

Toombs, M & Gorman, D 2010, 'Why do Indigenous students succeed at university?' *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 14-5.

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Why do Indigenous students succeed at university

Abstract

A great deal has been published on the disadvantage that Indigenous Australians experience that prevents them from undertaking university studies or of succeeding if they do.

Despite this many Indigenous Australians do enrol in university and successfully complete their studies. This article will report on research that explores why these students succeed and argue that the underlying factor is resilience.

Findings about barriers experienced- what are students saying about barriers to their education

Background/Overview of the study

Retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have always been low in tertiary settings. Historical factors including disconnection from family and kinship structures, poor health, low socio economic status as well as family responsibilities contribute to the complexities accompanying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into university. These issues can all impact on the social and emotional well being of the student.

The focus of this research is to investigate whether demographics, students' experiences prior to entering university, family responsibilities, intergenerational pain, intergenerational history and family expectations, determine a student's success or failure at university and in turn their social and emotional wellbeing. A selection of six participants from seven universities were interviewed for this research. Interviews with participants have revealed many factors affecting wellbeing. Adversity and poor health are often at the forefront for many of these students and yet the strength of character and resilience that came through in the interviews was quite overwhelming. The conversations that evolved have been quite humbling and it is a privilege that participants felt comfortable enough to share, often very private historical impacts on their lives and their families and the community in which they live. The conversations with participants involved participants sharing stories of turmoil, illness, suicide and death, but coupled with these stories of tragedy followed stories of hope and an inner strength by participants to reach their goals and complete university. The underpinning factor in all of this appears to be an inner strength that exists within these participants. This is also referred to as resilience and it is this resilience that will be explored within this article.

Resilience

The notion of resilience is based in psychological and human development theory and has been researched for about 25 years. Garmezy (1993) is generally accredited as the founder of resilience research and his work was inspired by observations of people with schizophrenia (Hegney et al. 2008). According to Hegney et al. (2008, p. 13) *“many theorists agree that resilience is a highly complex phenomenon composed of multi interrelated dimensions. Lam & Grossman (1997) suggest that the overabundance of research examining resilience has been a consequence of the richness of the construct”* According to Hegney et al. (2008) *“There is no universally accepted definition of resilience, nor any consensus as to how it ought to be measured”*. However, there are accepted definitions of what it may be. Dell (2005, p. 4) defines resilience as *“the extent to which someone can recover from adversity. A resilient person is often compared to a rubber band. They have the ability to bounce back in spite of significant stress”*. Recently, the term resilience has been used to describe an individual’s ability to manage or cope with significant adversity or stress in effective ways (Dell 2005). Lam & Grossman (1997) refer to these strategies as “protective factors” that help with recovery from adversity. Interestingly, resilience in Indigenous communities is viewed by many as holistic. That is without a strong resilient community, an individual can’t be resilient. The same themes as mentioned as social and emotional indicators appear to also contribute to resilience. The resilience framework developed by Kumper (1999) highlights the environmental context in which the individual lives, along with the relationship between this and internal resiliency factors. The internal resiliency factors highlight spirituality, behaviour, physical, cognitive and emotional constructs as indicators to the theoretical domain of good resilience. Block (1993) describes a process within the individual called “ego control” as paramount to a person’s level of resilience. *Ego control is defined as the kind of control an individual has over their own impulses”* (Block 1993). A person with good ego

control' also known as ego resilience' is resourceful and adaptive. If an individual has poor ego control, they are deemed to have poor ego resiliency. This can mean the person is slow to recoup after stress. Interestingly, the literature suggests that it is possible to develop resiliency over time, if acceptance of the situation can be achieved. The focus of most research on resiliency points towards oppressed groups and not so surprisingly Indigenous peoples.

Evidence of Resilience in Indigenous University Students.

Participants commented about their resilience and noted that they either did or did not have good resilience. In two instances a support person was present during data collection and laughed when the participant stated that they had poor resilience. The support person laughed at the notion that the participant could ever say they had poor resilience given their life circumstance. All participants agreed that resilience was necessary for survival at university in the face of underlying stresses that participants experienced. Family obligations such as “sorry business”, family community commitments as well as chronic mental and physical illnesses and financial difficulties were all noted as stressors. Literature supports the notion that resilience in the face of adversity is important. McKendrick & Ryan (2001) found that losses, trauma, grief, poverty and marginalisation for Indigenous people is high and to have good social and emotional wellbeing, high levels of resilience must be present.

Most participants have been heavily impacted by trauma, grief and loss. Adversities such as homelessness, poverty, and mental and physical illness were all discussed. Grief and loss also heavily impacted on many participants who shared story after story of their loss. The very fact that students are managing the commitments of university, despite the adversity in their lives is surely evidence of resilience.

The following conversations exemplify the adversity that these students are overcoming to succeed at university.

Conversations

The information in this part of the article will be written in the first person. The first author (Maree Toombs) wanted to convey the importance and value of the information provided by participants and thought it would undervalue the data not to convey information in this way. Pseudonyms will be used to personalise the participants and conversations that took place with each of the six participants in this article.

Participants came from different environments and responses varied to the question about their resilience, either agreeing or disagreeing that they were resilient. Some changed their minds as they talked through the concept. On three occasions, a student support officer who sat with participants during their interview interjected and said “*of course you are resilient look at the adversities that you have overcome*”. The participant would then think about this and agree. Unfortunately the stories shared all had an element of adversity and hardship, but with this there was a quiet acceptance. For the purpose of this article five snapshots of participant’s conversations have been chosen. Although there are currently thirty six participants who have discussed the notion of resilience, these five best depicted the similarities that existed.

Participant one

Gracie comes from a remote community and lives a very traditional lifestyle. Gracie has strong connection to country and is very homesick; she is currently living a long way from home and interstate to complete her studies. English is her second language and this made the interview process quite difficult. When I asked Gracie if she thought she was resilient she said she did not understand the concept of resilience and yet was demonstrating it in the fact

that she is living in a large city in a different state thousands of kilometres from her homeland, without family or community support.

Participant two

Sally said she wasn't sure if she was resilient and yet she is living with clinical depression, unsure of her identity due to intergenerational family separations brought about due to the assimilation policy and forced removal of many of her family members including herself. Sally is also supporting two young children on her own whilst currently living in cramped conditions where she shares a room with her children. Sally is successfully engaged in university studies where she is in her second year of her chosen degree. Sally has a quiet acceptance about her life and said that University was the one stable thing she has.

Participant Three

Ruth shared stories of suicide and accidental deaths that left her without family members, and the responsibility of raising children as a result of these tragedies. She recalled taking time away from her studies to attend to her responsibilities in her family as the eldest to organise "sorry business" and how through poetry and humour she has been able to overcome her grief. Also suffering from a visual impairment, this participant has had to become resourceful in accommodating this impairment, unable to afford glasses, Ruth has been using a magnifying glass to read course materials. When asked if she thought she was resilient she said yes but could not state why.

Participant Four

Teresa has a number of disabilities and long term medical issues she was born with as well as a number of others that have hindered her along the way. Along with her already existing disabilities/medical problems, Teresa has recently been declared legally blind. This poses a

number of challenges for her, with the main and most obvious one being that she cannot see lecture material. When asked if she thought she was resilient she said “*Yeh I think I am*”.

Teresa’s GPA is 6.33 and she is just about to complete her degree.

Participant Five

John attended a boarding school where he says he learnt to be resilient. “*Being separated from my parents at such a young age was really hard but it taught me independence and freedom, also being the only blackfella made me have to stand on my own two feet real quick*”. The participant travels approximately eight hours to get back home and has family obligations that keep him tied to the community. “*I always have to make sure that my assignments are done as soon as I get them, when that phone rings and it’s family calling, I know I am in the car and driving back to community, that’s just how it is.*” When asked if he thought he was resilient he said, “*Well I must be I’m not six foot under*”.

Conclusion

The relationship between adversity and resilience presented itself on many occasions and the stories of grief and loss were heard far too many times for there to be any coincidence about the similarities that individuals experienced as a minority group in this country. For these participants an acceptance of the difficulties they faced and ever present determination coupled with a reserve of energy to succeed was evident. A parting question that needs further investigation is ‘Whether participants have always been resilient and therefore are able to apply this to their life situation, or is it a phenomena that is characterised by the constant trauma and grief that many Indigenous people are exposed too?’.

Although the notion of resilience often presented as a vague idea that participants had about how they coped with life it did not extend beyond a passing comment of more than yes or no.

However, the ability to overcome their severe difficulties can be argued as evidence that these participants had a healthy supply of resilience and that they would most certainly complete their studies.

Sonn & Fisher (1998) suggest that developing resilience appears to manifest from an individual's responses to their own adversities and how they respond to that of the community they live in. These participants are responding to their own adversities in their own ways but seem to be able to continue their studies, often under the most difficult of circumstances. While success in the face of adversity can be used as evidence that they possess resilience, perhaps it can also be proposed that the very existence of adversity may be the reason for the resilience. That is that resilience is a result of the adversity that they cope with.

Whatever the cause of their resilience, there is certainly evidence that these participants possess it. Most participants initially had not considered themselves to be resilient but when confronted with their own experiences readily acknowledged its existence. It would be interesting to know whether recognition of their resilience had any impact on their confidence to succeed i.e. did it influence their resilience? Certainly if resilience is a factor in their success, then a significant strategy to increase the success rate of Indigenous students could be to increase their resilience. Sonn & Fisher (1998) suggest that resilience can be developed and the utilisation of strategies specifically aimed at Indigenous students to achieve this could make a significant contribution to the goal of improving the success rate of students.

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