

## CHAPTER SIX

### EXPECTED STAYERS

#### Introduction

This chapter introduces the four expected stayers. The high potential and motivation to succeed of these students had been recognised before they left primary school. In junior secondary school they stood out from the majority of their Aboriginal peers because of this. Their parents and their teachers had long expected that they would complete Year 12. At the time of the study Helen and Marcia were in Year 12 undertaking SACE Stage 2 subjects that would enable them to proceed to university. Lisa and Lucy were in Year 11, coping very well with their SACE Stage 1 studies and both had plans to complete Year 12 and go on to further study.

#### HELEN

Helen is a Year 12 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 400 and 600 students in the school and 10-20 per cent are Aboriginal. Helen is the younger of two girls. Her older sister was more 'arty' than Helen but she completed Year 12 and went on to do a traineeship after she left school. Helen's father was unable to attend secondary school because it would have meant leaving home, but he has worked in a variety of semi-skilled and skilled labouring capacities for his current employer, a federal government body, for many years. Helen's mother completed Year 10 at school. She was an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) in primary schools for many years, but spent a year at Helen's current school as well. In more recent times she took time off to work with a federal government department, and now has a position with the local office of an Aboriginal organisation sponsored by the federal government.

The local community in which Helen's family live has a reputation for being extremely racist. The mother of another student who lives in the same community comments on how life for Aboriginal people is more difficult now, especially in this community, compared with how it was for her when she grew up in a smaller community.

Life in general was a lot easier. You could walk down the street... We didn't have the discrimination and all that stuff. Now you can't walk down the street without someone looking at you because of the colour of your skin or the clothes you are wearing.

However, there is some anecdotal evidence that a few things might be gradually changing. The teacher who took Helen for a hospitality course the previous year has lived in this community for several years. She comments on how she felt when she approached proprietors about work placements for students undertaking this course.

When we went and visited all these hospitality places some of them would ask the name of the student, as they were trying to find out if they were Aboriginal. They wouldn't come out front and say they didn't want any Aboriginal students, but it was pretty obvious. So I asked them, 'How would your customers feel about being served by an Aboriginal person?' It's amazing what answers were given. Only two places said they didn't think their customers would like that.... The others were fine. That's a really big change for this town.

## **Helen's retention**

When Helen first came to high school she was one of between 20 and 30 Aboriginal students in her year level. However, Helen was close friends with only four of these. Of this small group of five students only one student has dropped out of school. Helen and her best friend are undertaking Stage 2 of the SACE, another is doing a mixture of Stage 1 and Stage 2 subjects and one transferred interstate.

Helen explains her reasons for staying at school as follows:

I guess a lot had to do with my parents. They wanted me to go right through. And because I wanted to go on to further studies as well, so I needed to finish school.

But her mother doesn't feel that she or her husband have had to push her to stay.

No, it's been good. The other one was a bit iffy a few times, so I said, 'If you're not happy go out and see what you can do, but you can't hang around home. You'll have to work.' It was hard. But Helen, she wants to succeed and go on.

Helen's mother also mentions the influence of Helen's father.

He didn't get the chance to go to high school. It's good. He's supported both the girls really. He sees the relevance of school because he hasn't got much in the way of skills so he is stuck in [the one job]. That's been his life.

Staff at the school agree that the supportive home environment has been a significant influence in Helen staying at school. Helen's AITAS tutor comments:

They've been very strong on their daughters and school.... There's always been that expectation in the family that the children will stay at school and go through to Year 12. [Helen] wrote an essay last year...reflecting on influences in her life.... In that essay she talked about the background influences, support from home, and things like that.

Helen's former Aboriginal Studies teacher adds:

I think in her case it's a combination of strong parental expectation, but she also wants to get somewhere. I don't believe it's anything to do with the school, let's put it that way. By parental expectation I mean it's just the way they have been brought up thinking. Because she has done well academically I think there has been this expectation that she would go on.

Like most students Helen has sometimes had her doubts about staying, but they have never lasted long. According to her best friend she has stayed at school:

Only because she wants to be something. I think that's why she's doing it. She sometimes complains that she hates school, but she does her work so you know she doesn't really hate it.

Helen has also looked around at most of her peers and decided that the life they have chosen is not for her.

All the people that started with me in Year 8, you see them just on the dole, or getting pregnant. It's not the sort of thing that would make me want to leave school, the way they have their lives.

## **Helen's attainment**

At the time when Helen arrived at high school, very few teachers at her school expected Aboriginal students to succeed. They were surprised by the small group of which Helen was part.

[E]very now and again you get a significant group of students...that seems to have a better work ethic. The group that Helen came through with were basically a group of five...who all had a strong sense of doing their work and being positive about school. That helped in two ways. Number one, it

meant that they weren't isolated as the only Aboriginal student in one class trying to battle on their own; they sort of had some peer support for doing work against teacher expectations and comments about being 'white' for doing it.... It raised teacher expectations as well, I think (AITAS tutor).

Helen had been academically successful at primary school, being dux of the school as well as Aboriginal Student of the Year in her final year. She came to secondary school with both personal and family expectations that she would successfully complete her secondary schooling and most likely undertake tertiary study. She continued achieving at a high level throughout her junior secondary years and was recognised as a hard worker. In Maths Helen's reports commented on her completing "extension" work and successfully "solving more advanced and complicated problems" than required for each level. Her English reports stated that she was confident enough of her ability to understand what she was reading, and her ability to communicate her ideas in writing and orally, that she was prepared "to take risks with her work". In other subjects she proved that she was "well organised", able to "use class time efficiently", "capable of independent work and research" and "strived for success".

As her mother says:

Helen, she wants to succeed and go on. She's had support from home and that's sort of encouraged her, and she's done well at school because of that support. I think kids that struggle and don't get any support, they sort of drop out and fall by the way side.

Helen's former Aboriginal Studies teacher feels that the support has been more than just encouragement at home.

We knew mum well, and that mum would fight the battles for her that needed fighting, particularly with various teachers. Like, mum would come in and talk to teachers that seemed not to be helping Helen, even if that meant having an argument or that kind of thing.

There has also been support to do homework, as Helen's mother comments about her husband's involvement:

He's always encouraged them to do their homework, talked to them about school. He's sat with them and helped them with their homework, and things like that. We've both done that.

Helen has found secondary school much different from primary school. In primary

school she felt as if she was personally supported by all her teachers. At high school she has found that support from teachers varies.

A lot of encouragement and support during primary school, but once you come to high school the teachers don't seem to have so much to do with Aboriginal students. The way they teach the class, it's sort of different.

Some teachers, like her AITAS (Aboriginal and Islander Tutorial Assistance Scheme) tutor, are very supportive: "She's really helped a lot, and one of my English teachers". Helen's mother explains the differences between the unsupportive and supportive teachers.

[Helen] just sits in her classes and does all her work. In high school the teacher just goes in and takes the lesson, that's it. You don't get to talk to them after, or anything. [This one teacher] is different. She comes to us, and to our house. She goes out of her way to sit down with students and talk with them.

In addition to not supporting Aboriginal students, Helen feels that some of the teachers are covertly, if not overtly, racist. She believes that they display their racism by being insensitive to her feelings and having unrealistic behavioral expectations.

I can remember [one teacher] who always used to expect eye contact. I used to find that really difficult, especially with someone I didn't know that well. They'd always say, 'Look at me when I'm talking to you'.... I didn't really feel comfortable doing that.

This may have been due to ignorance rather than overt racism, but according to Helen's former Hospitality teacher the two often go together.

Some of the teachers are racist. It's partly lack of awareness and understanding. Everyone has their prejudices. It's a matter of becoming aware and opening your mind a bit. I guess some people feel threatened by that and won't reflect on that in case they find there is something wrong with themselves. A lot of people won't do that.

This perceived racism does influence Helen's attainment, as the following contrasting situations illustrate.

Probably because of her positive approach to her work many of Helen's teachers have been prepared to provide extra assistance when she has asked for it. Similarly, Helen has not had problems approaching most of them for assistance with her work. She is always keen to do this. The AEW has noticed this.

There's lots of teachers that have helped her. She gets a lot of help from the teachers, and she gets tutoring. If she's having problems she'll go and see the teacher. She asks for help when she needs it. A lot of others won't ask for help because others might think they are dumb. Helen's not like that.

However, there are a few teachers with whom she finds this difficult, usually because she perceives them as racist. Her mother believes that this affects Helen's work.

Last year in [one subject] she got top marks. This year she's not doing anywhere near as well. I sort of thought that it would go this way.... I suspect a bit of racism there.... [T]he teacher said at the beginning of the year, 'I've never had an Aboriginal student in my PES class'. So we thought, 'Oh, yeah!' It's not just the marks, it's some of the comments on her work.

That really put Helen off and she is not attending the extra tutorial classes this teacher is offering after school. Instead, she has opted for AITAS tutoring. Her tutor has looked at some of her work for this subject and comments:

When I looked through the comments they didn't really indicate why her mark was so low. That, linked with the teacher and her perceptions of [the teacher], has created a big problem in [that subject].

In the early years of high school, Helen mixed mostly with the small group of Aboriginal students who were also interested in working and achieving at school, and with non-Aboriginal students as well. Her former Aboriginal Studies teacher noticed this.

As a younger secondary student...she kept to herself a little bit. She was mixing with the other Aboriginal kids, but my recollection was that she had a lot of interaction with non-Aboriginal students in the school, and seemed to be coping very well with her work.

Not only did Helen distance herself from negative influences, but, according to her former Hospitality teacher, many of the other Aboriginal students have distanced themselves from her.

It is sometimes hard for Helen because some Aboriginal students distance themselves from her because she is so successful, and she is aiming to achieve high. She wants to go to university. Some students have found that hard to cope with.

Helen has always worked hard and strived for success, usually aiming for a high level

of achievement in all areas. All her reports indicate this. However, at secondary school she has usually chosen at least one subject each year that she could pass without putting in very much effort, allowing her to relax more and enjoy the company of her peers while she worked. She has been able to do this because she has little difficulty understanding even the most complex of assessment requirements and because she is prepared to negotiate individual deadlines with the teachers concerned. This was very noticeable during SACE Stage 1 Hospitality which had double accreditation as an Australian Vocational Certificate course. Her teacher comments:

When I asked her why she wasn't aiming for high achievement in the subject she said that it was true that she had chosen this subject to cruise in. But she said, 'I know I can pass this'. She was very good at asking questions so once she was motivated she would finish her work on time. But if she was feeling stressed in other lessons she wouldn't worry about this subject. She knew that she could negotiate that with me.... I think she didn't hand in one of her earlier assignments.... Helen wasn't concerned because she understands the concepts. She picks them up the first time they are presented. When I went through the assessment she understood that easily. She knew that she could meet the objectives more than once.

There were times when she wanted to knuckle down so she could work by herself. At other times she would work more socially in a group. She also used the homework centre. Last year I used to drop in there quite a lot and she used to run up here and get me whenever she needed help. Some of the assessment was negotiated to be oral and she did this in the homework centre after school.

In her earlier years of schooling Helen did not find school work at all difficult.

In primary school and right up to SACE I've breezed right through. The work load in SACE is hard. There's too much of it. It's not that it's hard, there's just so much.

But she has not always made things easy for herself. According to her AITAS tutor, referring to the previous year, Helen always looked for challenges in her work.

That's one of the things about Helen. She always chose the mentally challenging or philosophical essays. She was expanding her mind at the same time. She didn't choose the very straight forward and mundane essay that you just regurgitated. She looked for challenge, philosophy and debate in her topics. She extended herself like that.

She also undertook an extension Maths program in addition to her normal classes in Year 10, and at the end of Year 10 attended the ASSETS Summer School for Aboriginal students with above average ability and potential.

Helen has developed a great deal of self confidence and independence over recent years. Her teachers describe her as being self reliant and determined. For example, Helen has been so determined to do particular subjects at school that she has put up with difficult circumstances. Last year, when she was the only student doing a particular subject, she had to sit in with the Year 12 students doing a similar subject, and this year she has chosen to do one Stage 2 subject by Open Access (correspondence) as there were not enough students wanting to do this subject for it to be offered by the school. All Helen's subjects are Publically Examined Subjects (PES) to give her the best chance to get into journalism at university. Although her parents are concerned about her going to the city to attend university as they have no close relatives there, she is determined that she will do this even though she is feeling "a bit scared because I've never been away from my parents, to live, before." Helen's mother is also concerned about her leaving home to study.

I don't want her to go to an Aboriginal hostel. There they can come and go as they like, and I think they could fall by the wayside with the peer pressure and all that.... But she is determined she is going anyway. I thought maybe she could stay here and do a traineeship in something else, or go back and do Year 12 again as she's only sixteen.

## **Helen's Aboriginal identity**

At home the family often discuss Aboriginal issues, from both a personal and a broader perspective, and her parents share something of their cultural heritage with her. Helen's mother was taken from her parents as a young child and placed with non-Aboriginal foster parents who did everything they could to make her lose her Aboriginal identity.

They looked at it wrongly, I think, and said 'You're with us now and this is how we live. You don't want to mix with those people because you'll end up becoming a drunkard'. Those sorts of things. But I always knew I was Aboriginal and I never got that out of my mind. I was determined they weren't going to turn me away from it so when I went to school I mixed with all the Aboriginal students. They didn't like it...but I stood my ground.

Helen's uncle, her mother's brother, was also fostered out but he ran away. Later in life Helen's mother found all her relatives through him and through other Aboriginal people in the town where she now lives.

People have come and said that so and so is here and he's your parent or sister or something.

Therefore, she was able to help Helen's older sister do a family tree as part of her Year 12 studies at school. On the other hand, although Helen's father was brought up as 'white' because his parents lived on a station, he has maintained strong links with his parents and his brothers and sisters, and he speaks his language fluently. According to Helen's mother:

When he was little he hung around his grandmother a lot. Whenever he saw her, before she died, they always spoke language.

Helen spends a lot of time with her father's parents as they usually go on holidays with Helen's immediate family. She also has a lot of relatives in the town, and even at school.

I think of most of my cousins like brothers and sisters. There's quite a few at school here.

This is important for her because, in her earlier years at secondary school, it meant that she usually had other Aboriginal students she felt close to in her classes.

Yes, especially with only two in a class you seem a lot closer; you feel more comfortable.

Helen gets on well with most people at school, students and teachers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. She is vice president of the whole-school Student Representative Council and chairperson of the Aboriginal student body. Helen's AITAS tutor, who was previously an AERT at the school, believes that in all of her school pursuits Helen has:

maintained her identity very strongly, at a personal and a school level...even standing for the whole school SRC and being elected to that...and at the presentation ceremony stating to the whole school that she thought it was important that there was more Aboriginal involvement in the SRC.... [S]he has the strength of her convictions to speak up. If she thinks something needs saying, she'll say it. She isn't worried about the public arena.

Helen may have been aware of racism at primary school, but has been much more conscious of its presence, "Just since high school, I think."

Usually I just don't let it get to me. If you let it get to you, you would walk around angry all the time and you wouldn't get anywhere. Like before, when I just started high school, any little thing, I'd jump on it. Then I started thinking, 'Why should I fight all my life?'.... It's making me stronger; making me want to succeed in what I'm doing.

Initially Helen wanted to be a lawyer to help eliminate racism, but after work experience with the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement she changed her mind. She now has aspirations to be a journalist. Helen has discussed this with her AITAS tutor who believes that Helen changed her mind because she wants to be an activist.

It was more that awareness during Years 10 and 11 that jelled with her, that even if you are a lawyer you really can't change much. You're just fighting, picking up the pieces all the time, reinterpreting the regulations, and maybe even getting bogged down. Whereas, if you write in a more public way you can have more impact. She saw articles written, and this helped persuade her of this.

Helen has also discussed her reasons for wanting to be a journalist with her best friend.

Well, she's always said she wants to be a journalist because not many journalists are talking about Aboriginal issues from the Aboriginal perspective, not from the heart. She wants to tell the truth from the point of view of an Aboriginal person.

Helen strongly believes that education is the way to change things, at the individual level and with the masses.

Especially when we were doing Land Rights and Mabo [in Australian Studies], some of the things the kids said really get you down. From there I got to thinking that to get to the racism, the things people say, you've got to educate them more. The way I was seeing it was to use the press and the media to really get to people.

Helen's AITAS tutor has recognised that she has already started to do this.

[She is] almost political in her writing.... I remember last year almost every English essay would be a little lesson for the English teacher because she would include the Aboriginal perspective of whatever they were doing.

Helen quite consciously tries to include an Aboriginal perspective in her work because she is concerned that none of the school texts do this. This was recognised by her Australian Studies teacher who commented Helen's report:

[Helen] has 'found her voice' this term. She has been able to discuss issues, particularly Anzac Day and racism, from an Aboriginal perspective. She has committed herself to strong opinions. but, more importantly, she has used the various texts to support her opinions.

Also, this year, when subject to overt racism from a non-Aboriginal student because she was eligible for AITAS tutoring, Helen requested that an educational approach be used to resolve the issue. Her mother reports:

Helen didn't want an apology because she didn't think the girl would mean it. She wanted someone to sit down with the girl and tell her why Aboriginal students have the opportunity to have tutors.... So they had that culture lesson, including a video, and apparently [the other girl's] dad wanted some more. Then they had a class photo taken and Helen and this other girl were sitting next to each other.

According to Helen, a few individual teachers have been influential in helping her find appropriate ways to deal with racism at school. One in particular:

made me want to stand up and fight again, not let things get to me. If something's wrong, then do something about it.

Helen has taken this to heart and sets a good example for other Aboriginal students. Her mother reports that in her role as chairperson of the Aboriginal student body Helen has helped other students to do the same, but that now most do it for themselves.

[L]ike last year, there were a couple of problems so the students went to her, and she took them to the principal and got it sorted out. After that lots more did the same, but on their own.

This has been encouraged by her mother who feels that you "need to be really strong to stand up to racism", particularly in the senior school. Helen's former Aboriginal Studies teacher comments that staff in the school did not really recognise Helen's leadership role in the school until she acted as spokesperson for a group of Aboriginal students after a rather unpleasant incident.

Helen helped verbalise their concerns and since then has been seen as a leader. Maybe she was before, but we never really noticed it. She goes to ASSPA meetings and you can rely on her to speak up and say those things that need saying.

Although Helen does not specifically say anything about being proud to be Aboriginal, her pride is obvious from the way she behaves. Her former hospitality teacher describes some of the ways Helen demonstrates her pride in her Aboriginality:

I know she has non-Aboriginal friends but she chooses to sit and work with other Aboriginal students. She works in the homework centre and she has stickers of Aboriginal symbols on her books and her bag. When she talks about Aboriginal people she talks as if she is one of them. She has spoken to me about racism and her anger about how non-Aboriginal people treat Aboriginal people differently, and the generalisations they make. She has discussed her own Aboriginal cultural background and we have discussed the different backgrounds of different Aboriginal students. She has been involved in the school magazine and she took on the role of putting together the stuff for NAIDOC week. She's also been an active member in the cultural celebrations, both NAIDOC week and the Cultural Week we have. She has actively participated as a representative on the Aboriginal Student Council. There's just so much, but it's hard to define.

Helen and another student also represented the school at the *Walking Together* conference in Sydney.

Helen is aware that a lot of Aboriginal students are unwilling to stand out from the crowd because they do not want to be 'shamed', but this does not really bother her. On the other hand, she understands what her friends mean by it and sometimes uses the term when talking with them. Her best friend has noticed that:

She goes along with it sometimes. Like, we use that word 'shame job' every day. She doesn't react to it. She just goes along with it.

The AEW puts those comments in perspective.

She's proud to be Aboriginal. For example, if we're having something for NAIDOC or Culture Week she'll get up in front of the school and do the speaking. She's not shamed or anything like that. To me, when she does that she's showing that she's proud to be Aboriginal.

Helen has support for her outspoken but sensitive approach to demonstrating her pride in her Aboriginal identity. The following example, related by Helen's former Aboriginal Studies teacher, describes how Helen values some of her Aboriginal heritage.

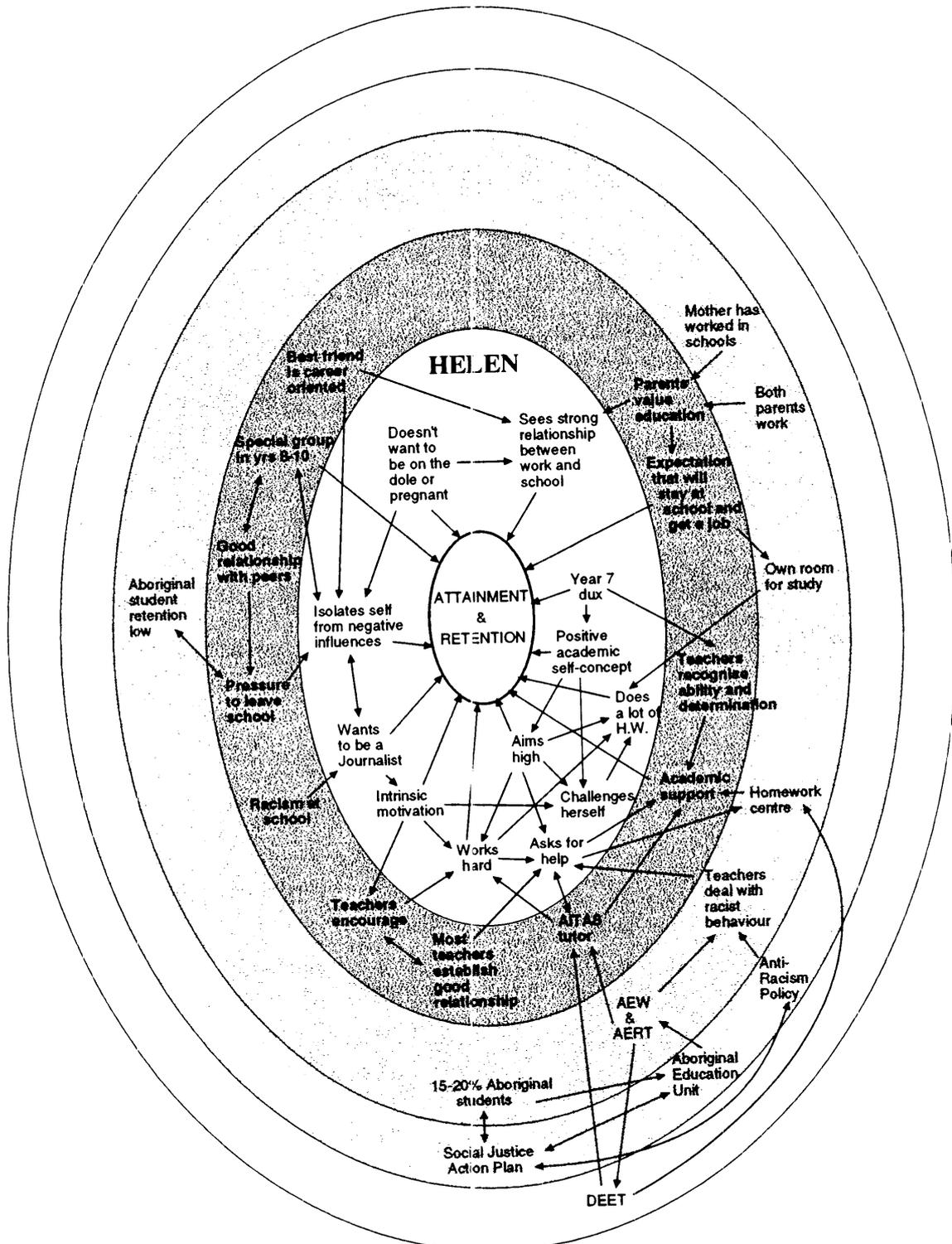
It was interesting last year in Aboriginal Studies. We had two mature age men in the class, and one time they were talking about bush foods. Helen was in a group of six Aboriginal girls. Helen and two others said how they liked eating witchetty grubs, goanna and kangaroo. The other three expressed their distaste of such things saying they wouldn't touch them. It shows the difference in the ways they have been brought up and the different tastes. She might appear to be a very well groomed young lady, but she can participate in bush life as well. In that sense she will fit in wherever she goes.

## **Helen - summary**

Although Helen has had a lot of support from home and school, she has still had to overcome difficulties in her efforts to stay at school and succeed academically. Most of these difficulties have been associated with her Aboriginality. She has learnt positive ways of dealing with racism, to the extent that she has been able to help others to do the same. In fact, Helen is seen as a role model for other Aboriginal students in the school. There have also been some significant changes in attitudes since she came to the school. Teachers and non-Aboriginal students are beginning to lose their perception that Aboriginal students cannot succeed. Her former Hospitality teacher comments:

[O]ver the years now she has been such a positive role model for them, so that in this school now part of being Aboriginal is to achieve. I know that some Aboriginal students who cannot be easily identified as being Aboriginal have taken on some really negative traits of behaviour to be accepted by other Aboriginal students. But I've noticed lately that that's beginning to change. That's been a change in the past three years. You need role models like Helen.

Helen has set her sights on being politically active in Aboriginal affairs as a journalist. Her Year 12 subjects were chosen with this in mind. Until Year 12 Helen did not have difficulty with any of her school work. However, she is persisting and making good use of the personnel and physical resources available to her. Figures 6.1 and 6.2 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors associated with her retention, attainment and identity.



**Figure 6.1** A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between various factors that have contributed to Helen staying at school and achieving academic success.



# MARCIA

Marcia is a Year 12 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 400 and 600 students in her school, of whom between 10-20 per cent are Aboriginal. Marcia has lived in this town all her life, and went to her local primary school before she came to secondary school. Marcia is the eldest of three girls. Her next sister is in Year 11 and plans to complete Year 12 and then go on to study at university to be a nurse. Marcia's mother stayed at home until the youngest started school, then she went to TAFE and did a certificate course before obtaining her current position as an aged-care worker. Marcia's father is a cook. Both work for the same local Aboriginal organisation.

In the past, Marcia has played a lot of sport and was very good at it, being selected in primary school teams to play in competitions away from home. She played in mixed soccer and football teams until the age of 14. In addition to playing hockey and softball in all girls teams. More recently she has given up sport because of study commitments and injury. However, she is still very much an outdoor kind of person. She did not enjoy either of her work experience placements, partly because they were both indoors.

The community in which Marcia lives is renowned for its racism. The racism in the community is reflected in the school. The acting Deputy Principal at Marcia's school talks about how the school addresses this issue.

Racism features. There's no denying that.... But we have strong anti-harassment procedures within the school to step on it. In the pastoral care program we look at that. All of that is really thoroughly discussed within the humanities subjects - the destructive nature of racism and harassment. But it still exists.... Often it's an ingrained response from the area that they're in.... They do it without thinking.

## **Marcia's retention**

Marcia decided some time ago that she wanted to be a police officer and has support from her parents and her extended family to pursue this career.

Well, some of my relations, my aunties, are real proud of me.

However, she is unsure whether to apply for that straight away or to go to university first. She is also aware that she will need to improve her typing skills, probably by

going to TAFE. A lot will depend on how well she goes at the end of this year.

I need to improve my typing skills. I need to have 30 words per minute to get into the Police Force. I did Typing in Years 8 and 9, but my skills are not very good. I might have to go to TAFE after I leave school to improve my skills. If I don't get into the Police Force I want to go to university.

Marcia realises that joining the Police Force will mean leaving home and moving around, but she is quite looking forward to the experience.

It's good in a way, a chance to grow up. You'd miss your parents and your home life, but you'd learn to grow up and be independent.

Marcia acknowledges that both her parents have encouraged her to stay at school.

My mother. She has encouraged me to stay at school. And dad too.

Her mother agrees:

I have a talk with them. In my days it was harder for us because there was nothing really available for Aboriginal students. These days I feel that Aboriginal students have got support out there to keep them going.

I always told the girls that when they get into the workforce they should try to get that certificate.... Once you get a certificate, if there's no jobs around here you can always travel and get a job.

However, Marcia feels that most of time she has 'pushed' herself.

But I've just pushed myself.... Just me wanting a career.... Probably just encouraged myself. Having confidence, and that. Believing that I can get where I want to go.

She feels that this confidence has come from "doing well at school". Despite this, Marcia still has mixed feelings about school.

Sometimes it's alright, if there's not too much work. But I get a bit depressed when there's a lot of school work to do. Sometimes I don't feel like coming to school.

But, according to her mother:

She was saying there's nothing to do if you leave school, anyway.

Throughout her secondary schooling Marcia has valued the support of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal friends to stay at school, especially when she felt she was being pressured to leave by many of her disenchanted Aboriginal peers who had already left school.

A lot of people that have left school say that it's not worth going to school. People have told me to drop out of school. I tell them that I'm going to get a job and they won't.

She has found that focusing on a career has been useful because it has given her something to work towards. Talking about this with her friends has also helped.

Probably about Year 10...everyone got career plans, I suppose. Don't want to be left out. Want to get a good job.

This was recognised by her English teacher.

It's not surprising to see her in Year 12 because she was desiring that. She talked about teaching at one stage. She wanted to go to university. She had her mind set on that a long time ago. That was her goal, and in a sense she has worked towards it...[with] tenacity.

## **Marcia's attainment**

When Marcia came to secondary school she stood out from most of her Aboriginal peers because it was obvious to her teachers that she was highly motivated and wanted to succeed at school. Her English teacher reflects:

I've known Marcia for five years, including this year.... Marcia, from the very first time I knew her, was very focused on success.... She was very much saying, 'I'm here to study and I'm here to learn'.... She had that strong sense and desire to do well.

The same teacher recalls that in the first two years of high school Marcia successfully resisted the strong influences of her Aboriginal peers not to work.

I'm not aware of what influences outside of school were, but I know that there were strong influences among her peers for her to be less diligent than she was.

According to Marcia there were between 20 and 30 Aboriginal students in Year 8 with her. Among that group were Marcia and four other Aboriginal students who wanted to succeed at school. Of the five of them, only one has left school. The rest of the Aboriginal students left school almost as soon as they could, in Years 9 or 10. Marcia explains the difference between herself and those who left.

Some thought they was dumb and weren't going to make it. Some thought it was too hard - the school work. They weren't getting much help. Perhaps because they were too shy to ask.... Or they run amuck and get told off, and then they take off. They didn't take their work seriously. I have, all along.

Marcia has found that work has become progressively harder as she has moved through high school.

From 8 to 10, or 8 to 9 actually, it was pretty easy. Year 10 was just the start of it [getting harder]. But now it's really hard.

However, she persisted in her efforts, asked for help, succeeded and even came to like subjects she had not liked before. For example, in Year 10 Marcia found Maths rather difficult and was put on an alternative program for a few weeks, so she worked harder and soon rejoined the rest of the class. Her Maths teacher wrote on her report:

In that time she proved to me she is capable of of success in the normal Maths program. I am pleased with Marcia's persistence.

Marcia feels it was worth the extra effort.

I couldn't do it, but now I can so it's O.K.

According to her mother:

[S]he's a bit like me when I was at school. If I didn't know how to do a Maths lesson, I didn't like that subject no more, but once I was shown how to do it I kind of loved it. When Marcia says to me she doesn't like something, I say to her, 'The only reason you don't like it is because you don't know how to do it. Ask the teacher to show you. When you pick it up you'll like it.' I do that all the time. I keep telling her to to ask if she doesn't know something. I tell her, 'You're there to learn. Don't just sit there and fail it. You go up to the teacher and ask.' I've kind of had to push her a bit to go and ask. I think she's doing that now.

Marcia prefers working with a group, but is also rather independent in her learning style.

If we can work in a group I'll do that. If I do need help I'll ask. I try and do it by myself first.

She works well with non-Aboriginal students in class, a necessity since there have been few other Aboriginal students in her classes over the last few years.

Teachers' comments on Marcia's reports throughout secondary school have been largely positive. Most of her teachers have commented on her positive attitude to her work, her motivation, her persistence, and her willingness to seek and follow advice. However, a few teachers have seen her in a more negative light. A few isolated report comments mention a reluctance to seek help and a failure to complete work. It is possible that poor relationships with her teachers temporarily impeded her progress in particular subjects. This can be inferred from the fact that the year before these particular courses Marcia was doing very well in that subject, and she chose to continue it the following year. For example, in Year 10 Drama her teacher wrote that Marcia was:

an influential member of our class. Her enthusiasm, energy and belief in our topic enabled her input to be invaluable.... [She] was a constant motivator and creator of ideas this term. She completed all areas of the course successfully.

In Year 11 for the same subject Marcia "did not satisfactorily complete her individual project or performance". Marcia, when asked about teachers she didn't get along with very well said:

There was a Drama and Dance teacher. He just bossed me around; thought he could do what ever he liked with me.

Her mother comments:

I believe that Aboriginal kids have got that 'shame job'. They don't really like speaking out in front of the class and that. For Drama they had to...hold hands with boys, and she's not that type. She doesn't really like doing that. She feels shame.

Similarly, in Year 10 Marcia's Art report comments were very positive: "Hardworking and positive...seeks advice where needed and puts it to work." But in Year 11 Marcia gave up going to Art lessons. Marcia's mother would have supported this. She said:

When they [Marcia and her sister in Year 11] was having problems in Drama and Art I always told them to concentrate on the main subjects that will get them somewhere: Maths, Science and English, and that.

Despite her enthusiasm for her work and her desire to succeed, this year Marcia has been unwilling to access the after school tutorials offered by some of her subject teachers. Instead, she has chosen to accept tutoring from a former AERT through the Aboriginal and Islander Tutorial Assistance Scheme (AITAS). This teacher believes that Marcia's reluctance to attend the tutorials has a lot to do with the fact that Marcia finds it difficult to work with people she has seen behave in racist ways in the past, even though there is no evidence of overt racism at present. This is particularly the case in one of her subjects.

There's problems in that class because of racism and racist behaviour by the teacher in the past. Not with Marcia...but with other students, but [she's] known about it...and [she hasn't] seen a change to indicate that [the teacher's] not like that any more.

Staff don't always recognise or acknowledge that they can be racist, but Marcia feels that some of them are.

Some of [the teachers] pick on you, but you don't know whether they pick on you because you're black or just because they want to pick on you. In Year 10 there was this teacher that picked on Aboriginal students. Sometimes we thought it was just because we were black, and it'd be right, but the principal would say it wasn't true. It was like we were telling lies.

Marcia doesn't usually say much about this at home but her mother believes that the problem is significant.

Now and then she does, but most times she kind of keeps it all to herself. It's only when I ask her about her studies. I find she gets hurt kind of quick. A few times there she had a few problems. She might be the only Aboriginal student in the class and when they are studying and Aboriginal issue the teacher will kind of isolate her and imply that she should know because she is Aboriginal.

Marcia's mother is concerned that racism from the teachers can be reflected in how teachers value the work Aboriginal students have done.

I find that with the two eldest ones, they come home, they study every night, they do homework every night after school. I've seen that. I know that they've copied what they had to do from the assessment form. They do all the work, and at home as well, and they are still lucky to get a 'C' or an 'RA', and you can look at that as a kind of failure. They take their work by the due date, but white girls in the class can take their work a couple of days late and don't get penalised for that whereas your girls do.

Marcia and her sister have their mother's support in challenging teachers in these circumstances.

I've been up to the school a few times to talk about that. I had a talk with the principal before and it seems like they always seem to be in the wrong. I know they are sometimes, but the teachers have got to listen to them, too. I've always encouraged my girls to try and discuss it first, but if they can't get anywhere I'll go in and talk to them myself. I've found that you just can't get through. They're right and that's it....They haven't bothered to find out the background.

Marcia's mother has had a lot of contact with the school and clearly understands the relationship between school and work. For the first two years of high school she came into the school to meet Marcia's teachers and collect Marcia's school reports rather than waiting to have them sent home. The school has always encouraged this but few Aboriginal parents have taken the opportunity to do so. Marcia was not particularly keen on doing homework when she was in junior secondary school, but she now appreciates the fact that her parents have always insisted she do it.

They nag all the time. They'll say, 'Have you got homework to do?' They tell me to make sure I finish it off. Sometimes I take it in a positive way, but sometimes I get sick of it. I suppose it's better than having nothing.

Because of this, and the fact that she now has career goals in mind, she now does her homework every night and doesn't go out very much. She usually does her homework in her own room.

I try to keep things neat and tidy so I know where everything is.

When she was younger her parents helped her with her homework, but now Marcia's mother feels unable to help much.

Yes, but I wouldn't be able to do it now. It's all changed. I feel like I'm dumb. They've got everything so different.

It was "probably about Year 10" that Marcia realised that she could succeed at more than just a "satisfactory" level, which is how she classifies her achievement at school up to that time. Then, towards the end of Year 10 Marcia became "angry" and "confused" about the SACE. Despite that she was prepared to:

Just give it a go. Find out what happens.

In her efforts to succeed Marcia has appreciated the support and encouragement she has had from most of her teachers.

Like, help you with the problems you've got with your work. Just help you with your school work, and that. Just be there sometimes.

Despite this Marcia feels that "following the steps" is the way to succeed at school and that teachers can't really do anything to make it any easier for you. Although Marcia does not elaborate on what she means by following the steps she talks about:

- being prepared to try new things
- trying to do the work yourself first
- asking teachers for help
- doing homework
- not giving up when things are difficult.

### **Marcia's Aboriginal identity**

Marcia has many Aboriginal relatives in the town and sees them quite a lot. According to her mother she often "goes over to her grandmother's at weekends". Marcia appreciates the fact that her grandmother is able to pass on some of the family's cultural heritage to her.

My grandmother used to tell us a lot about Aboriginal people - stories and that.... She still tells me stories when she gets time to.

Other than that "she doesn't go out much", according to her mother, but she has been on school camps and excursions, those especially for Aboriginal students and those for all students in her year level. She has also been to Alice Springs, where her father was born, and then on to Darwin to represent her school and community at an International Indigenous Youth Conference. She is proud to be Aboriginal and comments:

It's a great way to be. It makes you special. You feel special sometimes, because of your colour and you're Aboriginal.

Marcia identifies strongly with the other Aboriginal students at the school and mixes with them in the school yard. However, the group she sits with rarely uses the Aboriginal Education room at recess and lunch. A former AERT at the school comments:

[S]he was still with Aboriginal students in the yard. She would be in the general area but she didn't use the room.... In summer most of them just sit out in the shade in the yard. Marcia was part of the group that used those areas so she probably just preferred to be outdoors.

To Marcia it has been very important to have other Aboriginal friends at school. Although she gets on very well with most non-Aboriginal people and has some good friends among them at school, she finds that she can talk to Aboriginal friends in a different kind of way.

You can just feel it when you're talking to a white person. If you say 'shame job' they don't understand because there's no such thing for them. They don't believe in shame or anything like that. When you're talking to Aboriginal friends you can talk about that because they understand.

Marcia is well accepted by her non-Aboriginal peers and is not directly subject to many racist comments, but she and her friends are conscious of what occurs behind their backs. She finds that there is strength in the group.

Not in front of you, they won't say anything. We do hear a lot of things about it, but we don't worry about it. Sometimes you hear white kids when they talk to other friends. Also, 'Shut up you black tribe', and things like that. Just names, to tease us. All of us Aboriginal students, we just stick together. We feel stronger together.

Marcia's English teacher admits that racism is a problem with some students at the school, but feels that all Aboriginal students are aware of the procedures to follow if they are subject to racist remarks.

There are pockets of it.... We would have our head in the sand if we said it didn't. It is minimalised, and when it does occur it is dealt with in terms of ED policies and practices.

Marcia's mother has taught Marcia to be proud of her cultural heritage and, although Marcia is quiet most of the time and does not always react to racist comments, her mother is confident that she could stick up for herself if necessary.

I've always told the girls to stand up for themselves. If you believe you have done something right and people put you down, you just tell them.... I find she's quiet, kind of minds her own business and does her own thing. But I believe that if it did come to to the crunch she would stand up for herself.

She knows that Marcia gets upset about racist comments so she has encouraged Marcia to complain about such behaviour.

That's what my mother has always taught me. Don't let them put you down. Stand up for yourself and be proud of what you are.

So Marcia does sometimes complain instead of reacting violently as she would have done when she was younger.

I get pretty upset and angry about it. I don't do much. Sometimes I just let it go or I might go and complain about it. In primary school I would have punched them.

Marcia gets the same kind of encouragement from her non-Aboriginal friends.

Yeah, some non-Aboriginal students say that too. They tell you to complain about it. And if they're very close to you they get wild as well.

Marcia expresses her identity in a variety of ways. Whenever she can she chooses to take a slant to essays or research topics that includes an Aboriginal perspective. For example, for a Legal Studies essay she chose to write about Land Rights and the Mabo case. She also writes poetry and, according to her mother, expresses her feelings about her Aboriginality in these.

[S]he does some beautiful poems.... At the moment she's doing one that has something to do with Aboriginal identity. When she read it to me the other night it sounds like there's a bit of her in it. It's beautiful the way she does it.

Marcia's favourite subject at school is Aboriginal studies, a subject she has chosen to do for the last three years. She enjoys it because:

you find out more about yourself and more about different languages and cultures.... I knew a bit about it, but not as much...like what language I come from, but not how to talk it.

Marcia's mother reflects on her own knowledge, in comparison to Marcia's:

Even though [my mother's] Aboriginal I don't know much about culture and that. I understand our ways and where my family comes from, and that, but not about questions in history.

Even her choice of career is a reflection of Marcia's pride in her Aboriginality. Marcia decided to be a police officer because she wants to meet more Aboriginal people and help them understand that there should be no reason to fear the police.

Because I'd meet more Aboriginal people in there. Because, just to help our people up in the community. Just help them. Not to get them into trouble, but to tell them what it involves....Once you get their respect they'll get used to the police, and know that they're there just to help you.

### **Marcia - summary**

Although Marcia has had strong support and encouragement from her parents and a special group of Aboriginal friends at school, Marcia's main driving force to stay at school and succeed is her belief that it is important for her to make something of herself, both for herself and for others. She feels that as a Police Officer she will be a role model for other Aboriginal people.

Marcia's Aboriginal identity is very strong and at school she expresses aspects of it in her work whenever she can. Her favourite subject is Aboriginal Studies.

Marcia still gets upset about racism. This has affected her attainment in the few instances where she has perceived racism on the part of the teacher. Figures 6.3 and 6.4 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors associated with Marcia's retention, attainment and identity.

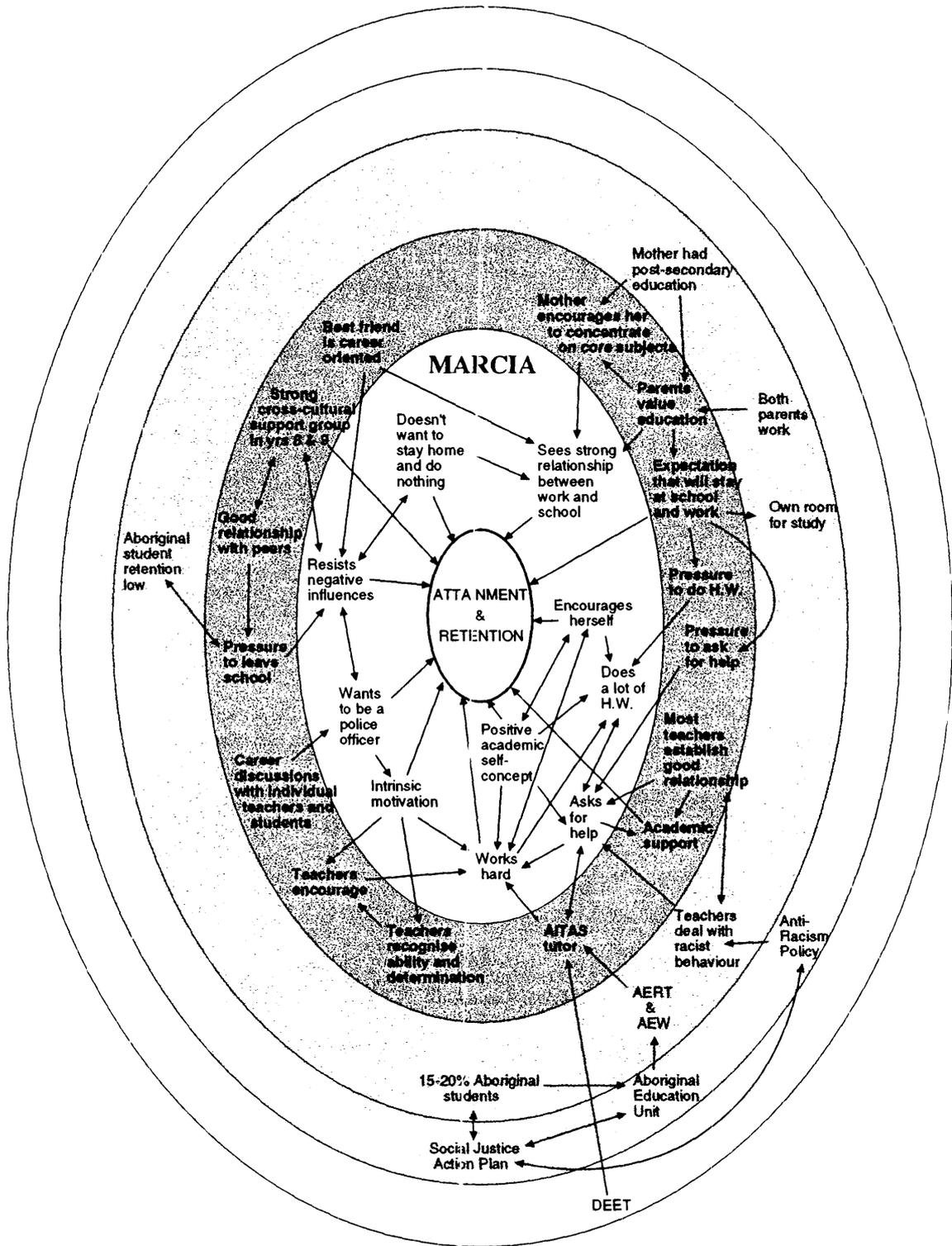
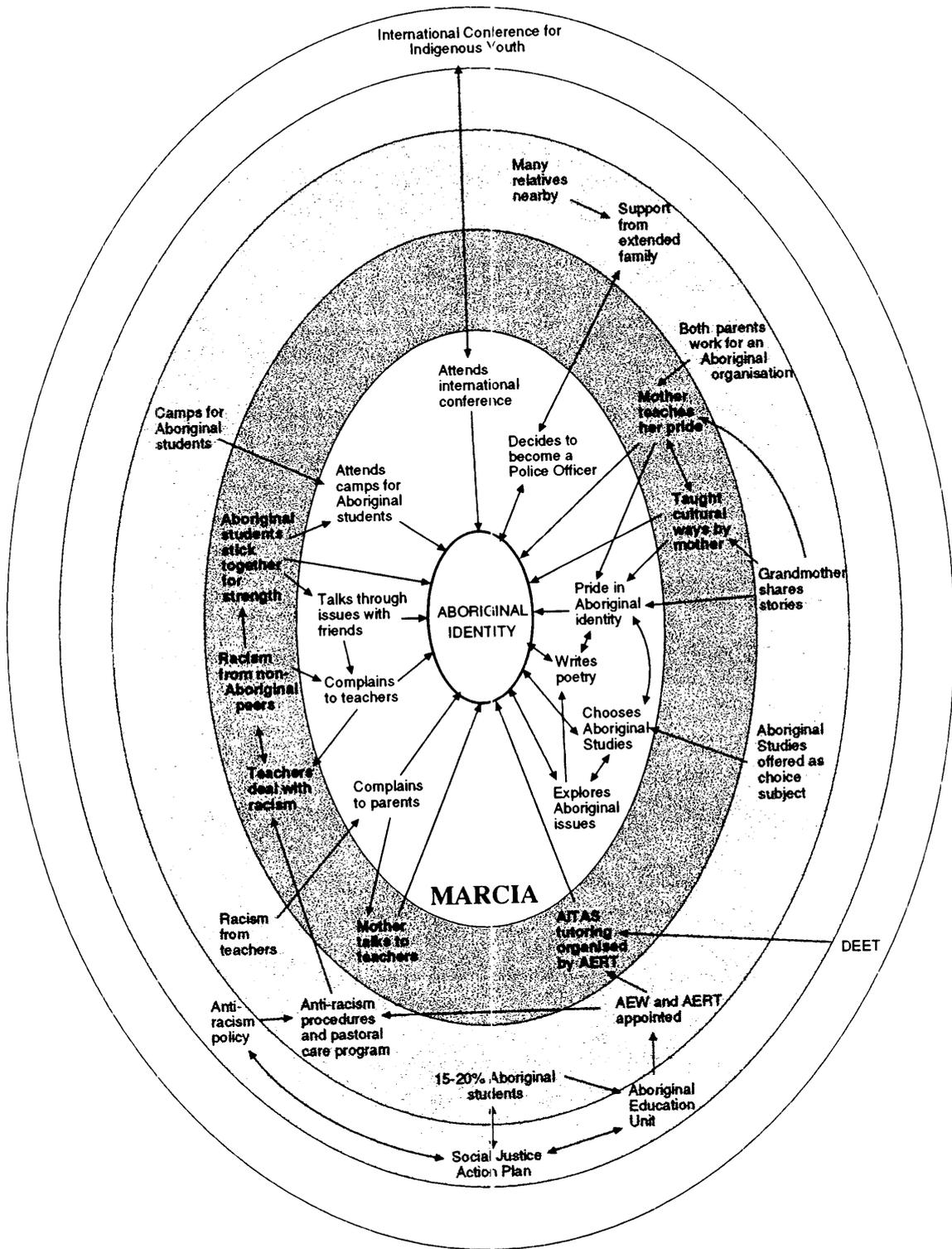


Figure 6.3 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between various factors that have contributed to Marcia staying at school and achieving academic success.



**Figure 6.4** A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between factors important in fostering Marcia's Aboriginal identity or arising from it.

## LISA

Lisa is a Year 11 student at an R-12 school in a rural centre. Approximately 30 per cent of the students in the school are Aboriginal and there are between 200 and 300 secondary students. Lisa has lived in this community all her life. Her mother grew up a short distance from the town and attended the old school. She now works as an AEW at the local church school. Lisa's father spent his early years in an Aboriginal community, then moved around before settling here. He works for an Aboriginal organisation as a handyman and drives the kindergarten bus. Lisa has an older brother who left school in Year 11. After completing a traineeship he now works in the hospitality industry and is continuing his studies at the local TAFE campus.

Lisa is one of four Aboriginal girls in Year 11. All four of them get on very well with each other, although Lisa has one special friend in the group. Lisa gets on well with non-Aboriginal students as well. Sport has been very helpful here. She says:

I mainly make friends with sport, like netball. People know me through netball and school. I have got this friend from Year 8 and I have made friends through her. She is non-Aboriginal but I get along with her all right.

Lisa's Business Maths teacher comments on Lisa's ability to get on with a whole range of students by giving an example.

Virtually every year students have at least one camp, a year level camp. She has always come on camp and mixed in with everyone else whereas in Year 8 and 9, when we had more Aboriginal students, most of the rest tended not to. She was always with [her best friend] but she always came.

Lisa's mother also comments on Lisa's ability to make friends, and explains the special relationship she and Lisa have:

Most of her friends are European. She goes out to their places and camps and things like that. Some come around to our place.... Some parents don't want their child to go out and have fun, but I tell Lisa I trust her and want her to go out and have fun. Me and Lisa, we don't hide secrets from one another. We talk about lots of things. I give her advice. We are sort of mates.

## **Lisa's retention**

Lisa has a special friend who has come up through secondary school with her. They are very close, both in and out of school, as they share a keen interest in sport as well as striving to do their best at school. Lisa's Home Economics teacher comments that keeping the girls together has been a deliberate strategy on the part of the school.

In Year 8, Lisa, [her best friend] and a few other Aboriginal girls were placed in the same caregroup. That meant that they went to English, Maths and Science, certainly to English and Humanities, together. They also did Home Ec., Tech. Studies and Art with the same group. We thought that the peer group would be strong that way. We kept them together.

All of the teachers interviewed about Lisa feel that one of the reasons why she and her best friend have stayed at school is because they have been able to support each other. For example:

I think, because they've got each other, that's really helped them, instead of just being a loner. And Lisa and [her best friend] are very close, I think. They play sport together, and that sort of thing (Maths teacher).

The group of Aboriginal girls she is part of have always been seen as a group that would succeed and stay at school until the end of Year 12, with family expectations of that. I know her mother would have expected that. Also, the peer group pressure of the group they are in to be at school, to come to school. It's always been like that.... The support that these girls give each other is just incredible. It's more the moral support, just the security of having someone likeminded there (Home Economics teacher).

Lisa's Geography teacher gives other four possible reasons why Lisa has stayed at school.

I think she has a very positive self concept, for a start. I think that has been a very important factor...and she's a real trier. She has also had quite a lot of support from teachers in the school. She's got very, very supportive parents. They have been keen to see her get through the system successfully.

Lisa's mother agrees about the support Lisa has received from home.

I started Lisa at Kindy when she was two. I spent a lot of time talking with her. She was very bright in primary school.

She does not, however, feel that she has put any pressure on Lisa to stay at school.

No, I don't think I have. I tell her it would be good for her to get a good education, to get her certificate. Like, her brother, lots of times when he was doing his training, he was getting tired of it - work, study and assignments to do - so I kept telling him that he only had so many months to go and if he dropped out now all the study he had done would be for nothing and he would be like the rest of the boys, without a job. I told him if he kept going he would get a good job and people would look up to him. So he just kept going and he passed as I told him he would.

Lisa started exploring career options when she was very young. Her maternal grandmother was living with them at that stage, and was very sick. According to her mother, Lisa used to say to her grandmother: "When I get bigger I'm going to be a doctor so I can fix you up." Since then, according to her mother, she has explored a variety of options.

Now she doesn't want to be a doctor, she wants to be something else. I reckon she's still too young to make up her mind. One minute she says she wants to be a lawyer. Next minute she wants to be an accountant, then she wants to do the hospitality course like her brother.

For her first two work experience placements Lisa worked at a hairdressers and in a clothes shop. For the one that is coming up when all the Year 11s go to Adelaide, she will be working at a large hotel. Although she hasn't really decided on a career, she says:

Hospitality, mainly because I have got a part-time job now at a restaurant ...and I work there once a week. So that has sort of narrowed my choice down.... Anything to do with hospitality would be all right.

Lisa has decided to stay at school until she completes Year 12. She explains why:

I don't really like it, but I need to go to get an education because I look around, now, because my brother went to Year 11, and that is when SACE first started that year. He tried and it was too hard for him, and now I see that is what all my relations have done - got to Year 11 and they have dropped out, and got to Year 12 and dropped out - and I'm saying to myself, 'I am not going to make that mistake and drop out early. Go all the way and do all of it. Get a better education to get more options to get jobs.'

[My brother] said that he finds it hard [at TAFE], and I said maybe because he dropped out early, and the people that are doing the course with him went through all Year 12 and he didn't.

Yes, but I don't really have a choice. But I would like to stay because mum and dad want me to stay and finish it all. [And you don't mind?] It is only getting up on Monday mornings!

## **Lisa's attainment**

For Lisa, and for the rest of her special group, staying at school and succeeding go together. Lisa's Business Maths teacher expresses this in the following way:

I think that the girls themselves are aware of the fact that they can make something of themselves. I have spoken to the girls.... I think that they want to be successful to show the other Aboriginal students that they are able to achieve, that they are able to get good jobs, and basically that they can be role models. They are all achievers, wanting to succeed.

The support the girls give each other has helped them to resist pressures from the less inclined Aboriginal students to stop working and to leave school. Lisa's Home Economics teacher stresses the importance of their special group.

To me, that peer group is very important to get them through, more important than anything the school has done. To help them to stay at school, to succeed, and to ask, 'Why weren't you at school?'

Lisa's Maths teacher adds:

Lisa and [her best friend] are a real pair. They support each other. I think that's probably contributed to her success. They've got each other to lean on. When confronted with peer pressure not to do the right thing she gets together with [her best friend] and another female Aboriginal student who has joined in. As a small group they have tended to alienate themselves from the less inclined Aboriginal group. As a result of that they have continued to succeed.

In addition to this special peer group support, Lisa has also had support from home to resist the pressure from the non-achieving Aboriginal students. According to her mother:

Lisa got the Aboriginal Student of the Year Award.... But it was hard when she did get that because a lot of kids made smart comments like, 'Smarty pants. Teacher's pet.' These comments were coming from Aboriginal students. Lisa is liked by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, but you get some Aboriginals that put you down. I just told her, 'Ignore them. Walk with your head up or else you could start an argument. Let them go. Let them mouth off.' Those students have now left school.

Lisa's Maths teacher makes a similar comparison between Lisa and the majority of the Aboriginal students with whom she came to secondary school:

Succeeding is not a bad thing for her. She's pleased to be able to succeed. A lot of the other Aboriginal students, probably as a result of peer pressure, tend to not to want to succeed.

Her Art teacher believes that it has also been Lisa's strength of character which has enabled her to resist these negative pressures.

She's a very strong girl. But I had her with two other Aboriginal girls [not from her special group] last year. I could see the influence, even though she's strong. There was the turning up late to lessons, and occasionally missing a few, which she hasn't done this year. She's just got in there and done it. There has been nothing else to try to drag her down.... I have noticed the difference this year because she is the only Aboriginal student in the class. She is very strong. Now that she has got this far she will manage not to let that bother her.

In addition to being 'strong', Lisa is described by various teachers as being out-going, confident and mature.

She's very out-going, very confident, a very positive sort of person. Her behaviour is fantastic. There's nothing negative about her at all (Geography teacher).

She is very much an older teenager compared with many of her peers. For example, at the prom at the end of last year she went with her boyfriend whereas many of her friends went with a group of girls (Home Economics teacher).

Lisa's confidence and maturity have led her to finding herself a part-time job. According to her mother:

She's got a job on Fridays and at weekends, and sometimes during the week. She reckons we don't give her enough pocket money, so we told her, if she wants more she has to go out and earn it.

Lisa's Maths teacher feels that she demonstrates her confidence and her maturity in the way she dresses.

She is almost a fashion trendsetter. She likes to do herself up as best she can all the time. (Maths teacher)

Her mother believes that this is related to Lisa's determination to do her best at everything, and help others to do the same.

Lisa's one of those people that everything she does she has to do to perfection, even the way she dresses, her eyebrows, etc.... When she plays sport she'll take a spare skirt, black runners, or a spare top because there's bound to be some girl who hasn't got one. She has to watch out for everyone else, you know. She's afraid that if someone plays with the wrong T-shirt that they don't look like a team. Netball and basketball, it's always like that. She likes to look after everyone else, too.

Several of Lisa's reports from previous years also mention the way she is able to work with others and to help them.

Lisa's academic ability has been recognised by her teachers.

She always struck me as being academically capable. I recognised that starting back in Year 8 or 9. It was more obvious at Year 10. At that level you start to see the difference between students who have ability and those who put in a lot of effort but have less ability (Home Economics teacher).

Academically quite capable. Her literacy skills are quite good. She seems to understand concepts quite well and also the reading material. I can see that, of the group, Lisa would have the greatest potential of completing Year 12 (Geography teacher).

Her English teacher comments on her literacy skills in general:

She has some problems with syntax, punctuation and spelling, but by drafting she can get over that. She's got great ideas. She's fairly articulate. She's really frightened of oral work, but when she has to do it her performance is very good.... Her poetry writing is very, very good.

For the previous three years Lisa was in an advanced Maths group, and even though she was not particularly confident of her ability to cope with that level of Maths, did not find the work easy, and missed some of it due to sporting commitments, she persisted and succeeded. This year she is doing Business Maths instead of Pure Maths.

It is not just ability that has enabled Lisa to succeed. She is prepared to put in the effort required to succeed at a high level. Her Home Economics and Art teachers have recognised this.

She has always been a high achiever. It was interesting when the other enthusiastic Aboriginal girl arrived at the school. At that stage I had her for Typing. She and [her best friend] were already very good, but the new girl was even better, so they tried even harder (Home Economics teacher).

She is extremely determined and independent.... She not only produces high quality finished pieces, but she is also well organised in her backup work. Her written work is also of a high quality.... She works really, really hard. She's probably one of the hardest working of the whole Year 11 bunch.... She's always got the work there on time. She is super organised. She is a dream of a student (Art teacher).

Lisa's mother agrees that Lisa is determined to succeed at whatever she attempts. She gives an example to explain how Lisa aims for perfection and is not easily satisfied with less.

She's very determined. At anything she does she is very determined, even with sport.... I remember one language or spelling test at primary school when Lisa got 49 out of 50. She cried her eyes out because she wanted to get 50 out of 50. So I said to her, 'Look, be thankful with what you've got.... You don't have to be spot on all the time. Everyone makes mistakes. You learn by your mistakes and you can correct yourself next time.' She cried for a long time.

To help her achieve at a high level Lisa takes the initiative in asking teachers for help. Three teachers comment on this:

She's always seeking help. She's not at all reluctant to come up to me and ask for help (Art teacher).

Her hand goes straight up or she comes and gets me.... Her group sit very close to me and they know that they can have one-to-one with me across the desk any time they like....The group was the same last year. They sat right down by my desk. It works quite well. She will just turn around and ask me little questions all the time I'm at my desk. That kind of interaction seems very important for their learning style (English teacher).

[S]he is extremely keen to succeed. She is always willing to ask questions. She is quite prepared to give up her own time for extra help. She has got a tutor; that's probably a parental-type support. She is keen to get any help she can and will accept it (Maths teacher).

Several of Lisa's reports also comment on this, indicating that Lisa has spent quite a lot of time in the homework centre catching up on work she has missed, either through illness or sporting commitments. In addition Lisa makes use of the resources in the Aboriginal Education room and seeks help from the AERT.

Sometimes, when we get some work to finish off on the Friday, we go there during the week after school and she [the AERT] helps us start it and get our wording right on our essays. We do all the work and ask her how we should put it, and she helps us out.

When Lisa mentions 'we' she is referring to her special group, especially her best friend.

The two of them do a lot of their work together when they can, although they are not now in as many of the same classes as they were, because they have chosen slightly different subjects. Lisa's Geography teacher has noticed this.

Yes, they do work together. I would say that she would help [her friend], but it would depend on the sort of task they were doing.

Lisa finds some of the work at school hard. She says:

Like, the hard part for me is I know it well, but when it comes to write it into an essay I don't know how to start it, sometimes. It just all confuses me, but when I get started I just go through it and finish it.

She has always thought that some school work was hard, but starting the SACE has made her change her mind.

It was easy, looking back on it now, easier than what we have now. It was easy. Work back then seemed hard, when I first started doing it, but after I got into it it was all right. It started getting more easy then. Now SACE makes all the rest of the work done, like in junior high school, to build us up to make us do the work we have to do now.

Lisa finds she has to study most nights during the school week. She has no idea how long she spends at it, but has settled into a routine.

I don't really count the hours. I just go home to clean up then do some work, then netball training, then after netball training I do some more work.

Lisa has her own room to study in but, according to her mother, she does not always do her homework there.

Sometimes, but usually she does it on the kitchen table. All the kids like the kitchen. I think it's because the food is in there.

### **Lisa's Aboriginal identity**

Lisa's mother and father are both Aboriginal and both come from large families. Most of their relatives live close by, so Lisa sees a lot of of her extended family. Lisa says she usually sees her grandmother "once or twice a day" because she lives just down the road. She goes on to say:

I have heaps of uncles and aunties on my dad's side and heaps on my mum's side, and most them live here, or nearby, so it is just a five minute walk to all of them.

Lisa did most of her primary schooling at the small church school where her mother works. She transferred to her current school for her last year of primary school. Having so many relatives in town made the transfer much easier. She prefers it at her current school now, although she liked the other school when she was there. She says:

I don't know, but here it's more better.... I don't know how to put it, they baby the students, and when you come here you are really timid and frightened. But I was alright when I come here because I had a lot of relations and my brother, and everything.... It's just different.... You get frightened at first because it's different. Now, after a while, it's all right.

Having relatives at the school hasn't always been so good. At times there are disagreements and even fights among the Aboriginal students at the school. According to Lisa this happens:

A lot. Yarns. People go back and tell them things, and you go and argue with them. 'I heard you called me this and I heard you called me that', and everything. And it's just childish.

According to her Home Economics teacher, Lisa cannot always keep right out of it as she would like because sometimes it involves some of her relatives.

Her family ties are strong. She felt it particularly strongly a while ago when there was conflict within the [extended] family. It was really hard for her when some of her relatives weren't talking to each other, particularly when it overflowed into the school situation where some of her friends couldn't talk to her.

Lisa says she does not get teased because she is Aboriginal.

Not me, but other people do. Because I don't go, and, I don't know, I mind my own business. I don't worry what other people do. But last year we had a bit of a racial fight, and that with just girls. It was both ways.

Lisa's teachers are not aware of many incidents of racism from students in the school. Her English teacher can recall only two incidents, and only one of these related to Lisa.

None that I am aware of, although there was one this year involving a Filipino student. There is one student who whinged about the fact that Lisa

and [her best friend] and [another Aboriginal student] work with the AERT on Friday afternoons on the Aboriginal newsletter. They do that as part of their English. It was just minor whinging about why they got everything. I've never heard it apart from that. The girls have never talked about the problem either.

However, the community has a reputation for being very racist. Lisa's mother recalls one incident that upset Lisa because of the racial stereotyping.

A group of them went to the CES about looking for jobs. There was one particular job she was interested in, but the person there said, 'You wouldn't like it because you would have to go away from home. Aboriginal people don't like going away from their families.' Lisa got really mad and said to me, 'Just because I'm Aboriginal, they're not going to tell me what I can do and what I can't do!'

Lisa's Home Economics teacher mentions some special events and programs when she comments on how Lisa expresses her Aboriginality.

In Home Economics we have talked about traditional Aboriginal foods and family ties, that sort of stuff, but I don't remember her making any comment about it then. She is very proud of Aboriginal things that happen. I remember when there was an Aboriginal Open Day. They [Lisa and her friends] were all involved in that, all keyed up. There's also the Nunga Newsletter they put out. They are very proud of that. Some of the Aboriginal kids will wear the red/black/yellow beanies or T-shirts, but I don't ever remember her doing that. Some kids will also use a lot of red, yellow and black in their pictures. I don't remember her doing that either. Certainly, she has never hidden away from the fact that she is Aboriginal. I would say that she is proud of it. She has also represented the school on Aboriginal sports days, and things like that. Also, I think she was Aboriginal Student of the Year last year. There's lots of encouragement for them.

Lisa's Maths teacher comments on how Lisa balances her activities with her Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers.

She goes with the flow. She doesn't try and alienate herself. She retains her identity, of course. She plays netball for the Aboriginal team in town and joins in other Aboriginal things in the town and at school.... She joins in with everyone else, kind of thing. The camps are one example. Then, for work experience, she hasn't wanted to go and work in an Aboriginal organisation. In lots of ways she wants to be the same as the white community.

Lisa's mother agrees that Lisa has learned more about the non-Aboriginal than the

Aboriginal way of life from her parents because both of them were brought up in situations that separated them from their Aboriginal heritage.

My mother was taken away from her parents. She was very fair. My father was dark. She got put in a children's home...before she moved back here when she grew up. She lost her Aboriginal heritage.... Because mum [Lisa's grandmother] didn't teach me anything about our Aboriginal heritage, I can't teach my children. There are certain little bits I know, but I can't speak any of the language. My husband's family grew up all together on the mission. He doesn't know much either. When I have found a witchetty grub I have suggested that Lisa might like to have a feast on that. She said, 'Oh, yuk. I'm not going to eat that.' I don't like it either, but my husband eats it. I think I'm a bit too European.

Lisa's mother is a well respected artist and her paintings have been displayed quite widely. Lisa shares some of her mother's talent and enjoys Art at school. This year the course had a section on Aboriginal art. Her Art teacher recalls that Lisa was able to make a significant contribution to this part of the course.

She had a fair bit of input to that. We watched two videos and looked at lots of work out of books. She had lots to comment on in discussion groups and things like that. She was just basically imparting her knowledge, giving a little bit more than I had or the video could tell us. She related it to the sorts of things that she knew that had gone on either by people around her or people she knew. She talked a lot about her uncle who did lots of work that was similar. She had a fair bit of knowledge about that.

But, when it comes to other Aboriginal things, particularly issues relating to the community, Lisa does not usually put an Aboriginal perspective on them. In English, according to her teacher, she takes a broader perspective.

No. That might be our expectation as teachers. Nearly all her work is generally about humanity, that kind of thing. She seems to have a wonderful overview of how things fit in. Her Aboriginality does not permeate her writing.

Her Geography teacher agrees that Lisa has never included an Aboriginal perspective in any class discussions, but he feels that this might be due to the unusual nature of the class.

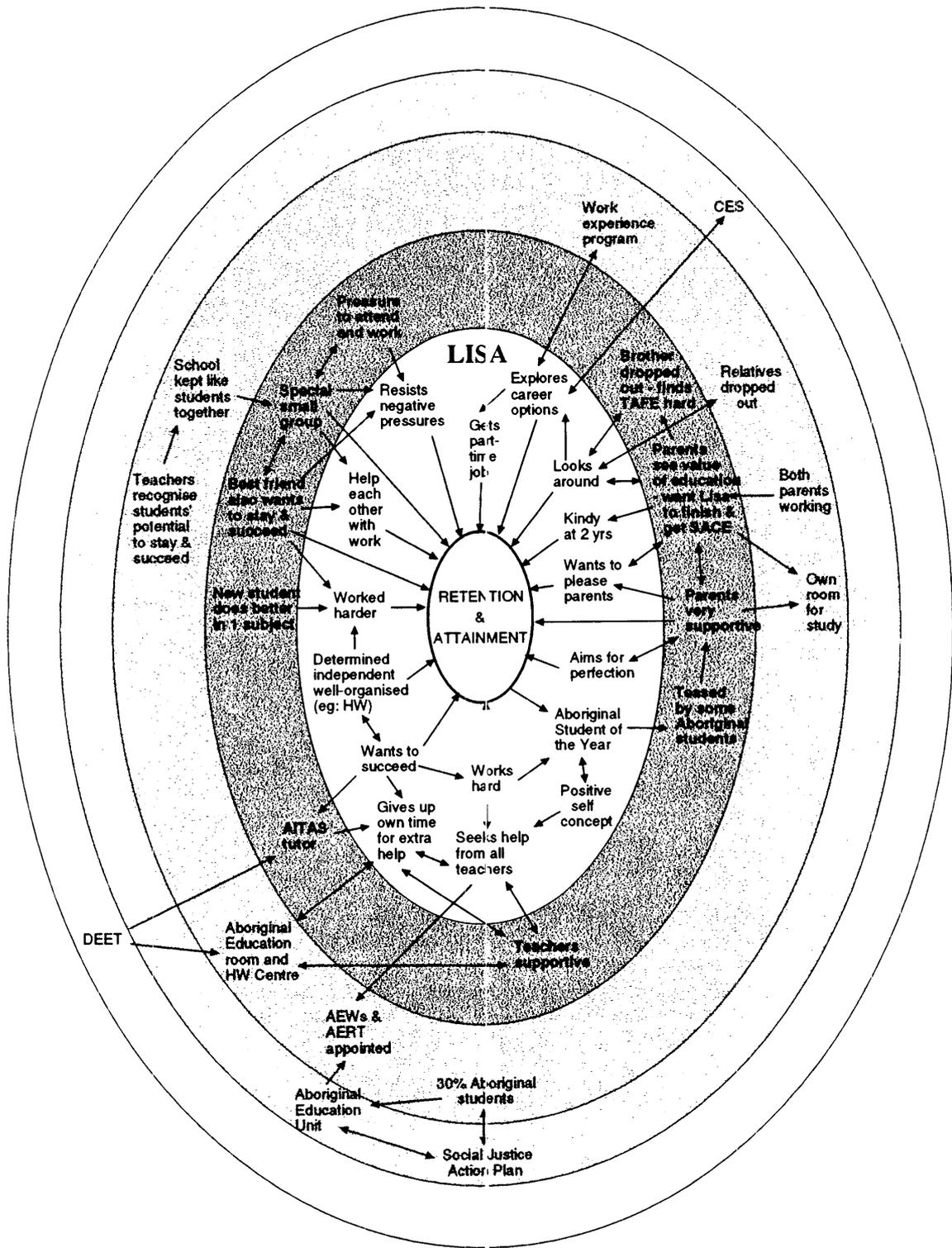
None of the group discuss issues relating to the community. If you were dealing with issues about poverty they wouldn't bring up the fact that 90% of Aboriginal people are living in poverty. They don't discuss those sorts of issues. Well, I haven't heard them anyway. It could be the fact that they are in a small minority group in the class. They might start doing so if the

numbers were reversed. It just wasn't a practical situation to do that in. None of the written tasks they have had to do lend themselves to that either, so I haven't seen any of it.

## **Lisa - summary**

Lisa has not been particularly troubled by racism at school and has both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal friends, many made through sport. She has reflected on how other local Aboriginal students, many of whom are related to her, have approached school, and she has decided to be different. Although she has not definitely settled on a career to pursue, Lisa anticipates that whatever she does do will require further study. She believes that this will be made easier if she completes Year 12, which she intends to do. Her mother supports this view and actively encourages her not to be put off by others who are jealous of her success.

Lisa is also supported in her ideals by a small group of Aboriginal students of like mind, in particular her best friend. Lisa is an active learner, prepared to ask for assistance and put in the effort required to succeed. She make good use of the personnel, physical and curriculum resources available to her at and through the school. Figures 6.5 and 6.6 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors that are associated with Lisa's retention, attainment and identity.



**Figure 6.5** A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between various factors that have contributed to Lisa staying at school and achieving academic success.



# LUCY

Lucy is a Year 11 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are between 300 and 400 students at the school and 10-20 per cent are Aboriginal. Lucy lives at home with her parents, her older sister, a younger brother and sister, and her nephew. Lucy's parents first met when they were at school together in a rural centre some distance away. Her mother finished Year 10, which was the highest level she could go to without leaving home at that time. Lucy's older sister was born there. Soon after that the family moved here where Lucy and her younger brother and sister were born. Lucy's older sister left school during Year 12. According to Lucy she "would have passed on a B average, but she dropped out."

Lucy's mother is a cleaner and Lucy works with her after school. Her father now works in a professional capacity with a government department, but he worked in several other occupations before that. He left school as soon as he could and found work on a sheep station, something he had wanted to do since his father and uncles had taken him to a shearing shed when he was young. He then found work with the Highways Department where some of his relatives worked. When he moved here he first worked for another government department before he left to become a field worker with one of the Aboriginal organisations. He was promoted within that organisation and subsequently within another Aboriginal organisation. From there he transferred to his present position. He says:

I haven't had specific...training, but I gained the position on the basis of the experience I have gained over the years, particularly within the Aboriginal community. With the family of four kids that I've got, which range from 10 to 21, I thought I could come into the department offering those skills. I certainly use my past experience in my day-to-day work here.

## Lucy's retention

Lucy has a good relationship with her parents and they provide her with any support that she feels she needs. They generally leave it up to Lucy to raise issues she needs support with, respecting her desire to handle many of the issues herself. Her father comments:

Yes, she's very open about school, but she doesn't talk about everything. There are school issues she likes to address herself. She's always talking to me and my wife about how she's going and coping at school. But I can tell that there are other things that are happening at school, and that she's

dealing with it. I encourage that, but I make sure she knows that we are available for any support she might need. The teachers have been very good at the school. They have kept me informed about different issues that are going on that are affecting Lucy. If she isn't able to deal with the issues, that's the only time I would be contacted. She's normally able to work things out for herself.

In her earlier years at high school Lucy's Aboriginal friends tried to discourage her from doing the right thing as far as school was concerned.

I go to school every day with all my Aboriginal relations, cousins, etc. If I go down to town at lunch time they talk to me about staying there and not coming back to school. It's a bit hard there. I don't really want to go back to school then because I want to be with them. They put pressure on me to go with them all the time. They're more encouraging to go out more often and just have fun. They say, 'Don't go back to school. Little school girl. Goody two shoes for going back to school. White.'

There were a few times when Lucy gave in to the pressure, but one of her teachers encouraged her not to continue to do this.

The Aboriginal kids all go down the street at lunch time. On Wednesdays when we had pastoral care after lunch Lucy tried that, not coming back. Because I was her pastoral care teacher and I knew she wasn't back I would chase her up and make a big deal about her not being there. She then started turning up every week. I think it was that someone had noticed that she wasn't there and had made a song and dance about it that stopped her from skipping out and made her come back.

Lucy has continued to resist the pressure.

I just tell them back, 'It's better than sitting down here and doing nothing.' Because that's all it is, just sitting around town. Most of the time I'd rather be at school than sitting down there.

The continued motivation for Lucy to stay at school has come partly from her reflection on what life would be like if she didn't. For example, Lucy compares herself with her younger sister who prefers the lifestyle some of her extended family live and wants to leave school as soon as she is fifteen.

Yeah. That's my younger sister's attitude. I don't think she's coming to school next term, or next year, whatever. She doesn't like school. She's completely different to me. I'm sort of like the poshy one. I don't like roughing it. She can go up north and go without showers; it's like she

belongs up there. That's the way she is. Schooling's not up there, so she doesn't fit in with school. She belongs up there. With me, I don't fit up there. I love going up there for a couple of days, but not for longer. I can't hack the way they live up there.

From Lucy's father's point of view, the visits to the north and the discussions the family has had at home have been good experience for his daughters.

I think both Lucy and her [younger] sister have seen both sides, in that they've seen the Aboriginal way of life and the non-Aboriginal way of life. I feel really bad saying that - what can happen if they do well at school. I think that's a bit of motivation for them as well. They don't want to end up just having kids.

Lucy also looks at some of her close friends who have left school, ones she used to work with at school before they left.

Well, look where they are now. B's pregnant. A, her boyfriend used to beat her up, and that. I don't really want to be like that, so I stayed at school.

Lucy also feels a sense of responsibility towards her parents, especially her father, particularly because her sister did not stay and finish school.

I love my dad. I've got so much respect for him I don't want to disappoint him. That's the main thing. I don't want to disappoint him. When my sister got pregnant he was very disappointed. He kept on saying, 'It's not worth it. You're only going to turn out like her.' And then he got all upset. It just makes you more determined to stay at school. I love my sister, but I don't want to be like her, what she's got now. So I decided to stay at school.

Lucy's father admits that he has put some pressure on his children to stay at school.

Yes, I have. I'm pushing all my kids, I suppose, but I'm not forcing. I guess I'm fairly practical when I'm talking to Lucy about how important education is, not only in terms of jobs and being able to leave school at the end of Year 12 with a certificate, but for her development as a person. She needs to be articulate, knowledgeable, and all the things that someone like Lucy is benefiting from at the moment from her schooling. It will all benefit her as an adult. Socially she is mixing with students of all different races, for example, and looking at different social issues. She's getting all the academic stuff as well.

Lucy also sees her non-Aboriginal relatives encouraging her.

They encourage us to stay at school, just like they encourage their kids too. They say it's important to stay at school to get an education, to get a better job.

Lucy agrees. She didn't drop out of school when her friends did:

'Cause I want to get a job, to get a better job.

Lucy would prefer to work in a caring role, but has not yet definitely decided what that will be.

I'm in to caring for poor people. I like kids. I did my work experience at TAFE, at child care, and that was all right.... Yes, it was really good. They knock you out, but it was really good. Looking after my nephew for about an hour, I thought looking after little kids would be all right, but I was buggered. It was worse than a day at school.

Lucy's father believes that Lucy would do well in one of the caring professions.

All the issues that are confronting her at school she will meet in the wider community as an adult. She's sort of being a social worker at school. She has helped several friends with social types of problems. Lucy has got a big heart. She cares about people. She likes to help. She's brought home some kids that have had problems back home, and she's been able to talk to kids about their problems and advocate this back to their mums and dads.

But Lucy puts some restrictions on this.

I don't really want to care for old people. I like the kids - teaching, kindy, day care - that sort of thing.

Lucy's future career will be partially determined by how well she does at school, the rest of this year and next year.

There's courses in TAFE, but I'll wait and see how I go in Year 12 first. I'll go to uni. if I can get into it. Mum and dad think Adelaide's too far, and too rough, but there is one in Whyalla. I don't know. I'd probably want to do nursing, but it's a lot of work. I like Science and Maths, but I don't really want to have to do heaps of work.

Neither does she want to have to repeat a year at school.

I'm interested in nursing, but I don't want to have to do Year 12 again - it's supposed to be really hard. I don't want to have to come back just to get into nursing, and then maybe end up not liking it.... I want to keep my options open.

Her father has encouraged her to explore her options.

She's still talking about nursing, and knows that will mean going to university.... She's talked to people in the hospital, nurses and other staff that she knows, and she knows some of the things that she's got to do.... I hope that she does succeed in Year 12 but if that doesn't happen then we'll need to look at that then. The other thing I'm doing at the moment is taking her the Notice of Vacancies from work. The kids can look at the positions that are coming up in government departments and what qualifications are required. I tell them that they have got to start thinking now about what they need to do if they want to get into particular areas, and look at Year 12 in a more positive light, for example.... I've got no doubt that if she sets her heart on going through nursing she will get there.

Teachers are aware of the support and encouragement Lucy has from home for her to stay at school and to aim for a career. Lucy's English teacher knows Lucy and her younger sister quite well as she is now teaching each of them for the second time, and she also knows Lucy's mother.

I would have to say that partly it would be her family.... I know her mum. We stop and have chats in the street. The mother is very supportive. I haven't met the father, but I think he wants the best for his girls.

Lucy's former Maths teacher believes that the success Lucy has achieved so far has also been an incentive for her to stay at school.

The fact that she was successful meant that she kept coming back, I think. She could see that she was getting somewhere.

This may well be true because Lucy believes that lack of peer group support and success discouraged her special Aboriginal friends from staying at school.

I reckon they feel shame. I don't know why, but I reckon if they were left to work in groups.... If they leave them in their groups and take the group along to each subject they'd work together. Like me now. There were two other girls with me in my class, and there were two other boys. Now they're all out of school; they've dropped out of school.

She explains that she was able to resist the temptation to leave with them because she is more independent than they were.

Well, I'm the sort of person that stays by themselves, anyway. I sort of helped them along. I don't really need anybody else with me.

Lucy's father adds another dimension to her determination to finish school.

Looking at Lucy as a person, I see her as someone who likes to finish a job. She's always been like that at home. If she's given a task she likes to see it completed.

Lucy agrees. She wants to complete Year 12 because that will complete her secondary schooling.

For me, school doesn't finish until Year 12. You don't drop out of primary school and say you won't do Year 7. It didn't really occur to me that you don't have to do it.

## **Lucy's attainment**

Lucy's academic potential was recognised early. Lucy recalls that teachers began encouraging her when she was still in primary school.

Back in primary school there was Mr X. He was very persuasive. Then Miss Y was, too. Pushing us so we wouldn't be like the rest of my aunts and uncles, to get a real job, and everything.

Lucy's ability has continued to be recognised by her teachers. Her Maths teacher, reflecting back to last year, recognised her ability and her academic potential.

She was a very capable student.... She always got good marks for everything she did.... We counselled her at the end of last year into doing Pure Maths, and I think she has the potential to do Pure Maths in Year 12. I'd really like to see her do that. Similarly with her other subjects, I'd like to see her go a long way. From what I can remember from last year, when I collated her reports, she would pass everything every term. She could do PES next year and go on to do some tertiary study.

Her English teacher comments on her literacy skills.

I'd put her at a high achievement level. She drafts her work, seeks feedback - she does everything just how I would expect a high achieving student to do. It's hard to explain. I've kept some of her work as exemplars - pieces of work that I can use as models for different things. A journal, as she read through a novel, was the first thing she had to do. She was very good at that, predicting what would happen. I think, when she is writing, she is able to imagine herself as that person. In the four literacy areas she's really quite strong.... I haven't had her speaking in front of the whole class. In fact, many of the girls refuse to speak in front of the boys. They are rude and arrogant, and everything else. They will interject, and there's a lot of

swearing. They can also be very sexist.... So I had them speaking in their little groups. She did that well.... Spelling is the one thing that lets her down.

Lucy agrees about her spelling.

The only thing that really bothers me now is my spelling.

However, Lucy also has some specific literacy skills. For example, she is an excellent listener. Her English teacher continues:

For one novel there weren't enough copies of the book, so I read it to the class and they had to just listen. Lucy and the other Aboriginal girl in my class...both listened attentively to the whole story. They didn't have to get the book to read for themselves to follow what was going on in the story like many other students needed to do.

In addition, Lucy's English teacher feels that she is confident in her own ability to do the work.

I think she is very confident. She will check a task if she doesn't understand, but she just goes away and does it. So she's very confident in her skills in interpreting a task, how to go about it and what I'm looking for.

Lucy liked working with her Aboriginal friends when there was the opportunity, but she is also comfortable working independently. Her friends were not so comfortable with this so their work deteriorated. Lucy puts the blame for this on the school.

In Year 8 and 9 we were all together. In Year 10 they split us up. I think it's important to keep them together. We supported each other.... I was always good at Maths so I used to help them with their Maths. 'A' used to be the speller; 'B' used to be good at writing and drawing. We all helped each other get through. Then they split us up. Sometimes there'd be me and 'A' in one class and 'B' by herself, or me and 'B' together and 'A' by herself, or me by myself. The subjects we were in by ourselves sort of went down.

Then Lucy's independence came to the fore. Her Australian Studies teacher also recognises her independence when it comes to her work.

She likes to work independently. Sometimes she doesn't ask a lot of questions that would help her along a little bit more with some of her work.

Maybe that is because Lucy does not see that Australian Studies is important or

interesting.

We're doing things about youth issues. I don't need that. I don't need to do that. I just want to do the things that I need to get me through, you know what I mean. I don't want to do these other subjects, but it's compulsory.... For every assignment we do the environment point of view, the social, the political issues and the Aboriginal point of view - in everything we do. That's not very interesting.

Lucy's English teacher believes that Lucy is an "all round" achiever.

I think there's some external motivation, and some of it is internal too - to want to do the best that she can do, and make a decent life for herself. I don't know whether Lucy wants to get out of town at all, but I think she has a vision of the greater world and not just that of town.

Lucy agrees that it is very important to succeed.

It's really important. I want to prove that I can do something better than just sitting around; prove it to myself and my parents. I'm really aiming to pass. I just hope I pass. I'll try to get better than a pass, but if I just pass I'll be satisfied.

Her Australian Studies teacher believes that she achieves at a high level because of the amount of effort she puts into everything.

She perseveres with things. She wants to be successful. She is successful because of the work and effort she puts into what ever she does, all the time.... She always presents her work really well; takes a lot of time and care with it. She does a lot of it on the computer. She must do a lot of going back and correcting it before she hands it in. Her assignments are always typed up on the computer. I think she does a lot of it in the Ab. Studies room because she asks if she can go over and type things up.

So far Lucy has not had many problems with any of her school work, but she does enjoy some subjects more than others, mainly because of the special relationship she has with the teacher and the other students.

Yeah, so far most of the work has been easy. It's easy when it's female teachers like in Biology - it's like a party. It's much easier. Because it's Biology there's no boys in it; it's an all girls class. We all sit around and talk. We do get our work done, but when there's a class discussion we're not embarrassed to say anything.

In explaining why she finds much of the work easy, Lucy describes some of her skills.

The work is easy 'cause I'm pretty good at writing down stories and that, expressing my view on paper and talking about it, and that's what most of it is. That's what Australian Studies is - expressing your view, debating two different sides of the story. I'm all right with that. I've always been all right with Maths.

When Lucy does need some help she will ask for it. Her former Maths teacher recalls that she would always take the initiative and ask for help.

Yes, she would always ask for help.... Lucy would ask me for help instead of waiting for me to notice that she was stuck.

Lucy agrees but still appreciates it when teachers recognise her need for assistance without her having to ask.

Yeah, most times. Most time I know. It's not often I have to ask. Mostly I get the next door neighbour to ask for me. I don't like putting up my hand to ask, but when they come close I'll ask. Most teachers know who needs help and who doesn't, but the other ones just go straight past you. It needs at least two teachers in the class - one to teach the whole class and another to teach individuals. Some are quite good at doing this but others are terrible.

Lucy believes it is important to like the teacher, and the teacher to like her.

Yeah, I reckon it is. If you don't like someone you won't listen to them, you know. If he's talking you just forget everything. If someone doesn't like you, you know they don't like you. They don't come up and help you, more often; they just let you go. It's very important to like your teacher.

Lucy can tell very quickly whether she is going to get on with a teacher. This affected her subject choices at the beginning of the year, and may make it more difficult to succeed if she does get into nursing.

I tried Chemistry for a week, but there's no way I'd get that so I changed. I don't understand Chemistry. It's so hard; the teachers don't help either. I don't like the teacher.

This may be because Lucy perceives this teacher as being racist. She believes that teacher racism sometimes affects her work. For example, some just don't seem to be comfortable working with Aboriginal students.

It's just like, they'll talk to the class, but when you need help they quickly help you and then go off to other students. Normally we all sit in a group. If our table needs help they'll quickly slap dash do us, then go off and have a big yarn with another group in the class. That quick help isn't always enough. Or they'll make us sit there most of the lesson and then help us right toward the end of the lesson.

She also has problems with the attitudes of some teachers because it makes it more difficult for her to ask for help.

They think they're funny and they're not. They tell all these jokes and try to be cool, and they're not. It's stupid. They're being stupid, making themselves look like idiots. Some teachers expect you to know everything, and they work along so fast that you don't have time to keep up. With me, I'm shamed to put my hand up, so if I don't understand it the first time the teacher just goes straight past you.

Homework has never been a problem for Lucy. Her former Maths teacher recollects:

She was on task and she would manage to get things finished for homework and handed in.

This is despite the fact that she has a job and works every night after school. Her father relates her ability to do both to the way she accepts all her responsibilities.

I think she's a person who thinks about her responsibilities and her workload. For example, she doesn't involve herself in things she can't see herself completing.... That's been evident at home with little things she does. She's working at the moment. She's working at night, cleaning with her mother.... She goes to school, goes out to work, and then comes home and does her homework. She's often tired after work, but she's facing up to her responsibilities extremely well. It has helped her grow more and accept challenges at school. She's approaching it in a different way now, I think. When she started to talk about getting a job I had mixed feelings about that because I thought that it might have affected her schooling, but it hasn't.

Lucy uses her time well. Often she manages to get ahead in her work so that she can relax a bit. For example, she plans to take the last two days of term off because she is getting bored with school at the moment, so she plans for it.

Sometimes it gets a bit boring. I like to have a couple of days off. Mum and dad understand that. I want to have Friday off, and maybe the day before, so I'll hand in today a draft assignment that's due in on Friday, so I can miss those two days.... Mum and dad are happy with that so long as I get everything handed in on time.

## Lucy's Aboriginal identity

Lucy's father is Aboriginal, but her mother is not. Because Lucy is registered at school as being Aboriginal at least one staff member has made the assumption her mother is also most likely Aboriginal. The only contact this teacher has had with Lucy's parents is meeting her mother at school on interview night.

Lucy's mum is very concerned about Lucy's schooling, and she comes in to parent interview night and picks up Lucy's report...I've met her there. She'll actually come in and collect the report from me in the library, with the white parents, whereas most of the Aboriginal parents go to the Aboriginal Studies room to get theirs. Her mum isn't intimidated to come into the library like some of the other Aboriginal parents are.

The primary school she went to had few Aboriginal students so Lucy has always mixed with non-Aboriginal people, both at home and at school. At Lucy's current school there are less than ten Aboriginal students in Year 11 compared with the large number that started there with Lucy in Year 8. Lucy recalls that quite vividly.

When I first come it was packed. I was scared to come into the Ab. Studies room because there were so many Aboriginal people in there. I wasn't brought up, like, [with so many]. The last school I went to there was hardly any Aboriginal people over there. When I come here I was hanging around with all my whitefella friends.

Because of her mixed cultural heritage, Lucy often feels that she is pulled in two directions.

I was with my white friends before, but then I realised my Aboriginal friends wanted me to be with them all the time. So I'm sort of hanging around with them all the time now. But you don't change your friendships with your white friends. It's just that you don't hang around with them anymore. They don't really mind. Most of your Aboriginal friends aren't in class so you're hanging around with them [white friends] then. It's just that at recess and lunch you're not with them. In class you're with them.

Lucy has a few problems always being enthusiastic about her Aboriginal extended family. She doesn't know many of them very well, and there are some things about a couple of them she would rather not be associated with. In comparison she knows her white grandparents very well and feels very close to them.

Well, to me, I love my nanna and pop. They've done everything for me. Like, Christmas times and birthday times they buy me presents and everything, but then my Aboriginal aunties, they don't give me nothing. I was born on one of my Aboriginal auntie's birthday, but I still don't get remembered on my birthday.... I know I'm Aboriginal but I respect my white relatives more than I do my Aboriginal ones.... I've got two uncles in gaol at the moment.... I don't know many of my Aboriginal relations. I wouldn't mind knowing them. Dad's not the type to go around introducing. We hardly ever go anywhere.

Her father agrees that Lucy doesn't see members of his side of the family very often.

Yes, she does, but not as often as the kids would like, I suppose. There is a vacuum in the Aboriginal side, in my side of the family, not being able to provide the cultural aspects of their Aboriginality. They often talk to me about stories, the history of my family, where they come from and how they fit in with the family tree, and things like that. They are very curious about Aboriginal history, their survival since settlement, for example. We talk about it in informal settings I suppose. I mainly try and give them as much as I can where it relates to my own people.

Despite the limited contact with her Aboriginal relatives, Lucy is still proud that she is Aboriginal, and acknowledges that she has advantages because of it. One non-material advantage of being Aboriginal relates to sport.

At weekends I do my sport. I play netball. I've been into that since primary school. I play A1 reserve. I reckon Aboriginal people have got a natural talent for sport. I reckon that's one thing we're all deadly at. Not one Aboriginal person is really hopeless at sport.

She feels that there are material advantages as well and feels that some Aboriginal people are missing out on these unnecessarily.

I've got a person in my class, she doesn't admit that she's black, but she is. I don't know why she won't admit it. To those sort of people it's really their loss. We get everything. We've got the Ab. Study room; they've got to sit out here in the cold. With me, I'm getting my drivers licence paid for - the school's got a special program for Aboriginal students - normally it's about 200 to 300 dollars. The government is doing so much to help Aboriginal people. They're denying the help. They don't want it. It's really their problem.

Then, again, Lucy believes that you can't have it both ways.

For some it's like they're only Aboriginal sometimes. You can't just be Aboriginal when you want. You're either Aboriginal or you're not. It's like they're saying it's a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. But I don't see what's wrong with it. I'd rather be Aboriginal than not.

Lucy has never been really challenged about her Aboriginality.

That would be a bit hard with me. I'm not really dark, but I reckon there's a bit of colour. You probably get that more from the Aboriginal side. Mum and dad have always dressed us really good, made sure we had everything we needed. Most Aboriginal kids don't have a really good family to support them. Like, we've got a computer and everything at home, and a pretty flash house, I reckon. They're probably a bit jealous and say we are more white than black, and put pressure on us like that. I reckon it comes more from the Aboriginal side. I've never heard a whitefella say that to me.

Lucy's father is confident that she knows who she is.

I don't think she has any identity problems. I thought about this issue when I met up with my wife before we were married, because she's non-Aboriginal. We didn't talk about it much, but I did a lot of thinking about it, about how it would be for the kids growing up in a community where Aborigines are in a minority; how that would affect the kids. The kids have talked about it and they see themselves as Aboriginal kids. It hasn't brought up, to my knowledge, any problems that kids with identity problems have got. As parents, my wife and I have always involved both sides of the family in growing the kids up. As they grew up, when questions were asked about their Aboriginality, for example, we talked about it. As far as her Aboriginality is concerned, she knows who she is and through her acceptance as an Aboriginal she is developing as a person.

Lucy's Maths teacher feels that there are several ways in which Lucy identifies herself as Aboriginal.

I guess, in the school sense, that they are actually on the list as being Aboriginal. And also those who actually go to the Aboriginal Studies room at recess and lunch time. They tend to mix more with the Aboriginal students in the school than with the non-Aboriginal students. The other students who don't consider themselves to be Aboriginal don't mix with the other Aboriginal students. They tend to mix with non-Aboriginal.

In this respect Lucy can be identified as being Aboriginal. But there is much more to Lucy's self-identification than that. Lucy's Australian Studies and Child Care teacher agrees that Lucy prefers to work with the one other Aboriginal girl in the class, "supporting one another with what they do" but she feels that Lucy identifies very strongly as Aboriginal in other ways. When there is a topic where Lucy feels she can provide another perspective, she does so.

She does a lot of research, and comes up with extra information... particularly when the topic is related to herself, her culture and Aboriginal people. She has selected topics that are related to the Aboriginal people as well.... Oh, very strong, a very strong identity. And she has taught me things

too, about their family and culture, things that I didn't know, for example, child rearing and things like that.

Sometimes Lucy expresses her views very strongly. Her teacher was rather concerned about the way she expressed the intensity of her feelings in one topic.

I thought she had to be careful about what she wrote because it was a little bit against the white people, that kind of thing. It was in relation to an essay she did on alcohol as an issue for young people.

This is an issue Lucy feels strongly about, and she was just expressing one view.

With alcohol there's lots of different views. I don't reckon Aboriginal people can handle alcohol, because it's not meant to be. That's why I think so many Aboriginal people are in gaol, because they can't handle the alcohol. But then, when you think of it, if the white people had not brought alcohol then they wouldn't have it right now. They wouldn't have had the alcohol and they wouldn't be in gaol.... It's something new. Once they've started they don't know how to stop. It's sad.

In Australian Studies, Lucy feels comfortable expressing her views in writing or in a small group situation, but she does not do so in front of the whole class. Her teacher comments:

She doesn't take very much part in class discussion at all. In fact, the two Aboriginal girls tend to be a bit shy. They won't talk to you in front of the whole class but will ask me to go over to them. Then they will talk about issues from the Aboriginal perspective. She'll talk in a small group and with me.

Generally Lucy looks at issues relating to Aboriginal people in a much broader perspective. She has done this in an English interpretive study. Her teacher was very impressed with her efforts.

She was very directed. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. She read *Cry Freedom*, and she looked at a video, *Stand and Deliver* I think, and I can't remember what the third one was. I thought it was a very good topic for her and she tackled it very well.... She did *racism*, and she looked at what was happening in America, what was happening in Africa. She didn't actually look much at what was happening in Australia in her connection, but she sort of spoke from her own experience. Another piece of writing I gave them was 'If you were in charge for a day, what would you change?' Racism featured again here. She would get rid of the governments because they caused the racism. [She says,] 'This has happened to me.' So she does relate what is happening in her life if it fits.

Teachers are not aware of much racist activity in the classroom, but acknowledge that it is a problem in the wider community and that means it would be in the school as well. Usually it comes out in comments students make. Three teachers comment on this and explain how they have dealt with such situations.

Yes, sometimes there are comments that the Aboriginal people get more than the white people do, the children in particular. I just sort of remember that, but I can't exactly remember the context. They [the Aboriginal students] just go very quiet and shy, and don't say much at the time. Usually, in cases like that, I have my little say and explain why they can't say things like that (Australian Studies teacher).

There's no racism toward her in the classroom, but because of the town, the way it is, there is racism in there. It's never really evident when she's there. And again, it's the boys. The girls aren't at all. The book we read at the beginning was Gary Cruse's *Strange Object*.... The main character is, I wouldn't say racist, just ignorant. I know most racism is based on ignorance, but his is mainly ignorance.... Before I actually read the class the book I picked out the parts I thought might cause problems for Lucy, and I asked her about them. She told me to go ahead and read it all out, not to miss them out. The mission Aboriginals were all drunk. The kids didn't really say anything at all, just listened. Maybe they weren't listening! I was really concerned that I would get comments and that I wouldn't know how to deal with them. I didn't want to set it up so that the kids would be attacking this race, and get Lucy and the other girl off side so that they wouldn't come to class (English teacher).

There was only one incident when one of the girls had started a petition up around the school because she thought it was unfair to have an Aboriginal room. But it was explained to her that it was an Ab. Studies resource room, and that she could use it as much as anybody else.... All the students are very aware of racist harassment and how to report it if they are a victim. Kids, generally, are very careful about what they say because they know that they can get into a lot of trouble. I suppose it does occur in very subtle ways (Maths teacher).

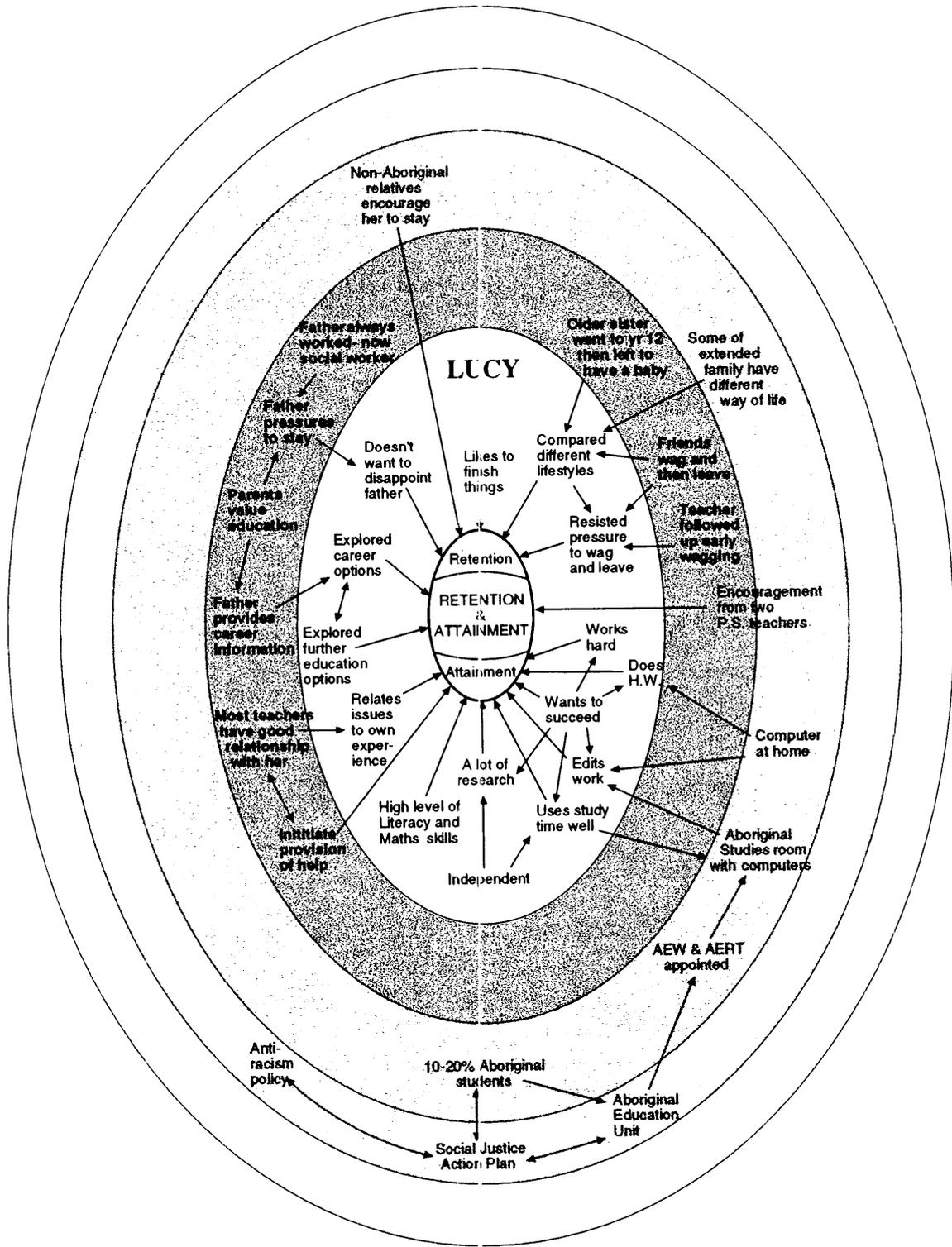
## Lucy - summary

Lucy has had both support and pressure from home to stay at school. She feels a responsibility to her parents, particularly her father, to do so. She has also compared herself with those of her Aboriginal peers who have already dropped out of school or intend to do so. She doesn't like the alternatives so is determined to finish Year 12, undertake further study, and get a good job in a caring profession. Lucy's academic potential to achieve her ambitions has been recognised by her teachers since she was at primary school.

At school Lucy likes to work with other Aboriginal students if she has the opportunity, but is also comfortable working with non-Aboriginal students as there were not many

Aboriginal students at her primary school. Now most of her Aboriginal peers have left school Lucy has developed a fairly independent learning style. In addition to having ability, Lucy also works hard, both at school and at home. Perceived racism from a few teachers has affected her subject choice and possibly her achievement in some subjects, but not to any great extent.

Only Lucy's father is Aboriginal, but Lucy identifies strongly as Aboriginal and has made an effort to learn and to use aspects of her cultural heritage in a positive way. Figures 6.7 and 6.8 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors associated with Lucy's retention, attainment and identity.



**Figure 6.7** A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between factors important in Lucy staying at school and achieving academic success.

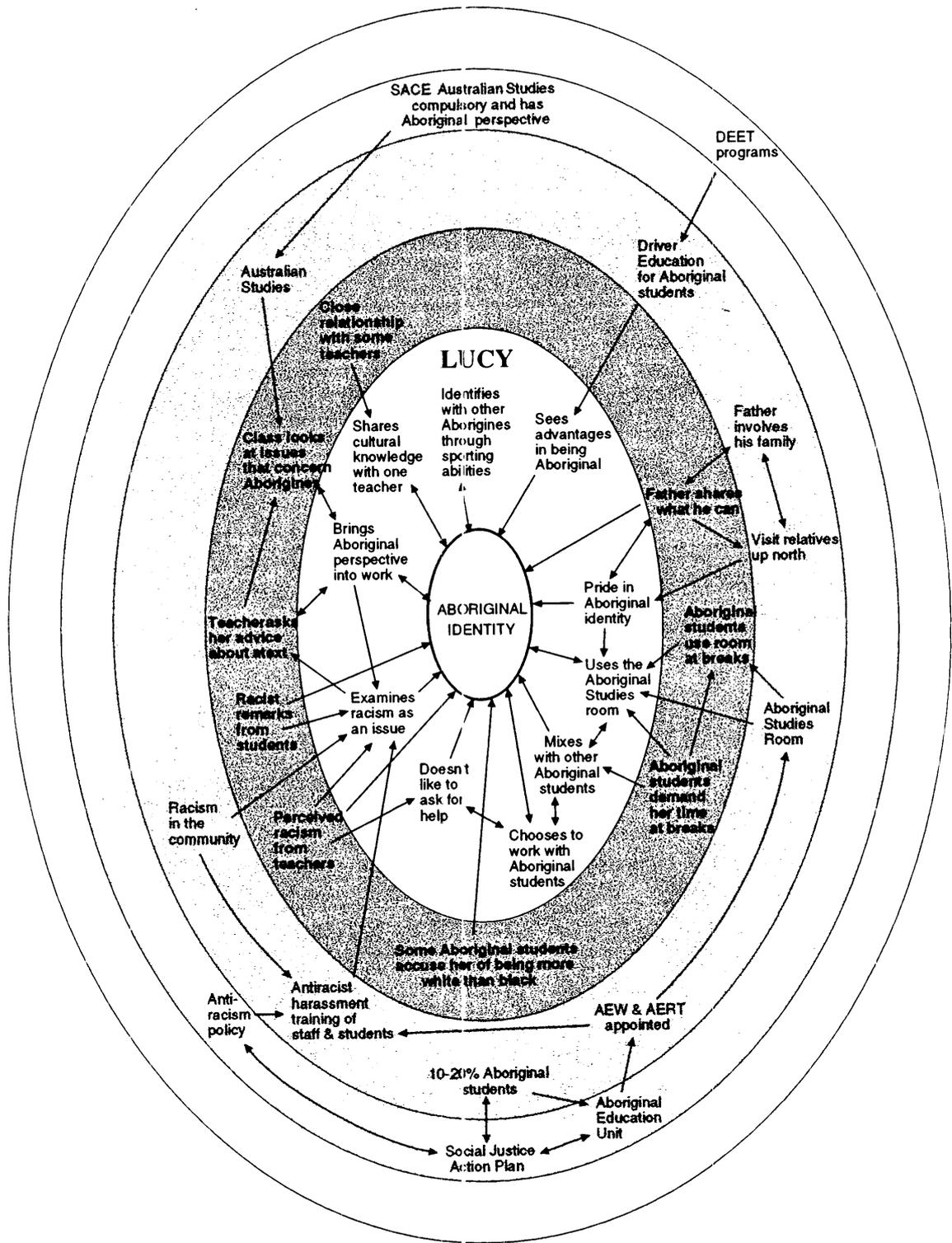


Figure 6.8 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between factors important in fostering Lucy's Aboriginal identity or arising from it.

## Expected stayers - summary

This chapter has introduced the case studies of four students who have been classified as *expected stayers* because of their academic ability and their motivation to complete Year 12 and to go on to further study. All four students are female and all have experienced losing most of their Aboriginal peers early in their secondary school years. The former AERT at Helen's school believes that most Aboriginal students do not stay at school because they are unable to break down the barriers that make it difficult for them to succeed at school.

I think that identity thing and the racism of the school, in its structures, stand in the way of them being successful. Lots of the kids that aren't successful here really enjoyed primary school and were successful. That identity thing hits about Year 9 or 10. It becomes a really big issue.

The *expected stayers* have found ways to overcome this. This is most likely because they are confident of who they are, where they are going and why. All of them have been and still are helped in their endeavours by their families and like-minded friends. For three of them it was important that some of these friends were also Aboriginal, but Lucy had to rely on her non-Aboriginal friends as she had done in primary school. Although all four students are quite unique, the similarities and differences between the four students and their environments are more obvious when comparing and contrasting the two causal network matrices that accompany each descriptive case study.

The following chapter introduces another group of students. These students are either just as highly motivated but less academically able or just as academically able but less motivated than the *expected stayers*. These three students have been categorised as *possible stayers*.