryl and Kelvin were going explain how they worked through their decision about using time zones as a gambling aid and invited students to compare their thinking to that of Marley, Beryl and Kelvin. Eight students came up to the blackboard to hear the explanation.

Kelvin was overweight and had diabetes and the stereotype of the successful Aboriginal sport star was not available to him. Instead, he had worked to establish himself as the "sporting expert" among his peers, a position he validated through his success at "picking winners". He combined the sporting expert identity with his Indigenous identity by displaying particular expertise in Indigenous sports people. In this lesson, Mr Morgan tapped into Kelvin's sporting expert identity as well as his "radical" identity to engage in mathematically thinking. He used his knowledge of Kelvin's family to provide additional useful information as the students worked through the problem that Kelvin himself had initiated. He acknowledged the educational expertise in Kelvin's family. Rather than requiring Kelvin to take up a position of "good student", he provides a context where Kelvin can extend and display his mathematical expertise in the context of his identity as Indigenous sporting expert.

It is important to see this lesson segment in the context of Mr Morgan's ongoing work with the students. Mr Morgan expressed concern that Kelvin's delight at picking winners would lead him to see gambling as a viable way of making a living and so throughout the year he included mathematical exercises examining the costs of gambling. These were presented in ways by which Kelvin could announce in class "I'm too smart to be sucked in by this keno thing. Murri'd be mad to give money to those whitefellas", thus maintaining a resistant Indigenous identity. It should also be noted that the self selected groups, the opportunities to turn mathematical exercises into personally relevant problem solving sessions and for peer teaching were all regular features of Mr Morgan's classes. While in this story, the students worked through the problem themselves, Mr Morgan also provided structured support to ensure students did understand the mathematical concepts necessary to be "smart"

at maths. As well, my observations show that the opportunities taken up by Kelvin in this lesson were shared equitable among the students in Mr Morgan's classes.

Conclusion

Ms Parkinson and Mr Morgan recognised their responsibility in assisting their Indigenous students take up identities that were both Indigenous and academic. However, their understanding of the Indigenous identity involved them in seeing the students in multiple ways, constantly moving between the individual interests and needs of the student, their family connections and contemporary Indigenous life. Their understanding of the students was informed by their knowledge of the students' family contexts and recent local history, particularly developed through their close professional relationship with the Indigenous Community Education Counsellor. In addition, they recognised the racism experienced in the Colonial Bay region in which they worked, and the ways in which a history of racialisation impacted on the identity positions available and taken by students. Thus, part of their work was helping students negotiate the competing identity positions offered and contested among their fellow classmates. They recognised that the identity positions Indigenous students took up in their classes would be influenced by how they were positioned and how they positioned themselves beyond their classrooms. They understood that many Indigenous students, particularly the boys, had already taken up oppositional or resistant identities and it would be counterproductive to try and turn them into "good students" or "sucks". Instead they worked with the resistance to help position these students as knowers and learners, problem posers and solvers, smart rather than good. Indeed they were able to provide opportunities for critical examination of aspects of Australian society through their incorporation of the students' "radical" identities.

The research showed that the practices of these two remarkable teachers were multi-dimensional, nuanced, situated and informed by an understanding of the complex dynamic interactions between race, history, school structures, peer relationships and Indigenous aspirations. While both Mr Morgan and Ms Parkinson recognised that the work of individual teachers alone could not overcome the many social and structural factors that limited the educational opportunities of Indigenous youth, they were determined to make a difference within their own classrooms at least. Indigenous students achieved consistently higher grades in Ms Parkinson's and Mr Morgan's classes than they did in their other classes and they achieved higher grades than Indigenous students in the same subjects in other classes. However, it appears they were able to achieve these results in the context where diverse Indigenous identities were also supported. Thus, through their practices, Ms Parkinson and Mr Morgan intentionally challenged the reproductive tendencies of schooling and created spaces where Indigenous youth could challenge "commonsense" about themselves (Weis & Fine, 2001), where they could be "smart" Indigenous knowers and learners.

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