

Reaching out to indigenous students

A South Australian study throws light on factors that enhance Indigenous students' success and encourage secondary school completion



Dr Kiara Rahman and students from Kaurna Plains School

It will come as no surprise that students from Indigenous backgrounds lag across most educational metrics and are shockingly over-represented in the numbers of students dropping out of secondary schooling.

Much curlier is the question of how to keep students that identify as Aboriginal engaged and in school.

A recent study by Dr Kiara Rahman from the University of South Australia has looked at the factors contributing to Indigenous students staying on to complete their South Australian Certificate of Education.

Based on the study, the main factors that enhance Indigenous student retention and attendance in school are;

- Demonstration of a positive cultural identity
- Family support
- The undertaking of Aboriginal Studies as a subject or as integrated units of work in school subjects
- Culturally responsive relationships between teachers and students
- Culturally supportive school environments and
- Indigenous educational support programs such as school scholarships, school-based homework centres and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Program (ITAS).

As an Aboriginal woman, Dr Rahmann sees much of her own success – she is the first

Indigenous PhD graduate from the David Unaipon College of Education and Research – as being due to family support, both her father and her sister are teachers.

Her findings indicate that those who have parents who value education attend school regularly, overcome hurdles in their education and go on to complete Year 12.

Parents were shown to support the interviewed students through the application of high expectations, motivating them to be at school, helping to maintain positive schooling attitudes, providing them with a comfortable and resourceful home environment and just being there when things get tough. This was shown to have a critical impact on the desire of these students to complete Year 12, their attitudes towards school and carrying out their schooling responsibilities and their levels of school attendance.

Data from her research indicate that for students who had supportive parents, 71 per cent wanted to complete Year 12 and 96.5 per cent regularly attended school.

All too often Aboriginal kids face problems with isolation; “Many of the kids I interviewed for the study had moved away from their home community to attend school. Some were experiencing extreme feelings of homesickness and social and cultural isolation and were clearly in need of further support,” Dr Rahman says.

It was apparent that some of the students interviewed did not have the most tranquil of home lives, but were remarkably resilient in their education, and resourceful when it came to studying at home under difficult circumstances.

“Home life often involves a lot of people coming and going, other kids, pets and just living as part of an extended family. But I found that given the right motivation students will create their own opportunities to study. For example, one student interviewed said that she found a way to escape the chaos of her home to complete her homework each night, by finding a quiet corner within her home and putting on some headphones with music, so she could concentrate.

Creating a school environment where Indigenous students feel comfortable and confident about themselves is an important part of the solution to keeping these kids in school.

Easily said, but how exactly?

Rahman says that a good first step is to adjust the curriculum so it is “culturally responsive”; learning is based on the student’s world view, is familiar to them and approving of their background. Students who learn as part of a culturally responsive school environment are exposed to culturally supportive and compatible teaching methods, instructions and materials, which build on the knowledge, skills and strengths students bring to school.

She writes, “this type of schooling has personal relevance to students who are not part of the dominant culture, this is because there is a direct connection between school learning, the home culture and the school... the aim of culturally responsive schooling is not to convince students that Western cultural knowledge is superior to Indigenous knowledge systems... but to enable students to become fluent in a multitude of ways of knowing and being.”

It makes sense, if there is a cultural mismatch between Indigenous students’ home life and school, it can challenge their ability to understand their class work, expectations and standards.

By including cultural concepts, knowledge and perspectives in their teaching, teachers can create what’s come to be known as a “culture of care”; teachers must connect with the local community, supporting local events and seeking advice from elders and involving the community in contributing material for the curriculum.

You could be excused for thinking that this

sounds a bit touchy feely, but the results are there. The simple inclusion of an Aboriginal studies subject correlates with a marked improvement in Indigenous students' engagement, and general happiness.

Establishing a positive identity for these students goes a long way towards improving their potential for educational achievement. Interviewees from Dr Rahman's research demonstrate the importance of a positive cultural identity for school achievement, according to Jimmy (pseudonym); "I feel good about myself, I can be confident at school because I know who I am, being Aboriginal is an important part of who I am."

The truth of this is reflected in students' attitudes in Aboriginal schools where markedly higher levels of academic success are achieved. In the Aboriginal schools surveyed 83 per cent of students indicated they wanted to complete Year 12 and 93 per cent said they valued their education.

Further, 100 per cent of the students who attended Aboriginal schools attended school regularly as did the 93 per cent of students that were taught by an Aboriginal teacher, whose involvement in education appears to be invaluable.

In the interviews, the question of Aboriginal teachers brought comments like, "having Aboriginal teachers around makes it feel more

Establishing a positive identity for these students goes a long way

like home" "[they] give you someone to look up to, in the sense of being a positive role model."

The practicalities of finding a good Aboriginal teacher, let alone good non-Aboriginal teachers, are reflected in Rahman's data, which indicate only 27 per cent of those interviewed had access to one. The vast majority of Aboriginal students attend mainstream schools.

Many students who considered themselves to be successful often mentioned that teacher support was very important. They described teachers using good teaching strategies, providing personal time to help students and "going that extra mile" as being a big part of their success.

As one of the students interviewed said, "Like, I'm not embarrassed to say 'can you help me?' but sometimes I'm not in the mood so I don't ask and they kind of know that there's something wrong and they come to help me anyway."

The involvement of Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) tutoring had a significant impact on retention and learning outcomes. Student that had had ITAS tutoring demonstrated higher levels of academic

competency, subject attainment and motivation to complete school and attend class.

Students who received a school scholarship also performed well; 87 per cent indicated that they wanted to complete Year 12. Similarly students who had accessed Abstudy through Centrelink showed that easing the load on parents had a positive effect on their children's education.

Dr Rahman's findings support studies on other Indigenous peoples around the world. The best way to keep the kids in school is to acknowledge and support their cultures and in some way include it in the curriculum.

"Obviously teachers play a big part in keeping Aboriginal kids engaged in school, which the study strongly emphasises".

As a positive step towards improving Indigenous educational outcomes and improving cultural awareness in education, the South Australian government has introduced a State Strategic Plan Target 4.5 which will see Aboriginal cultures taught in all South Australian schools by 2014, with the involvement of Aboriginal people in the design and delivery.

Dr Kiara Rahman's doctoral thesis can be downloaded through the University of South Australia's Research Archive: <http://arrow.unisa.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/unisa:45695>



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