

CHAPTER SEVEN

POSSIBLE STAYERS

Introduction

Nicolas, in Year 11 at the time of the study, was recognised by his teachers and parents as being academically very capable. However, he was not as highly motivated as the Helen, Marcia, Lisa, and Lucy. Therefore, he has been categorised as a *possible stayer*. Larry and Sally, also in Year 11, stood out from most of their peers in junior secondary school. Despite the fact that they did not find school work easy and did not always succeed at a high level, they were both regular attenders, and were highly motivated to work and do the best they could. They have also been categorised as *possible stayers*.

NICOLAS

Nicolas is a Year 11 student at a R-12 school in a rural centre. The school has less than 200 secondary students and there are only a small number of Aboriginal students at the school, between zero and five percent. This has remained fairly constant over the years, as evidenced by old school photographs and reflects the number of Aboriginal families in the community. Nicolas has lived in this community all his life and has been one of only two Aboriginal students in his year level since beginning school. Now he is the only one. He has two younger sisters who attend the same school. Nicolas' father has a job which takes him away from the family during the week and his mother has not worked regularly since she had the children. However, she completed Year 12 at school and was training to be a kindergarten teacher before she married.

Nicolas is a very keen and talented sportsman. According to his Aboriginal Studies teacher, that has ensured his acceptance into the wider community:

Here, in this community, it doesn't matter who you are. They tend to judge people by how well you can play sport. They're almost tribal in their sporting allegiance, what football club you play for or belong to. He excelled at sport and was a very good football player and that seemed to seal his acceptance - that's what's made him accepted among the community.

Football seems to be his main love and he is very talented at it. He has been away with the team on several occasions, and has been selected to play for the district team in Adelaide. He now plays A grade even though he is still eligible to play for the colts. Nicolas' parents have supported his participation in a variety of different types of sporting activities. As his mother said:

At one time he wanted to be a swimmer, so we lugged him around the countryside. Then he decided to be a tennis player. He's still into it although he's pulled out this year. The same with basketball and footy. We've been everywhere with his basketball and footy.

Nicolas' mother sees Nicolas as a leader among his peers.

Whatever Nicolas says all his friends jump. He just seems to say something and they will just do it.

He is also a leader on the football field, having captained the under 16 team for two years, "leading by example" according to his coach. His Technical Studies teacher has also observed that Nicolas is a leader.

He is a very good talker and seems to be a leader in that area. In school most definitely. And in his peer group he is definitely a leader. He's very good looking, for a start. He's very, very good at sport, football in particular, and credibility in the sporting area tends to lead to leadership.

Nicolas will be leaving school at the end of the year because he has won a traineeship with DEET (now DEETYA). He is a bit tentative about leaving home, but his mother is sure that there will not be any problems once Nicolas makes the move.

Nicolas was really excited when he found he had got this job. Now I think he's starting to have second thoughts. I think he's afraid of leaving his friends and his family. He's finally realised he's got sisters. He never really had time for them before. Now he's even playing games with his sisters.... He even asked if he could defer his job, but he can't, so he's been thinking about staying at school to finish Year 12. But I think he'll go. He's lucky. He's got all my family over there. When I went to Adelaide I only had my grandmother. Once he gets there he'll be fine.

Nicolas' retention

The community within which Nicolas lives is quite small. The town no longer provides all the services to the rural community that it once did. Many people travel to the nearest regional centre for all but their basic daily requirements, and many travel there daily for their employment. Nicolas' Typing teacher explains how community expectations are likely to have influenced Nicolas' decision to stay at school.

In this particular community very few students will drop out of school. So that's probably helped. He is considered as being one of us. Up until last year we haven't thought of him as being any different. It's just been expected of him and all the other kids he's been brought up with. He really hasn't had any Aboriginal friends. He's been with us all the way through, so why should he be any different. One of his friends, who just couldn't cope at school, is the exception as he left. I think Nicolas is felt to be reasonably bright, if he wants to be. So why should he leave?

Nicolas' Technical Studies teacher agrees:

I think there would have been community pressure to keep him at school, whereas in other communities there is an element that keeps them out of school. That's not here. So I think that would have a big effect on him staying at school.

In addition to, or perhaps because of, community expectations Nicolas did not want to be at home with nothing to do. He talked to his Technical Studies teacher about this.

The teacher says:

When he found out he had his traineeship, people asked him what he was going to do - whether he was going to stay at school or not. He responded that it would be very difficult to get a job, and he wasn't going to stay at home, so he would stay at school. He didn't want to do nothing, or be seen to be doing nothing. That's something very, very positive.

Also, being with his friends seems to be very important for Nicolas. His mother has noticed this.

He's very rarely by himself. He's not like me. Sometimes I get sick of people and I'll decide to lock myself away for a day because I don't want to see people that day. Then I'll sit home and read a book. Nicolas will never do that. He's got to be with a crowd all the time.

If Nicolas had decided to leave school he would have been practically alone. All but one of his peers would have been at school and his older friends would have been at

work. And friends are the main things Nicolas likes about school.

In Year 11 I get on with everyone. Everyone hangs around together. I've also made a lot of friends outside school through football.

Nicolas' mother recalls that Nicolas has explored a variety of career options.

Ever since he was in Grade 2 he wanted to be a policeman. Then he wanted to be in the Army because he went motor bike crazy and he saw all these Army motor bikes in [the nearby regional centre]. Then he wanted to be in the Air Force. Then, when we went over for the graduation of a nephew as a police officer he decided he wanted to be a policeman again. He got a bit put off by some of the gruesome things in the magazine this nephew sends over, but he still kept coming back to it.

Nicolas has also had two successful Work Experience placements, and he recalls that over the last few years several teachers have spent time with him, talking about the future and possible careers.

There's been a few teachers who have helped me along the way. They've helped me with the work and made me look to the future.

For example, Nicolas' Australian Studies teacher has ensured that he has been exposed to the success stories of other Aboriginal people.

[The district AEW] has spoken to him, and she's a success story in her own right. And when he's read the Aboriginal magazines and journals he's read other positive Aboriginal success stories. I think he has worked out that the key to all the Aboriginal success stories is self-made. Most of them have gone back to school or uni. to study and got some more education or training, and then gone on to do something. I think he's started to realise these Aboriginal people have persevered with their studies.

One of the reasons Nicolas chose to do Typing was because he knew he would need it if he became a police officer. However, he had not really thought about other careers where he could use these skills. It was through the enquiries of the Student Counsellor that Nicolas heard about the clerical traineeship. Nicolas was interested because he could use his Typing skills. This same teacher helped Nicolas with the practice tests that were sent to the school and organised for Nicolas to do the actual test while he was in Adelaide on the Year 11 Careers Trip.

Despite these other factors, encouragement from Nicolas' mother is seen to be the

strongest force in keeping Nicolas at school. Nicolas' Australian Studies teacher felt that Nicolas did not really want to be at school when he was in junior high school.

When I first had contact with him in Year 9 he didn't really seem to understand why he was at school. He didn't see the links between work, school and study at that stage. He was at school because he had to be.... His mum was quite concerned that he stay at school. She was aware of the benefits of education, but Nicolas wasn't.

His Typing teacher also thinks that his mother would have had a strong influence on Nicolas' decision to stay at school.

I'd like to think that his mum had a reasonable influence on him. After all, I always thought she was pretty bright, and I'm sure she went away to become a kindergarten teacher. A lot of people don't know that. There must be some parts of her that wishes she had gone on with that, so she probably wants Nicolas to succeed where she didn't.

According to his Australian Studies teacher, Nicolas' mother has taken a "parental watchdog" role, coming in to the school to check up that he was attending classes and behaving in class.

Besides encouraging him, it's been standover tactics. That would be his major driving force.

Nicolas' mother has supported him at school in other ways too, even foregoing some other interests in the process.

I haven't been to...since I was three years old. I had the chance to go with my mother, and even had my tickets bought, but that was the time of the Year 11 school trip to Adelaide and I decided I'd rather go on the school trip. I'll get there one day. This is the first time I'd been on a school trip. I was dying to go on another trip with one of my daughters, but I thought the Year 11 trip was more important.

Nicolas' attainment

Nicolas' mother believes that Nicolas has plenty of ability but doesn't always apply himself to his work.

Nicolas has got the ability to do whatever he wants to do. He just wasn't using it. First term this year we had lots of trouble with him, in his work.

He was just passing. He knew he could do a lot of better, but he doesn't like doing homework.... It's so simple for him. He's got a friend who lives around the corner who has to study all the time just to pass. Nicolas, if he studied, would probably come top of the class. Nicolas was doing double maths, but he pulled out of it because it was hard, but he was passing it.

Nicolas' Australian Studies teacher agrees with his mother about Nicolas' ability and potential.

A lot of ability. Almost unlimited potential, depending on how far Nicolas wants to go.... Basically he seemed to be very adaptable in any particular area he was interested in.... He's very quick with figures. For the last couple of years he has been very interested in his grades. He wanted to get good grades. He is very good at working out the percentages for his grades, and things like that.

The same teacher believes that Nicolas' desire to get good grades was related to his exploration of career options.

Basically, last year and this year he has started to focus on career choices, and what he wanted to do. He realised then that for his career choices...he needed to get good grades. He started to equate good grades with what he wanted in terms of career opportunities.... I've seen more of a focus this year.... He could see the relationship between work and school then.

Nicolas agrees that he has found work at school relatively easy; that "only bits and pieces" of it have been hard. He has always "passed" everything. He has some problems with the amount of work that is required for the SACE, but is confident that he will pass at the end of the year.

They just pile work on you all the time. I got a bit behind when I was going for my job. I've only just caught up.... I've only got three exams, I think. I've got a two hour Maths one, but that should be pretty easy as I'm cruising with my Maths. Then there's Typing - typing up stuff. That's easy, I reckon. English - we've had a practice one and I got 17 out of 20 for that. So I'm not worried about my exams.

Despite this, there have been times when Nicolas has under-rated his potential. He seems genuinely surprised that he did so well in his traineeship test, being in the top ten in the state, but neither his teachers nor his mother are at all surprised. His Technical Studies teacher comments:

I'm not. I'm not at all surprised. He seems to under-rate his achievement as far as school is concerned.

This may be because Nicolas has not always produced work of a high standard. On several of his junior secondary reports teachers commented that Nicolas tended to rely on his natural ability rather than working to succeed. The following sums up these comments: Nicolas "has yet to learn that ability alone is not enough for success". Nicolas also has a tendency to be tentative when trying new things. His Technical Studies teacher has noticed this.

The way I see it he doesn't like to do things wrong, or to be seen to be wrong. Whereas other kids are more prepared to keep doing it until they get it right, he likes to do it right first time. Once he finds he can do it, there's not problem, he does it very quickly and very well.... The only area where he lacks confidence is in acquiring new skills. He certainly won't be the first one to have a go at anything. He gets other students to show him, and to help him get started, even after I have shown him something.

Nicolas' mother doesn't feel that Nicolas does enough homework, despite the fact that she puts pressure on him to do it.

I hated homework when I was at school, but I had pressure put on me to do it so he's got to do it too.... He always seems to leave things to the last minute.

Nicolas doesn't agree. In a joint interview with his mother he asserted to his mother:

You don't see me doing my homework. I'm in my room.

Typing is one subject where he has done significant amounts of homework, especially more recently. His Typing teacher feels that this is related to his job.

I've noticed that change. Since he's got the job there has been a renewed interest because he knows that this is a subject that he really requires.... It's a wonderful machine [the word processor]. I've noticed since he's got his job Nicolas is doing his homework on it. He doesn't always do his work in class but his work is always passed up on time, so he must do his homework on it. He prefers to have a good time in class, but he also wants to get his work done.

Nicolas' Australian Studies teacher feels that relationships with teachers are very important in Nicolas' success at school.

That seems to be the single most important factor in whether he succeeds or doesn't succeed. If he can't form a successful working relationship with a

teacher then he doesn't seem to do very well in that subject.... For Nicolas it is important that he has a relationship where he feels secure. And likewise, if you have to discipline or tell him off. If he doesn't like you it will turn him off and he'll go away and sulk, and show a whole range of negative behaviours. If he likes you and respects you, you can tell him off. He knows you're not doing it personally. He'll go away and come back and try and do better.

The importance of such relationships is reiterated when Nicolas describes the kind of teachers he likes.

Teachers that like me. Teachers that help you and all that stuff, and tell you what you have to do. And also that will muck around with you and that sort of thing.... One of my good teachers this year and last year, he's a real sporty guy. He plays basketball and football, and all that. He likes all the things that I'm in to, and all that kind of stuff. And even after school, and all that. He's a top teacher. He's got a sense of humour and everything. He understands everything to you and all that. The student counsellor is the kind if person that sits down and listens to you. That's what he's good for, and as a teacher.

One of the things that has hindered Nicolas reaching his potential in the past has been his behaviour. According to his mother:

I expected Nicolas to be a bit of a brat in Year 8 when he came up from primary school. But he was a little angel. Year 9 he retaliated. I was here all the time having interviews with the teachers because Nicolas would not settle down.

Even Nicolas admits that he has mucked around at school.

I've had troubles - just mucking around a fair bit, from the teachers' point of view. Teachers have written in my reports that I have been distracted by this and that, but I never seen myself doing that. Oh, in ways you do.

During this year there has been quite a dramatic change in behaviour. His mother says that he is now the one complaining that other students are mucking around in class.

He settled down in more in Year 10. Then this year he started to complain about others who were mucking around.

Nicolas recognises that some students have encouraged and supported him in changing his behaviour.

There's a few students who tell you to do your work and not to muck around.

Nicolas' Aboriginal identity

Nicolas' mother is Aboriginal, as are both of her parents, but his father is non-Aboriginal. Until recently Nicolas had shown very little interest in his Aboriginal heritage, mainly because he had had few opportunities to do so. Most of his relatives on his maternal grandfather's side live some distance away and his mother has not visited them since she was a young child, although they have occasionally visited her. Nicolas has had more frequent contact with his maternal grandmother and her immediate family because most of them live in Adelaide, and Nicolas and his immediate family have spent many school holidays with them. However, Nicolas' maternal grandmother was brought up in a children's home and had little to pass on to Nicolas' mother who comments:

She went to Adelaide when Nicolas was only three. Anyway, mum wouldn't know a lot. She was brought up in the Colebrook Children's Home. She's only just starting to learn herself. She's also just starting to talk about her life in the home. Mum went up there about twelve years ago for a reunion of some kind.

A few things have happened more recently to enthruse Nicolas to explore his Aboriginal heritage. For example, one of his mother's cousins has recently gone through tribal rules. His mother recalls that:

When Nicolas first met him, when he [Nicolas] was just a little kid, he was really scared of him because he's really black.... He didn't go through the rules until he moved to [an Aboriginal community].... He thought he'd go through the rules to protect his family. Nicolas became really interested in him after that.

Then, as Nicolas' mother reports, last year the district AEW encouraged her and another Aboriginal mother to participate in NAIDOC week celebrations at the school.

And we didn't even know what we were doing. But we had fun doing it. We had a dance and a big cook-out, and Nicolas got involved in doing up the foyer with some artefacts. That's when he started to get interested in it, I think. But he didn't say much more about it...until he did the Aboriginal Studies unit this year. He became more interested recently.

Now, according to his Australian Studies teacher, Nicolas is "hungry for knowledge about his Aboriginal past". Nicolas takes every opportunity to find out more when he meets his relatives that live some distance away.

My uncles out...way. They know a lot more. I just ask them a bit each time. I know most of my relatives in Adelaide.... It's just the ones out...way I don't know.

Nicolas likes Australian Studies, partly because his teacher has also provided him with written material about local Aboriginal issues and helped him make contact with local Aboriginal people as part of the course.

Through it I have found out more about my family. I've also found out about people I have got in touch with, like [the district AEW].

Nicolas has even got his mother exploring Aboriginal issues and finding out more about her own extended family so she can tell him more. The teacher believes that this has not happened in the past because Nicolas has, until recently, been more or less treated as a 'white' student.

He has almost been treated as a white or non-Aboriginal student. That's been a survival strategy. Now he's discovering that he is Aboriginal he's been reading stuff, and the more he finds out the more he wants to learn. He is very curious about his Aboriginality. His mum is sort of helping him a bit now.... His mother has been doing some research into Black deaths in custody and has been involved in some of that stuff lately. Because he has wanted to find out more, she has had to find out more to answer his questions.

The district AEW has been a good contact person for this because, as Nicolas' mother points out:

She knows more about my family than I do. Her sister stopped with my grandmother in Adelaide.

At school the social justice focus in recent years has been on Aboriginal students. This has emphasised to Nicolas that he is different from the other students in his classes. For example, the school was given a word processor to be used by the Aboriginal students and by staff preparing work for them. Because Nicolas has done Typing for the last two years he has been able to use it most often. This initially created some problems for his Typing teacher because she felt uncomfortable that Nicolas was being treated differently.

He brought it to the class for three weeks at the most. I could see the looks on the other kids' faces and I just felt it wasn't right. It was making him different from everyone else.

Nicolas ended up taking the word processor home and working on it there. Around this time Nicolas' reports commented on his negative behaviour, particularly his attitude toward teachers and his work, and his relationships with other students, commanding their respect rather than earning it. His Typing teacher blames the school's social justice focus for at least some of that.

Teachers in this school felt strongly that they wanted to be in on the social justice bit. They started to make him think of himself as being different. From then on we've had quite a bit of trouble.... From my perspective he thought that he was one of us, the same as everyone else. Then, all of a sudden, there was this thing that he was someone very special.... He went through this almost aggressive stage. There seemed to be a lot of fighting out in the yard and a lot of kids were very scared of him.

It is possible that Nicolas was reacting to a change in the way teachers were treating him.

Up to that time Nicolas had not been particularly aware of racist comments for what they were. According to his mother, Nicolas has never gone home and complained of racism at school.

Nicolas wouldn't say anything to me about things like that. He clams up until I hear something and ask him about it. He deals with it in his own way.

But there have been some incidents. Nicolas now recalls that he was subject to some racist remarks when he was in primary school, but he did not recognise them as such at the time.

They made a few racist comments when I was in Grade 4 or 5. Just racist names. [Did those comments hurt?] Not then, they didn't. They just went over the top of my head.

Now Nicolas is more aware. His current reaction to racial name calling emphasises the importance of his perception of it.

It depends who it is. If it's someone I don't like, something might happen.... I might have a word to him, or a fight might start. Other than that it doesn't worry me. If it's one of my friends just mucking around I won't pay any attention. If a friend says something like, 'You stupid black bastard', I might just give him the same back and call him a white something.

Nicolas tends to treat each incident individually and asserts that, from his perspective:

Racism's not a big problem. It's nowhere as bad as...or...and those places. I know its worse there because it happens when I'm down there with my cousins and that.

Nicolas' mother has lived in this community most of her life and went to the same school Nicolas now attends. She says she has not been subject to racism since she stood up for herself soon after she arrived, but at that time the children who did not stand up for themselves were given a hard time. She feels it has a lot to do with the fact that there are so few Aboriginal people in the community:

In a place like [the nearby regional centre] where there's so many Aboriginal people, they mix with their own groups and don't mix very much with others. Here you don't have much choice. It's just one big community. You just get in and mix. Even my cousin [who lives in the same town] and I don't mix very often. We have completely different groups of friends.

But she also thinks that her own personality plays a part in this.

I don't think I'd get harassed wherever I was. I'm not that kind of person. We got a transfer once, but I didn't want to go because I wouldn't know anyone. But my husband said, 'Go on with you. You talk to anyone in the street. You'd soon know more people than I would.'

Comments from Nicolas' Typing teacher, who also taught his mother, support this.

From my memories, we never thought of her as being any different from anyone else. I'm not sure whether she did.... She was a very happy-go-lucky, easy-going sort of person.

Despite Nicolas' mother's lack of negative experiences, and Nicolas' perception that racism is not a big issue, teachers feel that the community is racist. Nicolas' Australian Studies teacher describes the community in the following way:

This is a very small racist community. Most of the community don't have much experience with Aboriginal people, and what they do tends to be negative. There aren't any Aboriginal drunks around here, but they see them elsewhere in the hotels. They begin to stereotype all Aboriginal people that way.

And, according to Nicolas's Typing teacher, comments about Aboriginal people in

general, particularly those in the nearest regional centre, are most often derogatory.

Yes, it's interesting. I don't think the students really are, but I do feel that the parents are. When I first came to this community.... I was really shocked the way people referred to Aboriginal people. Just the names they called them.

Then there are the more subtle innuendoes. For example, because Nicolas is so talented at sport, particularly football, there are those who think that he should not take the traineeship so that he can stay in the community and play football for them. Nicolas' mother has interpreted this attitude as being racist, reflecting community expectations of Aboriginal people in terms of employment.

One lady said, 'You can't let him go'. So I said, 'If it was your son and I said that to you, what would you do?' She replied that she would tell me to mind my own business, and that she would let her son go. But she kept on about it, saying that he was such a good footballer and we needed him. So I said, 'So what? I'm letting him go. His career comes first.'

Teachers tend to agree with Nicolas that overt racism is not a big problem for him in the school context. Nicolas' Australian Studies teacher explains that students:

tend to look around and over their shoulders to see that Nicolas isn't there before they make any racist comments. Most of the racism is hidden in the background and is hard to identify.

But this year, when Nicolas' Australian Studies class began to look at issues in society and the way they affect different people, particularly Aboriginal people, racism surfaced in the class. The teacher noticed that:

A lot of people were scared to express their feelings about Aboriginal people because they were frightened of offending him. When he wasn't in the classroom there were a lot of racist things coming out, but when he was in the classroom they wouldn't say anything.

As this affected a significant part of the Australian Studies course, Nicolas' teacher sought some outside assistance.

We got in touch with our local Aboriginal Education Worker. She came up and talked to Nicolas and the class and broke the ice, and we workshopped our way out of it.

There has also been at least one more major incident in the recent past. One was between Nicolas and another boy who was also a good sportsman and played the same sports as Nicolas. The principal helped the two boys resolve that conflict. Nicolas also appreciates that he has been able to spend time with the principal learning appropriate ways to deal with racial harassment.

I've also spent a bit of time talking with [the principal]. Sometimes he comes to see me, or I go down to his office. We've talked about my nationality. He's [of a European nationality] and he told me when he came to Australia he couldn't speak English, so he's been through it as well. Just talked to him when other kids have been giving me a hard time about being Aboriginal. But it hasn't happened often.

Sometimes it is unclear whether the harassment is racist or not, particularly when it occurs during a sporting activity. For example, last year Nicolas had some problems during one of his football games. According to his mother:

Some kid must have been calling him names.... But we don't know whether that was racial or just ridicule. It had started on the football field.... The kid just went on and on at him. There have been individual incidents but nothing ongoing.

According to his Australian Studies teacher Nicolas has now learnt not to react.

He would lose his cool and his concentration. Now he is smart enough to realise that he's being set up.

Recently Nicolas has experimented with expressing his Aboriginal identity. He has written some poetry that reflects the identity crisis he is going through.

Another seven faces, another misery.
No-one seems to realise the fate of history.
Please, look at what you have done...
Dying, looking back on our mistakes,
But no-one wants to learn...
Doubting my existence, memories remain...

Nicolas says he can express in his poetry thoughts he cannot talk to other people about, but he does not often share his poetry with others.

Well, no-one knows. There's only a few people know that I write like that. I do that in my own time. No-one knows. Mum doesn't know.

Also, in his Art work he has chosen to experiment with traditional styles of Aboriginal art and with how the red, black and yellow colours of the Aboriginal flag can be incorporated.

Nicolas - summary

Nicolas is recognised as having a great deal of natural ability, both academically and in the sporting arena. Despite encouragement from his teachers and his mother, pressure from his mother, and a desire to pursue a career, Nicolas has never worked very hard at school. However, he is recognised as a natural leader among his peers and enjoys school as a place to be with his friends. Nicolas will not be staying at school to complete Year 12 because he has won a clerical traineeship with DEET.

Nicolas has never had the opportunity to spend much time with Aboriginal peers because there are so few in the community. It appears that he had not thought of himself as being Aboriginal until relatively recently, certainly not in the contexts of most other Aboriginal students his age who live where there are more Aboriginal people. A variety of occurrences have facilitated his recent exploration of his Aboriginal identity. Figures 7.1 and 7.2 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors associated with Nicolas' retention, attainment and identity.

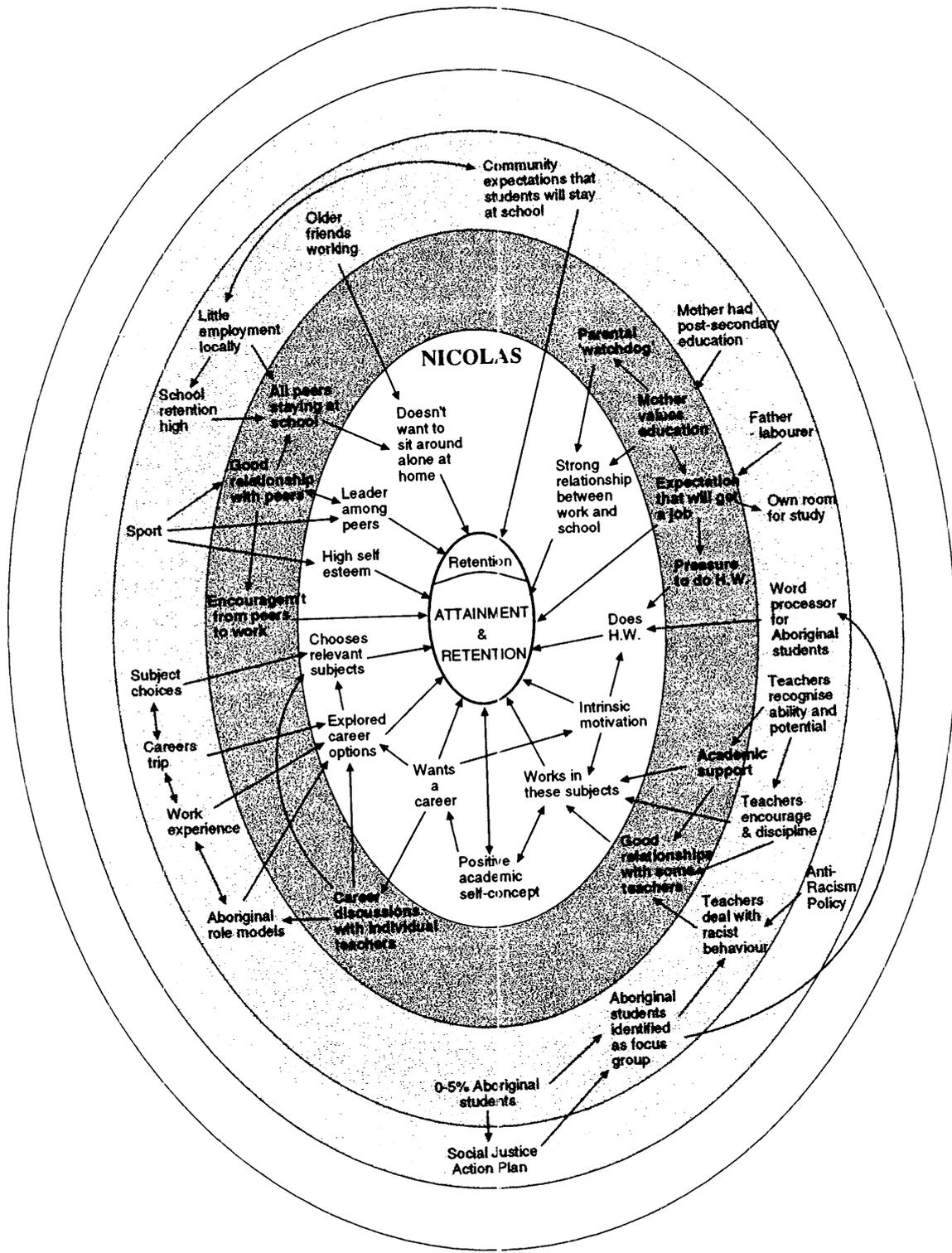


Figure 7.1 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between the various factors important in Nicolas staying at school and achieving success.

LARRY

Larry is a Year 11 student at an 8-12 school in a regional centre. There are over 600 students at his school and less than 5 percent are Aboriginal. However, the actual number of Aboriginal students at the school fluctuates because there is particularly high transiency of Aboriginal families in and out of the town. The majority of Aboriginal students are in Years 8 and 9. Of those that were with Larry in Year 8, only a few are still attending school. As Larry says, there are:

about 3 now, I think. In Year 8 there were about 20 in my same year level. Most of them pulled out last year or the beginning of this year.

Larry has a younger brother who is still in primary school. He also has an older sister who is part-way through a book-keeping traineeship with Aboriginal Health. She has her own flat but whenever Larry's mother goes away for a few days his sister comes home to look after the family. Larry's father is an invalid pensioner, crippled with arthritis, and has been unable to work for many years. Larry doesn't ever remember him working. His mother left high school very early and was married soon afterwards.

There is an active Aboriginal Community Centre in the town, but the Aboriginal people are divided. Some families have moved out of town to avoid the conflict. Larry's sister comments:

The community was coming together but some have made homelands groups and this has just divided the community. I'm just against that. But if that's what they want you can't stop them. I don't like that because it's like blacks out of town and the whites in the town. I'd rather stop in town.

Larry's retention

Both of Larry's parents went to high school, but did not go as far as Larry and his sister have gone. According to Larry and his sister, their father went to primary school in this town, but moved around a bit with his family when he was in high school, and he ended up leaving school in Year 9 or 10 "because of family problems". Larry and his sister cannot agree when their mother left school but do agree that she did not go very far at high school. Larry provides one reason why his mother may have left school so early:

But where she come from [in] Western Australia, they just put a lot of black kids out of school.

Larry's sister left school before starting Year 12. She explains why:

I did Year 11 at high school. I was going to do Year 12 but my grandfather got sick and we had to be over there for the first three months. So I decided to start working as I had missed so much at school. Dad is really strong about education so I started doing part-time courses. Then this short book keeping course came up so I got into that. Then the traineeships came up so I just went for them. I've got a two year traineeship. When I first started I didn't think I was going to do anything, and dad didn't know that I was going to do anything. Once I had dropped out of school he thought that I had just bombed out. But I've had to keep proving it to him that I can learn and have a job.... I wasn't really good at maths. I didn't know I was going to do this, but you change after a while.... Once I finished high school I had to look for a job. I needed money to make an income.

She acknowledges that her parents have had a lot to do with her attitude and approach to education.

I know a lot of what I'm doing is because of dad. He's always wanted us to have what he couldn't have. He got sick soon after he and mum got married. It's really got a lot worse in the last couple of years. In a way that's had a good effect on us. It's made me strive to do my best. It's made me strive to do my best. That's why I work. I do everything for him. You know in your heart that it's to put his name up there. That's what keeps me going - mum and dad.... When I get depressed mum and dad keep telling me how good it's going to be in the end, and so I just keep going. But it's also from yourself, where you want to go. You need that support. I have to have that talking to all the time.

Larry agrees that pressure from his parents has been important in him staying at school.

I don't know really, just my parents - making me go to school to get an education. You need a job to get something in life. They're not going to give you anything, anyway. You got to do it yourself.... If it wasn't for them I'd probably have pulled out of school long ago. But I just keep going, you know, because that's just the only way to get anything in life.

Larry's English teacher agrees that parental support has been important in Larry staying at school, but she also thinks that this has been reinforced by encouragement from teachers at school.

I think it's a lot of parental support, that the parents are interested in what he is doing.... I find them very approachable.... It's that, and Larry can see that now I have talked about it. I said, for some employers just the fact that you have done Year 11, even if you haven't got brilliant marks, because not everyone is academic. Some people have got different skills in different areas, and the fact that you have got Year 11 shows you are willing to stick at something, and that goes a long way in the end, especially for Aboriginal

people. If you are an Aboriginal person who can get through the schooling system, I mean, there's a lot of barriers to it, but that opens a lot more options for you in the future. I think he realises that through pep talks at home and from other staff.

She believes that teachers need to continue to encourage students, Aboriginal students included, to look ahead to the future; that teachers' expectations of students are important, even if they are not always realised.

There were a couple of other kids that I was sure were going to do it, too. I was really talking to them about it, and they have left. You can just hope and sort of have that expectation. I try to look at my expectations. It is easy to expect that Aboriginal kids won't go to Year 12. With Year 8 students I tell them, 'When you are in Year 12 you do this, that, and something else. After you have done Year 12, what are you going to do?' Just the idea and talking to kids about it.

However, despite agreeing that he needs to stay at school to improve his options for the future, Larry does not have any firm idea what type of job he wants. He says:

I'm only young yet. When I get older I'll probably finish school.

Because he is so undecided about what he wants to do when he leaves school he is not very interested in Work Experience, even for this year.

No, not yet. I didn't do any last year either. I haven't really thought about what I want to do.

Larry enjoys Art and is good at it. The Art staff at the school are encouraging him to pursue this and have organised for him to explore a career in this area. Larry is looking forward to this.

At the end of this month ASSPA are thinking of taking me to the expo., and [to] spend one or two weeks looking at a traineeship in Art, Aboriginal Art.

However, at the moment Larry does not see Art as providing him with many employment options.

I'd like to continue my interest in Art, but I'd do something to back it up, like Mechanics. So when I finish school I can go down to TAFE and do all Art courses and Mechanics.

He sat for an apprenticeship test, and had an interview, but nothing came of it, so he is staying at school.

Larry's Australian Studies teacher believes that it is the success that Larry has achieved that has encouraged him to stay at school when all but two of his Aboriginal peers left.

Larry is pretty quiet on that side. I don't think he would talk about it. I think he would experience more success than what the others were doing.

His English teacher also believes that success is important in Aboriginal students' decision to stay at school or to leave. She believes that Larry has the potential to succeed in Year 12 English and will therefore encourage him to try it.

I really hope that he will. Larry, I guess I'm looking more at English than with other subjects, but certainly he could do SAS and get a grade for that.

His caregroup teacher also believes that the success Larry has had so far might have encouraged him to stay at school. She comments about his artistic ability:

Larry, I hear from Art teachers, has more than average talent in Art.... I know a former Art teacher of his thought that he should be encouraged, that the talent is very real. Whether that's keeping him at school I don't know.

Larry's attainment

Larry's favourite subject is Art. He really enjoys it. It is also the area where Larry has had most success. He does both Art and Design. His Art teacher is impressed with his skills and his approach to the work.

He is a talented student, a reasonably hard working student, a student that is creative, a student that isn't afraid to take risks. He isn't afraid of showing his work; isn't afraid of other people seeing his work. He's someone that is fairly confident, someone who is self reliant. You can give him a task to do and he can do it by himself with confidence. He's also someone that enjoys his work. He's an above average student.... He is quite dedicated. He will pass quite easily Year 11, which is really good.... If he was just a little bit more dedicated he could probably handle Year 12 next year. There is a lot more theory next year so it will be hard for him.... I think it would just be him applying himself to the theory because his Art course is very much practical based at the moment. There is an element of theory, but not a great deal.

The teacher feels that Larry's relationships with the other students in the class has also contributed to his positive approach to this subject.

He is one of the senior kids in the class. I have Year 9s to Year 12s in the

same class. I take all the Aboriginal students and he is one of the most senior kids. He knows all the other kids and gets along with them very well, and jokes around with them, and enjoys himself in the class.

His Art teacher feels that, apart from his talent and the fact that there are a large number of Aboriginal students in the class, part of this could be that he gets on well with the teacher.

Probably because I have a good relationship with him.... I can sit down and talk to him about an issue or a problem and he can respond maturely when the time's right, or we can joke about football teams or something. If he doesn't like the same football team as me we can joke about that. We can get along just fine like that.

Larry agrees that relationships with teachers are very important for Aboriginal students to succeed at school. He adds that students and teachers have joint responsibility for student learning, although it may be up to the teacher to make the first move and make special provisions for them to succeed. He states his ideas succinctly.

Some kids don't try to learn. They just muck around. The ones that try to learn they give more help. But then it can go both ways. It's up to the teachers. If the teachers get on good with them then they'll probably help them.

I reckon if they had a Nunga room for kids, they could just go in there and learn, with a good teacher who knows lots of things about English and that. If the kids don't want to learn then they should go catch up on support. Make them do support so they can succeed.

Larry, himself, has no problems getting on with his teachers and feels that he gets all the help he needs.

Like in most of my classes, I've got some good teachers. They give me a lot of help. [Good teachers] do things for you. If they don't you won't go and ask them for any help. You don't worry about it [the work]. You just sit there and don't do it.

But he doesn't feel particularly confident about asking for extra help.

No, not really. I just get on with my work. I'd ask for help if I'm kind of behind.... But if you're not confident you wouldn't ask the teacher.

His English teacher has recognised this and goes out of her way to see that he has the help he needs. She describes how she works with the class, and Larry in particular.

He is like a lot of other Aboriginal kids in that he is very respectful of authority, and a teacher being an authority figure. If it's something he sees as really important he will approach me, but I guess I sort of check with all the kids. The Aboriginal kids are a priority because I know that they are less likely to ask if you have got a whole group of kids around you or you are talking to other kids. They are less likely to ask, so I sort of check on them at the beginning of the lesson.... But, yeah, he will take some initiative with what he is doing. He will tell me, 'I don't want to do that. I want to do this instead.' So he's not too bad. But he is still fairly reluctant to push a point He will just leave it a bit.

Larry would much prefer to ask his peers or the Aboriginal Education support staff, but, in Technical Studies, when the AERT is not there Larry still works well, seeking help when he needs it.

We get on really well. He is very quiet, but I am aware of that and try to get to him as much as I can. The other Aboriginal student does help him and the fact that the AERT is there helps, but he's not afraid of coming up and asking questions which is good.... Like, just the other day, when he was fitting some hinges, he came over a couple of times to get the hinge to fit and just check out a couple of things.

However, at other times he has tended to rely on them rather than talking things over with the subject teacher. This has created some problems for him. He did not hand in his last major assignment, one he working on with the other Aboriginal student. His teacher explains:

We did some work in the library on that. They found books and I thought they were quite enthusiastic. The AERT was working with them but the assignment never eventuated. It got to the date it was required and the AERT was away, hadn't been at school for a month...and that disintegrated. That was disappointing because I am sure they had done some work on it but I couldn't get it out of them.

Larry has always been a rather shy student who gets on with his works quietly. This was commented on in several of his primary school reports. Since coming to secondary school Larry's reports have varied considerably from one subject to another. In some subjects the comments have been very positive, and it seems that Larry has been able to distance himself from some of the negative influences in his classes. In other subjects his Aboriginal peer group seems to have had a negative influence on Larry's approach to school and his work. For example, there were some attendance problems before most of his Aboriginal peers left school, something Larry himself comments on, emphasising the importance of support from the school in this area:

Yeah. The Nunga workers, the Aboriginal Study workers. Help you get to classes, so no-one can get up to mischief, missing lessons and that.

This is something he tried earlier.

Oh, yeah, in Year 8 I did, but now I snapped out of it - about Year 10. 'Cause in Year 8 and 9 you don't really care about it because you're still going to pass. There's more kids coming in so you just get pushed up anyhow. But in Year 10, that's when you start getting down to it, when there's a lot of work coming up. And if you fail then you'll be behind one year. But I passed.

He feels that passing at school is important.

Oh, yeah, if you want to get a job in that area. Maths and English, you need to pass them to get a good job.

Larry's English teacher has perceived this and reinforced it.

Well, I have had Larry for two years for English so I know him pretty well. He thinks that English is fairly important because he realises that he needs that in a number of areas. Sometimes that's because we have talked about the fact that employers need English and that is often what they are asking for.

Larry has never been particularly good at English, in the technical sense, but in many of his humanities reports there are positive comments about his ability to express his ideas and evidence of his willingness to work to improve his technical skills. His Australian Studies teacher feels that his literacy skills are appropriate for the level of work required.

His literacy skills are good, his interpretation, and in particular being able to read it and plan his work.

This year, in English, Larry is continuing to work on his technical skills.

Larry has persisted with his writing skills. His skills are low in some areas, for example, we have been looking at proof reading, editing, that sort of thing, and he still has a bit of problem with that, but that is gradually improving. There are still a few minor errors in terms of things like spelling, but that is getting a lot better...he is still struggling a little bit with paragraphing, but that is getting better. But generally, yeah, quite a good student.

Larry is also completing all the written work on time. If he needs extra time to complete something he negotiates that with his teacher. His English teacher reports:

He is a student who gets his work in on time. I have been fairly flexible with deadlines because I allow him to work at his own rate.... I do have deadlines for him but that's negotiable. If he feels he is not going to meet that we have a talk about it, where his work in progress is up to, that sort of thing. He handed in all his work last year. To date this year he has handed in all that as well.

This same teacher feels that it is very important for deadlines to be flexible because if they are not it reduces Larry's chances for success. She comments on his achievement in other subjects:

With his other classes he's doing okay, but what happens sometimes, when people have inflexible deadlines, he just doesn't get it in and then there is no chance of getting a grade for that.... So I know there's some subjects he's not keen on. But he does get to his classes and he makes an effort, but sometimes I think the deadlines are a problem, especially when people aren't willing to negotiate when work is due in, and that is totally destructive, I think.

Maths is not one of Larry's favourite subjects, and he hasn't always done well at it, but he has persisted in his efforts to succeed.

English, that's all right, and Science, but Maths is hard, Algebra and all that. I never really learned that at school. We were doing all different Maths. But I just caught up anyway, and learned from the answers in the back. I'd look up the answer and try to figure out how they get that there. Sometimes I did work on that and then I knew how to do that kind of answers. I learned pretty fast, but it was kind of hard because I didn't know any.

He believes the gaps in his knowledge in Maths are due to the fact that he didn't work very hard in Year 8 and he missed lessons.

You don't work in Year 8, or at least I didn't....When you missed out on lessons you don't really know it when you go back, in Maths and Science.

Larry's efforts in filling the gaps in Maths must have been at least partially successful because when it came to sitting for an apprenticeship test he did well.

I went for an interview for Mechanics because I got a high score in that test.

Even so, he does not particularly like Maths. He tries to pass because, as he says, "you need it to get jobs and that." Therefore, he does quite a lot of homework at home and

does not spend much time on the drawing that he loves.

Nah, I don't really have time at home. I have to catch up on my other work. There's lots to do in Year 11. If there's no movies or something I do two or three hours at night. If there's something good on TV I watch that for a while.

Larry is doing woodwork in Technical Studies. He was very tentative about the work at first but is enjoying it more now that he feels he can succeed.

I like Tech. Studies now, now I've got the hang of it. Once you learn how to do things you can get down to it harder. If you don't know it you won't do it.

The teacher feels that Larry has been helped by having the AERT come into the class and do the same work alongside the two Aboriginal students.

He is working exceptionally well in the practical side of things. He attends regularly, is very quiet but is doing a really good job. He has the support who comes along to the class, or has fairly regularly, and that's working exceptionally well.... It is a large class, something like 18 or 19 students, which is large for the workshop.... We have got to follow a fairly set program and therefore we can't give Larry or some other students that are having problems as much time as we would like. With the AERT being there that's worked exceptionally well because she's having the same sort of problems as Larry. There's another Aboriginal student in the group who would be one of the better students in the class practical-wise.... He and Larry are working extremely well together; very, very good, and achieving. It's not just their attitude, it's the success they are achieving.

Despite the fact that Larry will be able to take home a "classy bit of furniture" at the end of this semester course, his teacher is a bit perturbed by the fact that Larry does not demonstrate any kind of enthusiasm for his work. He says:

It would be nice to have some sort of feedback from Larry, that he's happy with what he's doing, but I haven't seen a smile or a spark in the eye, or anything. It's all even keel. I am sure he is because he wouldn't be such a regular attender, sort of plugging away, and it is something that is bordering on the mundane.

Although Larry relates well to non-Aboriginal students in his classes, his English teacher has noticed that he prefers to work with Aboriginal students when he can.

He gets along fairly well in class, gets along well with other students, is a bit shy of non-Aboriginal students in that he prefers to sit with Aboriginal students.

But there are not always Aboriginal students in his classes now as so many have left school. He says:

I just try to get the work done. Mostly I work by myself. I don't have a group I can work with, not now.

Even when there were more Aboriginal students at school, particularly earlier this year, he has had to choose not to work with his Aboriginal peers in order to succeed.

According to his Australian Studies teacher:

We did Land Rights as an issue. Larry showed interest and did the reading. There were seven Aboriginal students in the class. That's why I wanted to do it as an issue, and I had the AERT come in.... So it had the positive aspect of them working together if they wanted to work together. However, there was three that didn't want to work, then Larry could be dragged down. So he needed a lot of individual help and encouragement, and sometimes even isolation for him to work, and he did that by himself. He has isolated himself on occasions so he could do some work.... Just his dedication, isolating himself occasionally when he knows he has got to do some work whereas the others may want to grab a football magazine and read that, especially when they came back from the football carnival. I don't know, I just think that determination inside. Larry was interested in what the others did in football, etc, but he still knew that class work was there and continuing it became no issue at all.

Larry feels the support of his non-Aboriginal friends has been and still is important in helping him succeed.

Yeah. Some friends that I made in primary school. They're doing some of the same subjects as I am.

They also helped him resist the negative pressures from his Aboriginal peers in junior secondary school. Larry explains what these pressure were in the following way.

If you're black the only way you'll get anywhere is if you go against black people. Well, if there's two black fellas walking along and someone says something about going to lessons, and you go, then they'll say, 'You, white fella, you.' [Has that happened to you?] Yeah, sometimes I have, but not now. That was in Year 8. That's when most of the bludging was going on then. Most of your friends. It was just pressure, peer pressure.

Larry believes that the pressure to not work, not attend and drop out was reinforced by some teachers.

It was also the teachers. They wouldn't let you go into class without hassling you, and you don't want to get hassled in class. So you just don't go. You try and tell the teacher, but they wouldn't listen, so you just walk around in the school grounds, or go home.

Although there are no longer any Aboriginal students to encourage him not to attend lessons, Larry still feels that he gets unnecessarily hassled by some teachers. He believes some of them are racist, either directly to students or indirectly by not doing something about the racism from students that occurs within the classroom.

Yeah, some of them. Like, you can't work in the Library. They just chuck you out. I'm just getting some hassles from the teachers in the Library. I don't know why. They just always pick on you, in this Library probably. You get singled out. Ask you [what you are doing?]. You can be doing work, but they still ask you.

When you're sitting at a desk you can see it, and what's written on the walls and that. When you see your name written on the desk you feel like smashing it.

His sister reflects back to her time at the same school and comments on another area where she thinks teachers should do something about racism.

You feel it all the time. It really puts you off. White people can give their opinion on Aboriginals all the time, but Aboriginals can't give their opinion on white people. It still makes you feel bad. A lot of the time we used to get up and walk out of the room. If the teacher doesn't say anything about it the kids interpret it themselves and they think it is okay to do it themselves because they saw it on video. That's really sad.

Larry has not talked to anyone at school about this. He denies that it is a real problem.

No, not really. I don't know, I'm not really worried about it.

In fact, he feels that there is less of a problem with teachers now than there used to be.

Well, when we had that big strike. The teachers probably snapped out of it. All the teachers probably quietened down after that. I must have been in Year 9. All the teachers started to change their attitudes, changed for the better. You can get on with them more easier.

Larry's Aboriginal identity

Both Larry's parents are Aboriginal. Larry's father was born in this town. He met Larry's mother when he visited Western Australia, and they came back here to live soon after they were married. His father comes from a group of Aboriginal people that have experienced rapid cultural changes, largely as a result of government policy. Larry's sister explains:

His family got taken away. All his brothers and sisters got taken away by white people and they put them in homes, but he went and hid until they [the government people] went away.... He said his mother died of a broken heart because she missed all her sons. They all spread out...they all come back, but now they all got their own families and spread out.

Larry's sister is actively involved in the group that is trying to reclaim what they can of her paternal heritage. She comments:

A lot about the [local group of Aboriginal] people here is still not known. It was thought that the tribe died out because a lot of other names have overridden the original names. The [local group of Aboriginal people] are still here but they just went under different names. They're going to make a walking trail. The group is based in [the next regional centre] but the people are spread all around [a large part of the state]. There is still a lot of research to be done before we can actually claim the titles. A lot of people don't even know that the people exist. It's really a slow process at the moment, especially with developing the language. It's just a step at a time.... The main problem is that the old lady who knew all the legends and stuff died before they could all be recorded. So we still have to research it...it's going to take a while yet. If we had the numbers we could push it but there's only so much of us. We go to the [next regional centre] for meetings and stuff all the time.

Larry's sister is very conscious of belonging to a large extended family group. She says:

We're related to practically everybody. It's a pretty big family but lots go by different names. Often you don't even know you are related. You've got to do a lot of research to find out who you are related to. Half the state in Western Australia we're related to, and half the state in South Australia we're related to. Both mum and dad come from big family groups. It takes a lot of time to find it all out.

This means that at home Larry has been involved in this exploration of his family's cultural heritage. He participated in the interview with his sister and was able to provide names when she could not remember them.

At school Larry has demonstrated the strength of his Aboriginal identity in a variety of

ways: in his choice of subjects at school, in his choice of topics within subjects, in his choice of groups within which to work and in his discussions with teachers about Aboriginal issues. Larry has chosen to do Art with the Nunga Art class. He is doing Year 11 Art but in a mixed year level class. His Art teacher talks about the Aboriginal identity of the group, and Larry in particular. From his perspective Larry identifies:

[s]trongly, in the way that all the Aboriginal boys in the class do. They have their own culture. They're a group like any other group.... The Nunga boys have got their own identity. I'm not sure if it is necessarily an Aboriginal identity, but they have got their own identity and culture within that group, and that comes out very much - the way that they talk, the language that they use, the subjects that they talk about. Sometimes they use a bit of pidgin English, using traditional language as well, usually traditional swear words, and sometimes they mix the two together and end up with a sort of combined language. It's a bit of secrecy, too, because they think that the teacher doesn't understand what they are talking about, so they talk in that way.

His current English teacher also took him for English last year when the class had quite a few other Aboriginal students. The teacher took the opportunity to support the Aboriginal students in identifying with Aboriginal cultural issues and literature. She comments as follows on how Larry's demonstrates his Aboriginal identity.

Yeah, very strongly in Year 10. Not so much this year. But in Year 10 I had a separate program for the Aboriginal kids. They did the same things as the rest of the class but I used Aboriginal texts - films, short stories, poems - to ensure that it was inclusive of them.... I just felt that in a lot of other areas they weren't getting anything that they recognise as Aboriginal and so I felt in English I can do that. They can see that Aboriginal people were writing about their own experience and recording their own history, which is really important. In Larry's writing he uses a variety of different forms and styles. He writes about the Aboriginal experience in terms of things that are happening today. The last story he wrote was about a dream he had, but it was tied up with the Aboriginal people who were pushed off the cliffs. He was just talking about being pushed off the cliffs, and there was a couple of places where Aboriginal people were pushed off the cliffs. He knows that I am interested in that sort of writing and that I do value it, and I do value him writing about his own experience.

Earlier this year the same teacher tackled the issue of racism with the class by studying a couple of films about Mississippi in the 1930s. She was quite amazed at the different reactions of the students.

The non-Aboriginal kids did not cope very well with it. They were really very wriggly and disinterested, and often demonstrated the sort of behaviours that non-Aboriginal teachers associate with Aboriginal students. They really resisted. They got really irritated with me and the Aboriginal kids saying, 'What are we doing this for?' One film was about what this

really racist Mississippian was doing about the niggers. The non-Aboriginal kids were really disgusted, saying things like, 'Isn't that man really disgusting! Listen to him going on! Isn't that shocking?' The Aboriginal kids were just looking at the non-Aboriginal kids and were just so shocked that the non-Aboriginal kids could recognise the racism.... I mean, it was fairly extreme. Kids find it hard to pick up the message during less extremes of racism. That helped the class unity a bit and helped the kids to sort of recognise they did have something in common.

Larry's Australian Studies teacher has also provided Larry and the other two Aboriginal students in the class with opportunities to explore current Aboriginal issues. He says:

I want the Aboriginal students to be able to have some identity and understanding, plus give it to some of the other students in the class.... I opened that to them - they could do a Land Rights issue. They chose the Goolwa-Hindmarsh Island bridge issue because that was in the newspapers at the time.... The rest of the students could look at the global issue and see that there are Aboriginals all over the world, not just Aboriginals in this society.

This same teacher feels that it is Larry's pride in his identity that leads him to challenge most non-Aboriginal accounts of Australian history. He says that Larry is:

Very much pro-Aboriginal, and understanding, and proud of the history. He was very hesitant to accept the European history view of saying where Aboriginal people came from. He understands that they were certainly being involved with the land and are part of it. He had very great difficulty accepting the view that Aboriginal people came down from Asia and didn't want it to be taught. I think he came around and understood that it is a point of view, a history view, and it is just another reason that may show some of the ignorance that people hold. If they believe that they don't understand the Aboriginal view. It gave Larry a chance to write about that. This importance came through also in his Crocodile Dundee essay, the Aboriginal spiritual connection to the land. So I'd say that he is very proud to be Aboriginal. He expressed that and took an interest in the discussion.

Larry feels that it is often the way that the history is presented that is offensive. But he didn't say anything to the teacher at the time, probably because he couldn't find an opportunity to talk to the teacher individually. As his Australian Studies teacher points out in relation to Larry's reaction to the non-Aboriginal perspective of early Australian history:

He won't discuss it to the whole class because he's not that type of student, but he certainly had a discussion with me on a one-to-one basis.

Larry's sister comments on the 'shame' that many Aboriginal people feel when asked to speak to large groups. It affected her when she was at school and may account for Larry's reluctance to discuss Aboriginal issues in front of the class.

Yeah. When you're out numbered in the class it makes you shamed to get up and do things in front of the class. There's only Larry and [one other Aboriginal student] left in Year 11. I used to make sure I was in classes with at least one other Aboriginal girl. There's a lot of shame if it's an all white class.

Larry agrees:

Yeah. Talking in front of the whole class. In class the black fellas sit next to each other. Some just feel so shamed that they have to go out of the classroom. Sometimes I feel like that.

Larry - summary

When Larry first came to secondary school his attendance was not particularly good; it took him some time to decide to actively resist the negative influences and pressures of his Aboriginal peers. It is most likely the encouragement he received from his parents and some of the school staff, plus the role model of his sister, still studying, helped him make the decision to stay at school. Once the decision was made Larry began to work more consistently at school, aiming to pass so that he would have more options in the future. Particularly in Maths, Larry took the initiative to fill in some of the gaps in his earlier learning. He is now succeeding in all areas, although he is still rather shy and tentative of asking for assistance, believing that teachers should take the initiative in helping him.

Over the years at secondary school Larry has been conscious of racism from both students and teachers. He discusses Aboriginal issues only with some teachers, and never in front of the class, but he does take advantage of opportunities teachers provide to learn more about such issues. He and his family are actively participating in group efforts to reconstruct some of their cultural heritage. Figures 7.3 and 7.4 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors associated with Larry's retention, attainment and identity.

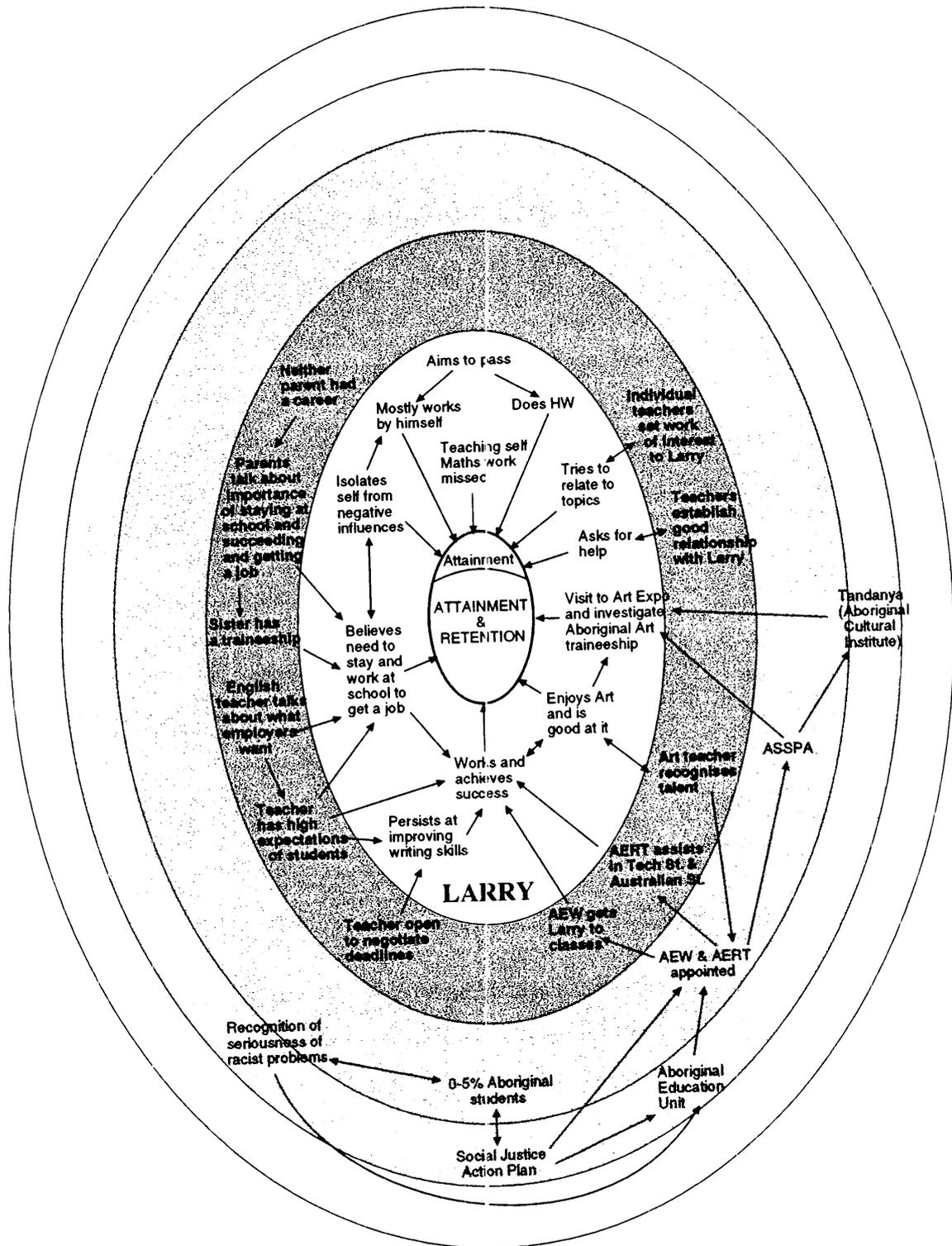


Figure 7.3 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between various factors important in Larry staying at school and achieving success.

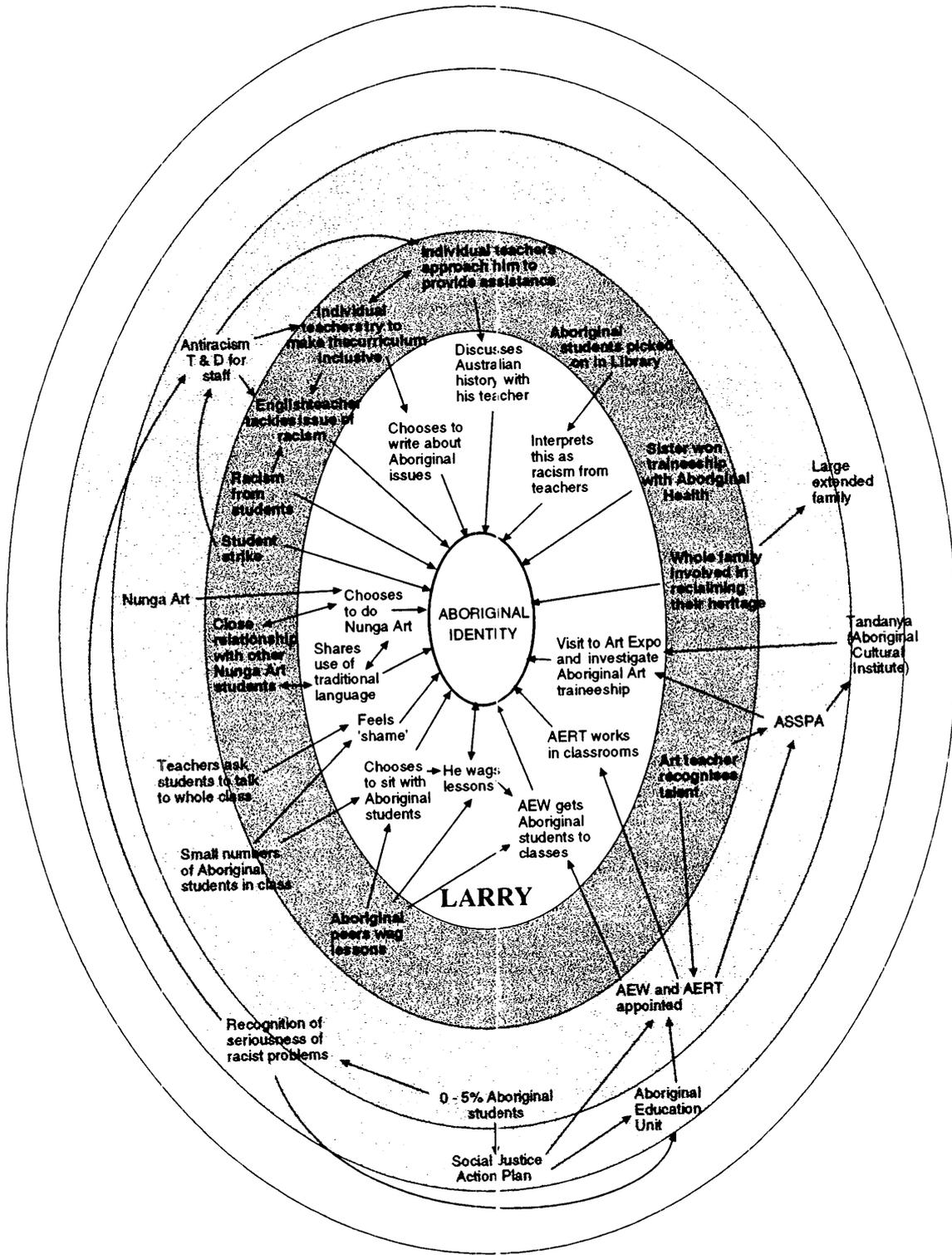


Figure 7.4 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between the various factors important in fostering Larry's Aboriginal identity or arising from it.

SALLY

Sally is a Year 11 student at an R-12 school in a rural centre, one of four Aboriginal girls in her year level. Thirty percent of all students at the school are Aboriginal, but there are only five Aboriginal students in the senior secondary years despite the fact that the secondary component of the school has between 200 and 300 students. The school has a Social Justice Coordinator, an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT) and three Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs)

Sally's mother was born in an Aboriginal community not far from here and has many relatives living in the town. She did not get a lot of schooling because her father was required to move around with his job. She eventually left school around Year 9 and did not think about work until her children had started school. She did a course at TAFE and is now a secretary with an Aboriginal organisation. Sally's father was brought up by an aunt and his family come from a different area. He met Sally's mother when they both lived in the state's capital city. The family have lived in this town for five years. They originally came here for a holiday to visit relatives, but decided to stay. Sally's father works for another Aboriginal organisation.

Sally has an older brother and a younger sister. Her brother left school after completing Year 11 because he had not done well enough to go on to Year 12. He now has a CDEP traineeship and lives with an aunt. Sally's younger sister won a scholarship and is at school in Adelaide. Sally is very keen on sport. According to her mother this is what she prefers to do when not at school, but she does a lot at school as well.

She likes netball and basketball, just mainly sport. She does a lot of swimming when it's hot here. She also does running, and that, a lot with the school. Sport, that's what she's interested in.

Sally's retention

Even before most of her Aboriginal peers started leaving school, Sally had decided to stay at school. She relates this to the fact that her father was one of the AEWs at the school when she was in her last year of primary school. She is also conscious that relatives and friends have encouraged her to stay at school.

It's mainly my parents that tell me to hang in there, 'cause my dad used to work as an Ab. Ed. teacher here in the Aboriginal Resource Centre and that most probably made me think of stopping and going on. I think it was when

I was in grade 7.... [Also], my aunts and my parents encourage me to stay at school. Not many of my friends are still at school, but some friends encourage me...one recently at school. Now we encourage each other.

Her mother agrees that there has been encouragement from home and from her extended family, and feels that Sally is coping well enough at school to be able to complete Year 12.

Well, we've been telling her not to finish school. So many kids, when they turn fifteen, finish school straight away. We've been telling her there's nothing for her yet. 'Wait until you finish Year 12.' Then she can get a job. She's got no intentions of not finishing, I don't think. She hears it from uncles and that as well. 'There's nothing for you if you finish school now. Just stick to it.'

Sally's been going real good at school. She'll finish next year. She enjoys school. I don't know [what it is she likes]. I've never really asked her. I think she likes everything that goes on at school.

Sally's Home Economics teacher appreciates the family support Sally has for staying at school.

The group of Aboriginal girls she is part of all have family expectations that they will succeed and stay at school until the end of Year 12. I don't know her family background, but I do know some of her aunts. They certainly would have had the expectation of her staying at school. I don't know. There's always been that expectation.

Sally hasn't talked very much at home about what she wants in terms of a career, so her mother is unsure of her intentions.

No, not yet. She doesn't quite know what she's going to do.

However, Sally does have some ideas and has talked about them at school. Her Maths teacher sees that her subject choices this year, and her choice of work experience placement, indicate the type of career she desires.

I think she wants to get into photography of some form, to be a photographer. In her work experience she has gone that way a little bit. She is also doing Chemistry this year as that's a bit of a prerequisite for photography, so she's got a bit of a career pathway mapped out.

Sally agrees. She has chosen to work with a photographer for her next work experience placement for that reason.

Yes, I want to be a photographer.

Sometimes she and her special friends talk about what they want in terms of careers, but they have also talked about it in class.

Yes, we talk about it, and there is always persons coming in and talking to us about our careers and what our next step is in this.

This focus has been recognised by Sally's English teacher.

I think she is a very focused person, but I don't know what on. I'm guessing that whatever she's focusing on may well be part of her remaining at school. I've never heard her talk about leaving school. I don't think she wants to end up unemployed. From little snippets I've had from the group, I think they all have aims of some kind. They look at what options they've got. Part of that deal seems to be remaining at school.

The importance of the peer group support in attendance and retention is referred to again and again by Sally's teachers. Her English teacher comments:

the peer group pressure of the group they are in to be at school. It's always been like that.... The support that these girls give each other is just incredible. It's more the moral support...to help them stay at school.

Sally's Chemistry teacher is conscious that her attendance and that of two other Aboriginal girls in Year 11 relates to their ambitions.

Attendance is very high. There are very few days that they are absent.... They realise that there are not many Aboriginals that they can identify themselves with.... They want to be successful...to be role models.

However, one other Aboriginal girl has been taking more days off school recently. Sally's Home Economics teacher has heard Sally being very critical about that.

One of the group has been missing a lot of school lately. She tells me she has been staying home to look after younger members of the family while mum is doing a TAFE course. Sally has been saying, 'That's silly. She shouldn't be doing that.' In that way the group is supportive of each other staying at school.

The potential strength of the initial group of three Aboriginal girls was recognised by teachers before they entered Year 8. Sally's Home Economics teacher comments on how the school deliberately kept them together in Year 8. When the other girl arrived part way through the year she was put in the same class.

One thing the school has done; we used to make sure that the kids were placed together.... Although they had to change caregroups in Year 10 we still kept them together.

The same teacher adds another possible dimension to Sally staying at school, something not mentioned by anyone else.

She is still a very young teenager. For example, she went to the prom at the end of last year with a group of girls whereas the more mature Year 10s went with their boyfriends.

Sally's Geography teacher summarises what he sees as factors that may have helped Sally stay at school.

I think her self concept is good. It relates to her sporting achievements. They would have helped a lot. I think she is a real goer. She's a trier. I can't really say what parent support has been like. That may have been a contributing factor. Also, the fact that she is very good friends with [her best friend]. Also, peer group support. And she's received a lot of support from teachers.

He believes that academic success at school would not have been as much an incentive to stay at school as her success in sport would have been.

She's a terrific kid, very well mannered, nice personality, outgoing, and all those positive sorts of attributes she's got. She's very successful at sport, and there's probably some cross over here. I think she gets a lot of positives from that which she may not get from her academic work.

Sally's Maths teacher agrees that her involvement in sport has been good for her.

She is very, very good at sport.... That's been a big strength for her. In sport and athletics, running and that sort of thing, she has been very good.

Sally's attainment

Sally's early school reports describe how her competency improved as she moved through school. The following is a summary of some important records of achievement. In the middle years of primary school, before she came to her present school, Sally was behind most of her peers by between one and two years in both mathematical processes and reading. In Years 4 and 5 she did a modified course in both these areas. During

Year 7 at her present school she improved quite markedly. Although she did not particularly like reading and "required encouragement to get started" she was a "very capable reader" and could spell "very well". Her number work had "improved" but she was not very confident "when tackling new work" and often needed "individual instruction".

Sally's skills in both literacy and numeracy continued to improve as she progressed through secondary school. Her desire to succeed was evident in all her Year 8 reports. Her English teacher was impressed with the improvement in Sally's skills during the year, and with Sally's attitude to her work. Comments included:

improvement...most impressive...completing all homework in an exemplary manner...positive, cooperative and enthusiastic approach...sets herself high standards...understanding of formalities is excellent...written pieces are very fluent.

Progress in Maths was slower but Sally persisted in her efforts. Her Maths reports during the year included the following comments:

worked well...understands most basic concepts...had some difficulty... tries very hard...willing to ask questions in class...produces good work when she gains confidence to attack the task.

In her other subjects Sally usually worked hard and asked questions in class, but in some areas she lacked confidence in her own ability and found it more difficult to complete homework. She obviously enjoyed Physical Education because all four reports that year were very positive about her ability and her approach to the subject.

In Year 9 Sally started the year well but there were times when she had trouble settling down to work, particularly in Maths. There was also a "reluctance to complete homework" in English. Then there were subjects like Science where she worked really hard but had difficulty coping with the concepts and the workload. By Year 10 Sally's literacy skills were quite good but she still lacked some confidence, and was reluctant to take her written "pieces through to their final draft". In contrast, her reading and comprehension skills were "sound" and she was "able to order her thoughts" when preparing oral pieces. In Maths Sally "worked extremely well in class" but had "difficulty recalling the work in tests" and in completing homework.

Sally's Home Economics teacher has known her quite some time and agrees that Sally has had a few problems academically but that she has persisted and reaped the rewards.

Right from Year 8 she...worked really hard, but she seemed to have some difficulty grasping some of the concepts. About Year 10 you see the separating out of the students who just work hard and those who have ability. Some of them who don't have it in Year 10 get it later. I think that Sally is now 'getting it' - memorising information, thinking about it and adding depth to it. Her skills have improved in the first semester this year. That could be because she's had to produce the SACE results she needed, or maybe it's just part of the maturing process. She's always been enthusiastic, easy to please, and achieved, although not at a very high level.

Sally's Geography teacher agrees that Sally does not have the skills to do really well, but believes that she achieves satisfactory results because of the effort she puts in.

Her combined literacy skills have held her back to some extent, I think. She's not a fantastic reader; her comprehension skills aren't fantastic; her writing's also been an obstacle for her as well, especially as far as expressing her ideas, and so on. Her literacy skills are a lot better than a lot of kids, but not good enough for her to do really well. But she's a real trier. She tries hard.

Her English teacher feels that Sally's literacy problems are both technical and organisational.

She is very keen. She has problems with syntax, punctuation and spelling. Last semester she had very few pieces that finished up 'SA' [satisfactory achievement]. She's got the technical problems and she needs to learn to draft. Often she does the one copy which she passes up as the final copy. It's a bit of a personal organisational problem which she can struggle with at times.... She needs to leave herself time to draft her work first.

Despite the difficulties Sally might encounter in her work, she is still prepared to take risks. Her English teacher continues:

She is very positive, very keen. Her work is meticulous and she takes great pride in it. She wrote a kids book for me, *The Gurg*, a parody on the *Grub* books. It was very courageous of her. She chose the topic of death, for 5-7 year olds. She'll make some brave decisions. She's got some good ideas, too.

In Business Maths she is a "good average student" and has "the potential to succeed in the mainstream".

Sally's mother has noticed that Sally has been doing more homework this year but is conscious that homework is something that Sally has to do by herself as she can't help her very much.

Yes, she's been doing quite a few homeworks lately. They had a big project she had to finish off. But she doesn't do homework every night.... [Some homework is done] on the table, with the light on, while she's watching TV. Sometimes she does it as soon as she gets home, but most times she waits until it gets dark and then she sits at the table and does it. Sometimes she goes in her room and sits on the bed and does it. If she's got a lot of work she does it on the table, but if she hasn't got much she does it in her room.... Sometimes she'll ask me something, but I can't help her much. I don't know much about the work these days.

Sally's Chemistry teacher indicates that homework can be a problem for Sally if she has difficulty understanding the work. However, she is prepared to seek extra help and when she understands what she needs to do, and how to do it, she does it enthusiastically.

First term she did little [homework] but I put that down to the fact that she didn't understand the work. When she got the extra assistance she did a lot more homework. She stayed back for about an hour on Thursday evenings for the extra help. The next day she would come back and she had done a lot more work. Once she was given the extra assistance she was positively motivated.

In the end Sally was able to give an oral presentation for one assessment, and do it well, despite the fact that she was "a little scared".

I helped her a little, but hers and the other Aboriginal student's were among the better ones.... The fact was, she understood the material well enough to get up in front of the class and talk about it.

Sally's Geography teacher has also noticed that she has had some conceptual problems, but these are mainly related to the breadth of the expectations of the course.

She has a lot of problems, mainly conceptual understanding of things... because of the nature of the content of the course. It's mainly on world development and global issues, and her own general background is very limited in that area. That's the same for a lot of the other kids as well. They don't read the newspapers, watch TV news. It's a quantum leap from Year 10... [Even when you] come right back to the local area, talking about systems that are set up that create the differences between the rich and the poor...it's still very difficult conceptually, I think.

She received an 'RA' [recorded achievement - a low pass] for Geography last semester. She worked. She worked really hard at it, did all the assignments, but did not achieve all of the objectives required.

That was despite the extra help she sought.

Sally's Chemistry teacher believes that Sally was prepared to ask for extra help because she feels comfortable in the class and with him and she felt she needed the extra help.

There is a good relationship between all the Year 11 students. She relates best to the other Aboriginal students but she does also relate well to the other Year 11 girls. The Year 11s, as a whole, work well together. There is no animosity between groups, or anything. If she can't get help from the student she usually works with because she is away, she'll often get help from other girls in the class.... She and I get on very well together. I know her parents as well so she's not scared to come and approach me. I think that's the reason why she came back to school for help on Thursdays. She was aware of the fact that she needed assistance.

Sally's Maths and Geography teachers agree that Sally is aware of when she needs extra help and asks for it because she wants to succeed.

She is extremely keen to succeed. She is always willing to ask questions. She is also prepared to give up some of her own time for extra help. She is keen to get any extra help she can.... If I've got a free and she wants some extra help, she'll come and find me.

In English Sally's group sits very close to the teacher's desk so that they can ask questions any time they need help.

Her group sit very close to me and they know 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 the front by my desk. It works quite well. That kind of interaction seems very important for their learning style.

Sally is used to passing most, if not all, of her subjects at school but does not think she does at all well compared with her younger sister.

Because my sister is really into work, and all this. She is like a brain box...more of a brain box than me. At [this school in the city] they encourage more Aboriginal students to go over there, and so they decided to send my sister.

This year Sally is finding the work is much harder than it was in previous years.

Just this year. Before, it wasn't really hard.

However, she feels she is coping satisfactorily and her mother agrees, going by the reports Sally received at the end of first semester and by Sally's reaction to them.

Yes, she went quite well. She was happy with it, anyway.

Sally's Geography teacher comments on the help that is available to the Aboriginal students at the school.

There is a lot of scope for help. Tutorial assistance is available. Then there's the homework centre. But, also, the AERT does provide a lot of assistance in their assignment work.

Sally recognises this but also indicates that the group she works with is important, too.

Pretty hard, but we all, when there's big assignments, heaps of work coming up, we all book the Aboriginal Resource room and we ask the teachers [the AERT and the Social Justice coordinator] for tutoring. And they help us and we get the work done. That would be them helping and us helping each other get it done on time.

Sally's Home Economics teacher agrees, but points out that there is friendly competition between the girls as well and that this has had positive effects on the achievements of them all.

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 very good, but the new girl was even better, so they tried even harder. So did the non-Aboriginal girls. That was the positive peer group pressure.

Sally has always preferred to work with the other Aboriginal girls in the class, and to varying extents she depends on them to help her with her work. For example, her Maths teacher comments:

She and [her best friend] are a real pair. They support each other. I think that's probably contributed to their success. They've got each other to lean on.... They have tended to alienate themselves from the less inclined Aboriginal group. As a result they have continued to succeed.

Her English teacher has also noticed that Sally relies on her best friend.

She relies a lot on support from [her best friend].

And her Chemistry teacher adds:

She is a quiet student, very quiet. She finds it difficult to work on her own.... She mainly works with another Aboriginal girl in the class.

Her Home Economics teacher has also recognised this tendency, but implies that it was probably more important in the past than it is now.

The support that these girls give each other is incredible. This is the first year I have had Sally in a subject by herself. Always before she has had one of the other members of the group along with her even though she didn't have [her best friend].... I think she needed it.

Now, Sally tends to challenge other members of the group if they are not doing the right thing. Her English teacher has noticed this.

I have heard Sally really get stuck into one of the other Aboriginal girls in the group for not working. A few weeks ago, while working on a project they are doing together, they came back into the classroom and she started going on about this other girl and said quite loudly, 'She never does any work.'

Sally's Aboriginal identity

Sally sees a lot of the relatives on her mother's side as many of them live close by, and some attend school with her. She has "aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents" living in the town. Her mother says:

Yes, she's got quite a lot. She sees quite a lot of them.

Sally doesn't usually ask her parents much about their cultural heritage unless information is required for school. Her mother provides one example.

Sometimes, when she's got things to do for school she'll ask questions about it. She did this family tree and she asked where we came from, and that.

Sally is very proud to be Aboriginal, and feels that her family have encouraged her in this.

My family, they encourage me to set a good example for younger Aboriginal students.

Sally's English teacher relates Sally's expertise at sport to her Aboriginal identity.

She's got some really strong Aboriginal role models like Cathy Freeman. She's very, very good at athletics.

And, according to two other teachers, this is one area where Sally has been able to display pride in her Aboriginality without needing to make an issue of it.

She plays netball for the local Aboriginal team.... She has also represented the school on Aboriginal sports days.... I remember when there was an Aboriginal Open Day. They [Sally and her friends] were all involved in that (Home Economics teacher).

She doesn't make an effort to be Aboriginal. Even though she plays netball for the Aboriginal team in town and joins in other Aboriginal things in town and school, she doesn't try and be different (Maths teacher).

There are a variety of other Aboriginal things that Sally is involved in, both at school and in the community. Her Chemistry teacher sees her as a leader in promoting Aboriginal people in a positive light.

She's pretty active in the youth groups that's around the town, the Aboriginal newsletter that we've got going, and the Aboriginal Student Representative group. She's very well organised when it comes to Aboriginal people and she's sort of getting herself involved in making the identity of the Aboriginal people known.

Sally is very proud of her involvement in the Aboriginal newspaper.

We are doing this Nunga News for the Aboriginal students in the school, and for our English class, us four Aboriginal students. Us girls organised it, just the Year 11s, so there was a newsletter that was up-to-date. We all help and put things in it. We organise it. We get assessed on it...it goes out to all the Aboriginal students, even Reception.

When given the opportunity Sally has shown, in her writing and in her choice of topics, some of the influences in her life. Her English teacher explains how Sally has expressed her pride in her Aboriginality.

It doesn't permeate a lot of her writing, but I am a lot more aware of it than I am for [her best friend]. Last year I got them to do some research on a country they'd like to visit. She chose Jamaica. That's the Bob Marley - reggae - influence. Many of the Aboriginal students identify with the Rastafarian ideas, which includes Bob Marley. That message comes through in her work. I think she also leans toward Aboriginal poets.

Although Sally gets on well with most of the other students in her class, she always chooses to sit with her Aboriginal friends if any of them are in her classes. According to her English teacher, there don't appear to be any problems with racism.

The girls tend to mix quite happily with the rest of the class when I ask them to work with someone they don't usually work with. However, the four girls do always sit together. Sometimes one of the non-Aboriginal girls will go

and sit with them for a while just to have a chat. From my perception racism's not really an issue in the class. I haven't heard any of the girls being the subject of racist comments.

Her mother agrees that Sally gets on well with non-Aboriginal students and is not subject to racist behaviour at school. She feels that this is because there are so many Aboriginal students at the school. In fact, problems between different groups of Aboriginal students are more common.

Not that I know of, because there's lots of Aboriginal kids here, see. I don't think she gets picked on because she's Aboriginal. Sometimes you get two groups of Nunga kids that have arguments, sending silly notes and things like that. There was a bit of this last year, but its all right now.... Most of her friends are Aboriginal, the ones that come over are, anyway. She gets on with some of the white kids at her school, and she talks to them on the street, too.

There was only one incident of racism at school that Sally's English teacher could remember.

There is one student who whinged about the fact that Sally and [her best friend] and another Aboriginal student work with the AERT on Friday afternoons on the Aboriginal newsletter.... It was just minor whinging about why they got everything.

Sally - summary

Sally has always had to work very hard at school to keep up with her peers. She has done this enthusiastically throughout her time at school and does not appear to have really recognised how hard she has had to work. Sally has been supported and encouraged in her efforts by her parents and extra tuition by some staff but, most importantly, by a special group of like-minded peers. In turn, she has supported and encouraged the others in the group. As a result of her efforts, Sally is now achieving at a higher level than might have been expected from her earlier achievements.

Sally has a great deal of sporting ability and has had plenty of opportunity to use this at school, including in extra-curricula activities. Her teachers feel that the success she has achieved in this area has been more significant in her retention at school than any academic achievements might have been. Sport has also provided Sally with opportunities to display her pride in her Aboriginal identity. Figures 7.5 and 7.6 that follow provide conceptualisations of the interrelationships between the various factors associated with Sally's retention, attainment and identity.

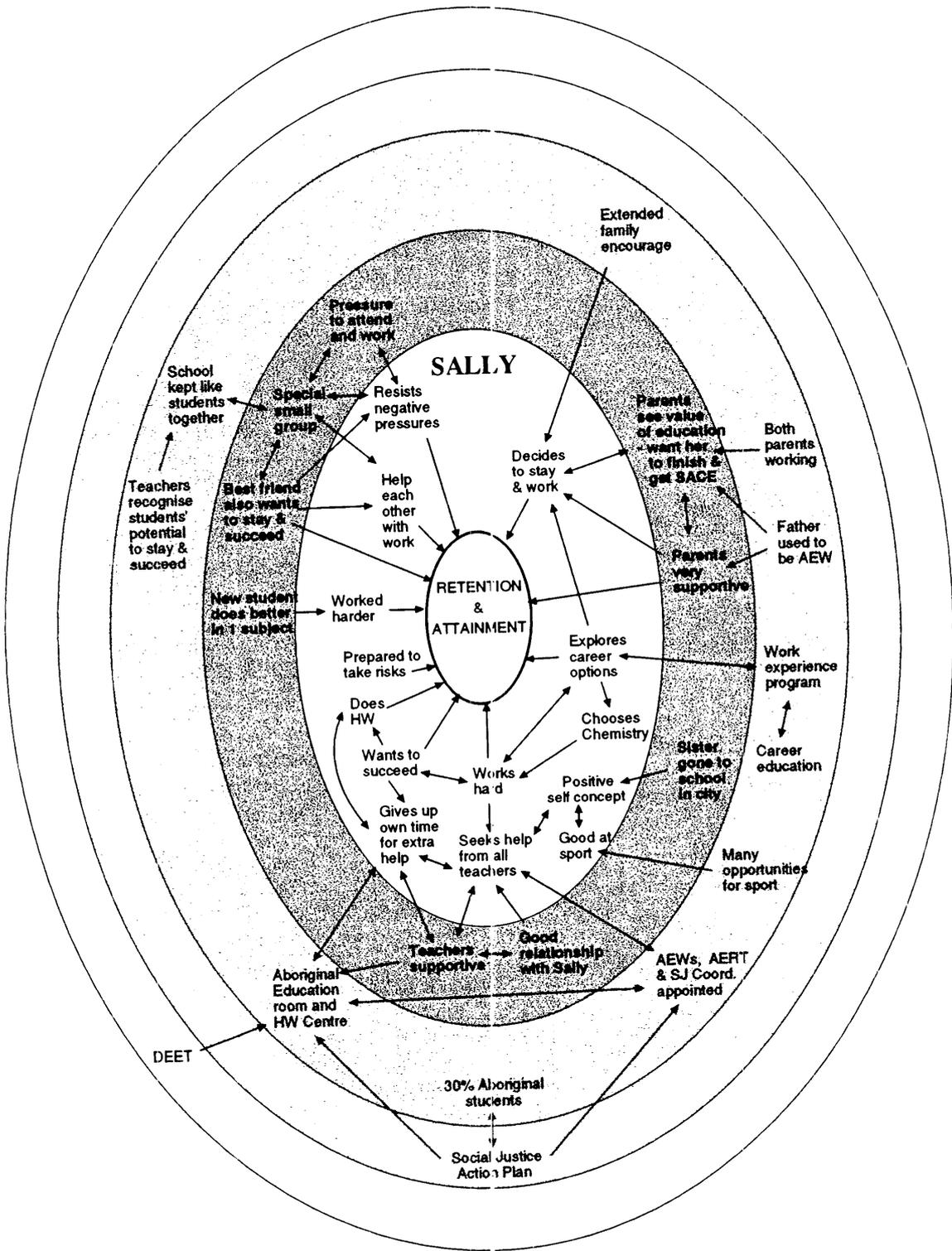


Figure 7.5 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between various factors that have been important in Sally staying at school and achieving success.

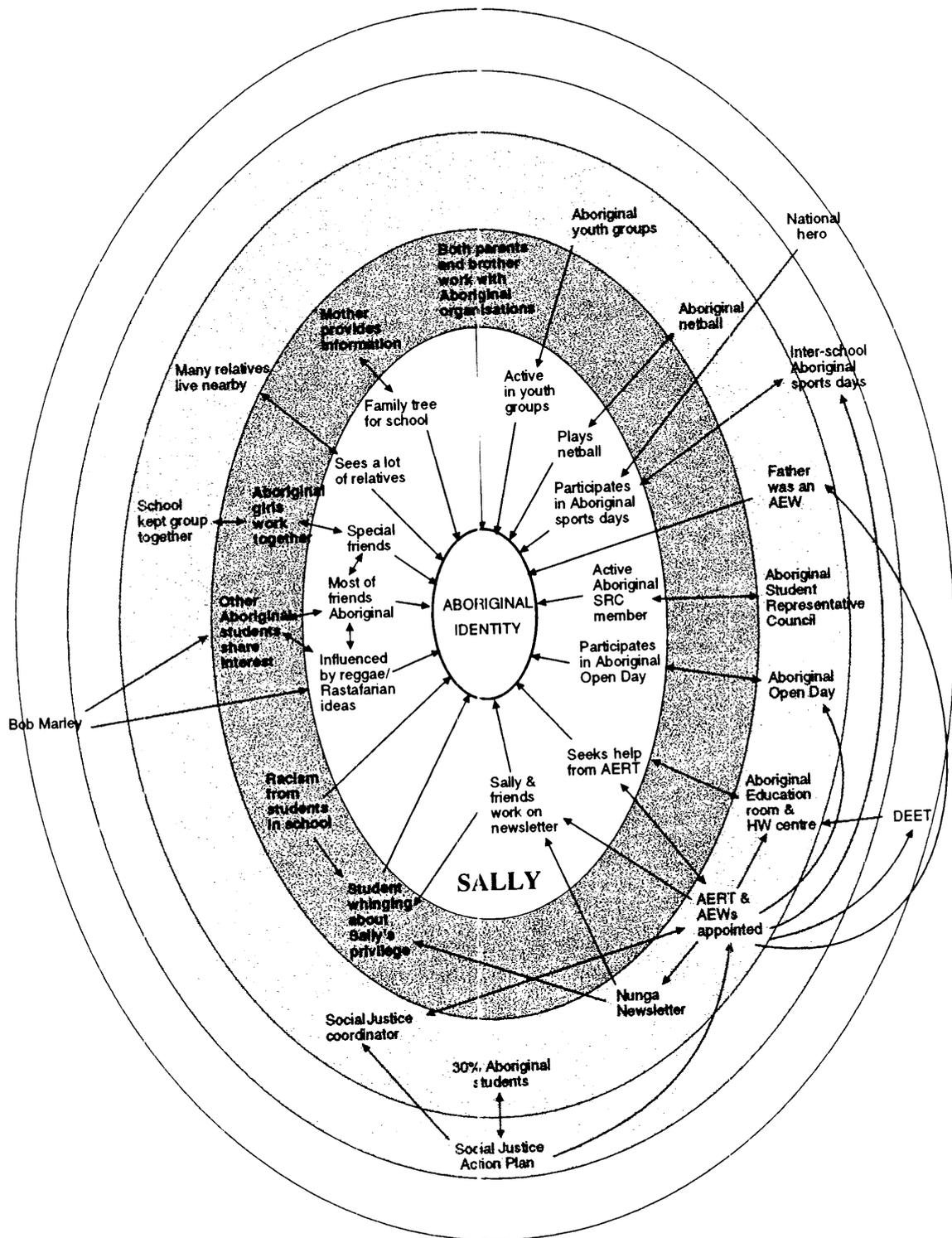


Figure 7.6 A causal network matrix showing the interrelationships between the various factors that have been important in fostering Sally's Aboriginal identity or arising from it.

Possible stayers - summary

Nicolas, Larry and Sally have all experienced some problems at school: Nicolas in terms of motivation, Larry in attendance during his early years at high school due to pressure from his Aboriginal peers and Sally in having to work extremely hard to achieve at a satisfactory level. Nicolas had the ability to achieve at a high level, but lacked the motivation. Larry and Sally had less ability but developed a high level of motivation to stay at school and succeed academically. All had a great deal of encouragement from home and encouragement and support from at least some of their teachers at school. In Year 10, everyone would have hoped, but no-one could have been sure, that Nicolas, Larry or Sally would stay at school beyond the years of compulsion and make a successful transition into the SACE as they have done. As a result Nicolas, Larry and Sally are *possible stayers*.

The following chapter introduces the final group of students, the *unexpected stayers*. These three students are very different from each other, and from any of the other students whose case studies have already been presented. Early in their secondary school career few would have anticipated them to still be at school in Years 11 and 12.