# 'Reading Was like My Nightmare but Now It's My Thing': A Narrative of Growth and Change of an Australian Indigenous Student

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**Abstract** It is well known that Australian Indigenous children, like many other Indigenous children from around the world, statistically perform less well in meeting the minimum reading standards than the general school population. Buried beneath the performance data are children who bring to their schooling unique experiences that shape and underpin their readiness and willingness to learn. Rarely are stories told that do not perpetuate the dominant discourse of failure, but this is one of them. Adopting a person-in-context perspective, this chapter presents a descriptive account of an Indigenous Australian student and the environmental factors that supported her remarkable improvement in reading and, in turn, her ability to identify as a reader. Wherever possible, the student's voice has been given priority to tell her narrative of change and thus permits an emic understanding of the significance the student–teacher relationship had in supporting her reading growth and the development of her self-esteem and identity as a reader.

**Keywords** Reading achievement · Reading motivation · Indigenous student · Reading context · Teacher support

Empirical evidence consistently reports Indigenous people from around the world having significantly lower literacy skills than non-Indigenous people. Illiteracy is also more common among Indigenous people (Hanemann, 2005), including Australia's Indigenous children. De Bortoli and Thomson (2010) reported that Indigenous Australian students had significantly lower levels of interest in reading and reading engagement than their non-Indigenous counterparts. However, there is limited Australian evidence about effective school-based factors that can be manipulated to increase student engagement and create an effective learning environment to engage Indigenous students to read with motivation (Lamb & Rice, 2008; Ockenden, 2014). So when an Indigenous student told us, 'reading was like my nightmare so much so I used to fake I was sick. Now reading is my thing',

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her reflections necessitated digging deeper in order to ascertain the factors that led to her identifying as a reader at school. The research questions in this study were why the student had changed her attitude to reading and what had contributed to this change.

The theoretical perspective in this study is labelled as person-in-context. Rooted in the sociocultural theories inspired by the work of Vygotsky, this perspective situates students' learning behaviours and processes within embedded social, cultural and historical contexts (Turner & Meyer, 2000). From this particular perspective, Indigenous students' personal interests, goals and other important cognitive enablers for reading are understood and interpreted within their immediate and embedded contexts (Nolen, 2007; Oldfather, 2002). It is important to make sense of Indigenous students' motivation to read and their reading behaviours in the light of the various contextual and interactive factors that come into play and contribute to their formation. Using a person-in-context perspective, our chapter presents one student's story of change. It accounts for influences derived from classroom and out-of-school reading contexts, together with consideration of the impact of social interactions with teachers, peers and family members might have on the student's reading attitudes and behaviours. Aligning with this perspective, multiple data collection methods including both qualitative and quantitative were combined to produce a rich empirical foundation to understand and verify the student's change story.

This chapter first situates the reading underperformance of Australia's Indigenous children within national and international testing frameworks. This is followed by a discussion of factors contributing to Indigenous underachievement and a review of selected research initiatives that have reported success in promoting learning and engagement among Indigenous students. Finally, the student's case highlighting her reading development as well as her cognitive and affective changes is presented. All the stakeholders in this case have been de-identified, and the pseudonym Lisa has been used for the Indigenous student.

# 1 Situating Lisa's Story in National and International Testing Contexts

The significance of Lisa's story lies in the fact that we rarely hear good news stories about Indigenous children and their successes in education. Far more common is the discourse of deficit, failure and underachievement. Despite living in 'the lucky country', Wolgemuth and colleagues (2013) noted that Australia's Indigenous children are far less likely than the general Australian student population to meet minimum reading standards. Many Indigenous students have exceedingly poor educational outcomes (Kaufmann, 2003). Results derived from large scale tests such as National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (PISA, 2012) support these claims.

The most recent NAPLAN data from 2016 for students in years three, five and seven reported that Indigenous students' mean scale scores for reading were substantially lower than the mean scale score for reading for non-Indigenous students. Data from the 2012 PISA paper-based assessment of reading literacy also showed that Indigenous students performed significantly lower than non-Indigenous students and that Indigenous youth are being left behind (Dreise & Thomson, 2011). A report highlighting Australian students' performance in the PISA test by Thomson, De Bortoli, and Buckley (2012) indicated that the average difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was 87 score points which equates to two and a half years of schooling.

The literature on Indigenous education has identified a variety of factors that have contributed to Indigenous students' underachievement. These include: geolocation of the student (Prior, 2013; Yeung, Craven, & Ali, 2013), truancy (Prior, 2013), continuity of teachers and pedagogical practices (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black, Lhuede, O'Meara, & White, 2001), unskilled teaching (Kenyon et al., 2001; Prior, 2013), health problems including middle ear infections (Bennet & Lancaster, 2013), inability of school to address minority and cultural diversity (Ogbu, 1992), and a variety of teacher factors (Bennet & Lancaster, 2013; Hattie, 2003, 2009; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005; Robinson, 2007; Rowe, 2003). Obviously, the issue of underachievement among Indigenous students is complex and a host of influential factors related to Indigenous students' personal, familial, school and physical contexts come into play. A review of Indigenous education in New South Wales (NSW) (New South Wales Department of Education and Training & New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated, 2004) argued that social, cultural, economic, environmental and health factors often intricately work together, contributing to students' underperformance at school. This begs a systematic approach to explore the interrelationships between these influential factors and to understand how they operate at an individual level.

## 2 Factors that Support Indigenous Students' Engagement and Learning

There are many assertions made about school and classroom conditions that need to exist to support Indigenous students' engagement and learning, but few are backed by empirical evidence connecting the initiative to positive gains in students' literacy levels or learning engagement (Lamb & Rice, 2008; Prior, 2013). Below, a selected set of empirical studies relevant to the current investigation on Lisa's change story is reviewed with a view to locate important factors for promoting learning engagement among Indigenous students and for developing an empirical base to discuss the results derived from the longitudinal case study reported in this chapter.

Lamb and Rice's (2008) review of the literature on increasing students' engagement and school retention identified a range strategies and programmes aimed at increasing engagement and school completion for students at risk.

Although not solely focused on Indigenous students' engagement, the meta-analysis indicated that the most effective schools are those with a supportive school culture, school-level strategies and student-focussed strategies and that 'schools are most effective in addressing issues of student engagement and retention when all three areas are addressed' (p. 14). More specifically, for Indigenous students, cultural acknowledgement, targeted and explicit teaching, and skill development and participatory decision-making were noted as supporting engagement. Aligning with the work of Lamb and Rice (2008), systematic efforts were made to explore the influences of support during school reading programmes, specifically those targeting individual students like Lisa in promoting engagement in reading.

An important teacher factor that should have positive effects on Indigenous students' reading engagement and performance is classroom practices and discourses that function to engage students. In their mixed methods study, Munns, Martin, and Craven (2008) found that pedagogies that fostered substantive student engagement encouraged cognitive, affective and procedural responses from students. Based on data gathered from 32 highly motivated and engaged Indigenous students from 'exemplary' urban and rural primary schools in NSW, they found that these students worked with a mastery orientation rather than with a competitive orientation. This finding suggests further research be conducted to investigate the potential motivational effects of a mastery oriented classroom among disaffected Indigenous students. Furthermore, the authors found that classroom pedagogies and discourses 'carry either engaging or disengaging messages' (Munns et al., 2008, p. 99) and that those underachieving Indigenous students 'appeared to be continually on the receiving end of messages that pointed to their lack of ability and their restricted voice in classroom pedagogical spaces' (Munns et al., 2008, p. 102). A major oversight in this study was that underachieving and unmotivated students were not interviewed; thus, their voices were silenced. The current study specifically addressed this imbalance by seeking out the voice of an underperforming Indigenous student in an effort to understand the aspects of teachers' behaviours and communications that may impact Indigenous students' learning to read in school.

Another significant teacher factor that may contribute to Indigenous students' reading engagement and improvement is the positive impact of caring student–teacher relationships on engagement for students from minority groups. A mixed methods, two-year long study of caring teacher practices in multiethnic mathematics classrooms in New Zealand (Averill, 2012) described specific caring teacher behaviours and practices and illustrated how they could be mapped to Durie's (1998) *whare tapa wha* model for health and well-being. The study indicated that caring teacher practices are not confined to consideration of students' cognitive and affective characteristics but also include teachers' deliberate attention to students' spiritual and physical elements of well-being and an understanding of familial and social circumstances that constrain or enable students to learn. Furthermore, the study provided much needed empirical evidence supporting the critical role of the student–teacher relationship in promoting Indigenous students to learn. In particular, it was found that students who had deeply caring teachers exhibited high levels

of engagement and student-initiated interactions while students in the less caring teachers' classes were more likely to exhibit 'off-task, disruptive, unresponsive, and challenging behaviour, and negative body language (such as turning away from the teacher)' (p. 121). Despite the specifics of mathematical and New Zealand contexts, this study forms an empirical foundation for analysing the impact of teachers' behaviours on Indigenous students' learning to read in Australia. We need to know more about the salient features of student–teacher relationships that support engagement and whether they are constant or highly nuanced and influenced by context.

This literature review points to the need for a systematic investigation designed to explicate the influences of a host of factors and their interrelationship in order to understand Indigenous students' attitudes towards reading longitudinally. The qualitative findings in the current study will complement the extant literature on Indigenous students' underachievement. The inclusion of student voice enables a closer look at the issue of underachievement and disengagement by situating students and their learning attitudes and behaviours within relevant contexts and over time. The review of empirical studies that investigated factors capable of promoting learning and achievement for Indigenous students provides an empirical foundation for analysing the longitudinal case study and draws our attention to positive influences originated from a supportive school learning environment, caring teachers and engaging classroom practices.

Our current understanding of Indigenous students' underachievement is mostly derived from, and built on, the results of large-scale national and international testing which highlight the achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students without offering viable explanations for their formation and development. Qualitative and longitudinal studies focusing on individual Indigenous students and their interaction with significant others within school and out-of-school contexts are essential for developing a better understanding of the nature of the achievement gaps identified in repeated rounds of testing results. In addition, such investigations are needed in the light of some notable inconsistencies in findings about reading performance and behaviours among Indigenous students. For example, De Bortoli and Thomson (2010) in their report on Australian students' performance in PISA testing noted that Indigenous students showed significantly lower levels of interest and engagement in reading than did their non-Indigenous peers. In contrast to this finding, their report indicated that the PISA surveys conducted during the same period found that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were not significantly different from each other in terms of their effort, persistence, learning preference, learning styles, attitudes towards school, experiences of relationships with teachers and disciplinary climate of the classroom. An immediate question based on these non-significant findings is what has contributed to Indigenous students' low levels of reading interest and engagement. These non-significant findings derived from large-scale studies are not consistent with accumulating empirical evidence suggesting that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students engage in learning in different ways. For example, a number of quantitative studies indicate that Indigenous students often have lower academic self-concept

than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Bodkin-Andrews, Ha, Craven, & Yeung, 2010; Craven & Marsh, 2004; Prior, 2013). In response, there is a need to compare findings across different quantitative studies in order to verify our understanding of Indigenous students' underachievement and their learning problems. More importantly, systematic investigations using a variety of research methods that take into account a host of complex factors within embedded contexts where Indigenous students engage in reading and other forms of learning in- and out-of-school are required for a better understanding of Indigenous students' learning problems, and in particular, their lack of interest in reading and strategies for re-engagement.

## 3   Method

Lisa's case is drawn from a three-year longitudinal, mixed methods study investigating reading engagement and disengagement among low socioeconomic and Indigenous students funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Disadvantaged students from low socioeconomic (SES) areas and/or Indigenous students who were reported by their teachers to be disengaged readers were recruited to participate in the study. Lisa identified as Indigenous, attended school in a low SES area and, in addition to being disengaged, her Year 5 teacher reported her reading age was approximately six years behind her chronological age.

Over the course of three years, qualitative and systematic classroom observations were made of Lisa and other students in the study as they participated in a range of reading contexts including silent, guided and independent group reading. In addition, Lisa and the other students participated in four semi-structured interviews annually and completed two questionnaires on a biannual basis. Lisa's interview responses and her engagement behaviours were triangulated with teacher interviews, Lisa's responses to the surveys, her end of year school reports, NAPLAN test results and a range of formative reading test results including PAT-R and Probe. In developing this case study on Lisa, the interviews were taken as the main data source while the data derived from observations and surveys were used to complement, verify and extend the findings based on the interviews. Further effort to verify Lisa's story was made by presenting her case to different teachers whom she had worked with in the school. Overall, the aim of the study was to understand why Lisa had changed her reading attitudes.

Lisa joined this project when she was in Year 5 and was nominated by her teacher as a persistently disengaged reader with poor reading achievement. In Year 5, Lisa was assessed as six years below her chronological reading age. In Year 6, the Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading (PAT-R) at the end of the academic year showed that Lisa's reading age had jumped from six years to her chronological age of 12. While her capacity as a reader had improved, our classroom observations conducted when Lisa was in Year 6 showed that Lisa was frequently non-compliant when asked to read. She preferred to talk back to the teacher or talk with her friends.

One-to-one conversations with Lisa permitted an emic perspective of her behaviour and provided a better understanding of her new reader identity and how it was shaped by important influences both in- and out-of-school contexts.

Lisa's narrative of change unfolded during her final year at primary school (Year 7) in Logan City, Queensland. During our conversations, she highlighted the importance of the relationship between her classroom teacher, Miss Barb Redman, and herself, and the significant role the teacher played in developing her confidence and self-efficacy as a reader in a public domain. In addition, Lisa identified several other critical players that supported her transition from non-reader to reader at school. Wherever possible, the narrative has been constructed using Lisa's words, thereby supporting the student voice and emic perspective. Lisa's words have been italicised.

## 4  Lisa's Story of Change

### 4.1  The Change

> I found it boring and stupid that reading was even made! Reading was like my nightmare so much so I used to fake I was sick. Only last year I was reading at an age six to seven. How sad. I cried…because I was so low and it was really embarrassing. Then I went up to (age) 11 to 12 and now I'm at 12 to 13 (reading age according to Probe testing). Now people actually believe I can do it. People didn't really believe before that I could really read before this.

Lisa was clearly very proud of her improved reading ability by the end of Year 6. In Year 5 she perceived reading at school as boring and she considered that reading 'little kids books like Cat in the Hat' was too easy. Nevertheless, she indicated that about half the time in Year 5 she found the texts given to her at school hard to understand. This interview response contradicted her reports of reading Harry Potter books and Lord of the Rings at home. Lisa's poor results in NAPLAN (band three) and Probe testing (six years below her chronological age) in Year 5 indicated an anomaly between her reading ability at home and at school. An interesting point in the interview excerpt is that Lisa mentioned that there were people who did not believe that she could read. While it was unclear who these people were, Lisa's reading and her attitude to reading were influenced by a group of people who were not supportive of her reading in school.

In the first interview in Year 7, she smiled and talked animatedly about the factors in her environment that she perceived as having a positive impact on her willingness to read at school and her perceptions of herself as a reader.

> I started to care more about my grades because it was really upsetting me that I always had bad grades and I knew I could read properly and I was good at comprehending and stuff…. so then I decided to do what I was supposed to do and learn better, concentrate on what the teacher was saying and stuff and that's how I became a good reader….

Lisa's change was verified by the survey questionnaires that she completed during the three-year study. In Year 5, Lisa perceived reading in class was usually boring and strongly agreed that it was hard for her. She indicated about half the time she wanted to quit reading. In Year 7, Lisa indicated that the reading material was sometimes boring and sometimes hard but that she never wanted to give up and always wanted to spend more time on reading. Improvements across a range of tests also supported the change.

Lisa's Year 6 English results were an E grade for semester one and a D grade for semester two. The E grade indicated that she had extremely little knowledge and understanding of concepts, facts and procedures and application of processes covered in the English-language curriculum while the D grade pointed to limited knowledge development in these language areas. She was classified as achieving at a band three level based on her performance in the NAPLAN assessment of reading and writing. In addition, Probe reading comprehension assessment indicated Lisa had a reading age of 11 years and six months. While Lisa's Year 7 English results remained the same as the previous year (an E in semester one and a D in semester two) her reading achievement in Year 7 improved. Her reading performance on NAPLAN moved up to band five and her reading age on the Probe test increased to 12 years and five months.

Lisa's change story was not just about improved reading performance. Lisa developed new reading attitudes congruent to her reader identity. Before the change, Lisa used to avoid reading by pretending. In the excerpt below, she explained how she had disengaged from this type of avoidance behaviours since her change in reading performance. She attributed it to her confidence in reading.

> I can avoid reading if I'm fake reading but then I get caught red-handed because I get asked the questions! But I don't really think….I haven't even fake read since before I went up levels. Maybe it's because I've got more confidence in myself that I can do it and I'm not shameful [embarrassed].

## 4.2   The Barriers

Lisa's comment about knowing she could read 'properly' was intriguing. It begs a question about why Lisa had chosen not to demonstrate she could read at school. As she explained:

> I didn't concentrate before and listen to the teacher because I felt that I was really, really cool and my friends were in the low group as well so that's another reason I went there. I wanted to be with all my friends and I was too modest and also I get distracted really easily.

It appears that group membership and her own inability to ignore peer distractions were the main reasons for her reading difficulties. It is probable that her friends in Year 5 were the people who did not believe she could read. Observations of Lisa working in group reading situations revealed that she frequently acted out,

interacted inappropriately with other students, called out during the reading and constantly moved and fidgeted. However, as the peer membership broke down and her peers told Lisa that she was 'weird', she began to see the need to do what she 'always knew' she could do—read well.

> I always knew I could read but I just didn't want to. Then my friends started being mean to me a lot so then I decided well why am I still here if they're mean to me. Probe is coming up so let's change all that.

Nevertheless, the change process was not without barriers. Her determination to do well in reading met with an immediate problem—reading anxiety.

> I get very nervous when I have to read and especially in front of other people. I can only do it [read] in front of people I don't like. I can't do it in front of people I do know because sometimes I stutter because I get really nervous.

In addition, Lisa spoke of several frustrations about reading at school that may, in part, explain her former reluctance and inability to show her capabilities as a reader. She was particularly cognisant of the optimal classroom and affective conditions which allowed her to concentrate and read.

> I like quiet reading but some people read out loud in quiet reading and it distracts me. I'm one of those kids that need absolute quiet. I can concentrate when something good has happened and when I'm relaxed and I'm not angry, and people are nice and quiet because I really cannot work in a loud environment even I'm loud! But if I'm not relaxed I feel like I can't do this, I'm not good at this, why should I even try.

During the interviews over three years, Lisa frequently spoke of reading as being something she considered to be a private, almost intimate, affair. At home, Lisa explained her favourite places for reading were her bed or her cubby house in the back yard. Both locations were private and offered her the chance to escape both physically and mentally. Lisa's responses to the survey questionnaires consistently revealed these preferences for reading at home. Aligning with Lisa's consideration of reading as a 'private' activity, her reading preference at school was silent reading. In the interview excerpt below, Lisa talked about her reading at home, the book collection that she had acquired over time, and her treatment of reading as something personal that she wanted to hide from other people.

> I read a lot at home. I've got two cupboards full of books. I get them from the op shop for 25 cents each, especially if they're chapter books. I've been doing it forever because I didn't read at school. I only read at home. I don't like telling people about it [what she's read] because it's sort of my place to relax and be with myself and it's something that I like to keep to myself.

She also indicated answering questions about texts was often frustrating because she wanted to share her knowledge with her peers and, in her eagerness to do so, would get into trouble for calling out the answer. At other times, when comprehension questions had to be written, she would have difficulty concentrating and finishing the task because she was tired. Nevertheless, she explained that an important reason for

her tiredness was that she had read at home the night before, and explained that 'sometimes I avoid reading at school because I'm tired. About 40% of the time I'm tired because I read books in the night and stuff'.

## 4.3   The Support

Miss Redman was Lisa's classroom teacher for two years (Year 6 and Year 7). Over that time, she came to understand Lisa's profound anxiety related to public reading. Observations showed that she endeavoured to reduce the pressure by speaking calmly and encouraging Lisa to have a go, even if she only read a sentence. In the interview excerpt below, Lisa talked about how Miss Redman showed her support and helped her to overcome reading anxiety.

> (My classroom teacher) says everybody should participate [reading aloud] but when it's me she understands because usually I have a bit of trouble reading aloud to people. She says, "Do you want to read today Lisa?" and I usually say "no" so I read along with them and sometimes out loud with them but very quietly. But I don't get nervous with my teacher. I can connect with her. She's my bezzie (best friend). She makes me feel okay about reading out loud. She's had a big role in helping me show I can read. She's been in class with me for two years and it's like when I come to school I leave my mum and I come to my mum at school. She's always so supportive of me and she listens to me all the time and she talks to me more than my mum does so she is like a mother to me and it feels normal.

Our records of classroom observations corroborate Lisa's comments of a nurturing and supportive student–teacher relationship. For example, Miss Redman used a combination of humour and irony to encourage Lisa to persist with reading. She frequently genuinely praised Lisa's efforts but also expressed firm and clear expectation for goals and achievement in reading.

> She tells me I can do it and that if I put my mind to it I can do anything and she makes me feel happy and good so I do it. She says she's proud of me. After Probe testing she said, "well done Lisa….okay now do your work!"

In addition to the encouragement and praise, Miss Redman directed Lisa's use of reading strategies, monitored her off-task behaviours and redirected her attention when Lisa's focus drifted. Miss Redman was cognisant of Lisa's tendency to be easily distracted and consequently she monitored her work output and gently encouraged her back to the task at hand. 'She says to me "Lisa, I think we need to have a little chat. Now in reading I've noticed you're a bit side-tracked."'. Most notably the teacher used a sense of humour to redirect Lisa's behaviour and it is likely that this strategy worked because it appealed to Lisa's gregarious and fun-loving nature.

Lisa's connection with Miss Redman was not shared with the other teachers who took her for literacy rotations. In the interview excerpt below, Lisa talked about her disruptive relationship with a teacher who led the literacy rotation period. From Lisa's perspective, her poor relationship with Ms Wood was attributed to the teacher's failure to allow Lisa to read at her own pace, which upset her.

> I've worked out which teachers I like and don't like. Ms Woods, my group reading teacher, she burns. She gets angry with me because I call out because I know the answers. I call out because I like to get in first with the answers and she never asks me.

Here, Lisa is clearly able to articulate the teacher-driven conditions that frustrate and/or stress her. Again, our observations of the literacy rotation periods supported Lisa's comments. Although the teacher had reasonably good instructional skills, Lisa disliked that she 'doesn't really make us feel interested before we read because she makes everything sound really boring'. Nor did the teacher demonstrate any understanding of Lisa's need to orally share her understanding of texts with the group or keeping her on task. Consequently, Lisa was often verbally rebuked for talking and becoming distracted. Lisa's reported relationship with two different teachers suggests that the relationship between teacher and disengaged student can either act as a powerful vehicle to support and sustain change, or work to further alienate and disengage students.

## 4.4  Additional School Support

Lisa's network of support extended beyond the classroom. In Year 7, she was moved to a higher-level reading group and selected to read to English as a Second Language (ESL) students at the school. Lisa was very proud of this achievement because it was proof that she was a reader and she frequently raised it during conversations. More importantly, Lisa was nominated to participate in a new initiative: reading to the residents at a nearby retirement village.

> I got chosen, because I was the only one who moved up six levels in half a year, to go to the old people's home and read to them. I loved that. They are a bit smelly though; some of them have funny perfume! I feel very, very excited because Miss said that I'll have more opportunities to read to people now.

Reading to the residents was the brainchild of Mr. George, one of the teachers at Lisa's school. He indicated that the school considered it was important to recognise and acknowledge the achievements of those students who may not necessarily perform at the top level, but who were applying themselves and making improvements. The initiative was well received by both the residents and the students, although there were some obstacles to arranging visits.

Reading to the elderly bought an unexpected benefit for Lisa—an increase in confidence in reading aloud to others. In the excerpt below, Lisa shared how she had learnt to regulate her reading and overcome reading anxiety associated with reading aloud in public.

> I can do it [read] in front of people I don't like…I can't do it [read] in front of people I do know because sometimes I stutter because I get really nervous. Sometimes I'm reading and then I skip two whole lines. I'm like, "I missed it – sorry" so I quickly go back and then I read it all over again.

For Lisa, being chosen to read to the elderly residents at the retirement village added another level of public validation beyond her successful reading in front of her peers at assembly. The opportunity also afforded her the opportunity to practise public reading skills in front of an unfamiliar audience who, unlike her peers, were non-judgmental and appreciative, which in turn made the experience relatively non-threatening and permitted success.

Lisa's participation in the initiative was a demonstrable way of proving to her former literacy rotation teachers and peers that she was capable of reading. 'I want to prove them [the people who don't think I can read] wrong and show how smart I am because I moved up like 6 reading levels.' However, she explained that proving to others she can read was not the primary motivation for her reading engagement. Her intrinsic motivation was far more powerful: 'I do it for myself. I want to make myself proud of me'. She explained that she was not yet proud of herself, but she was proud of her results in the Probe reading test.

## 4.5   Support Beyond School

Beyond the school environment, Lisa shared that her father, stepmother and biological mother consistently encouraged her to read but mostly for extrinsic reasons such as getting a good job when she leaves school. In mid-2012, a change in her family situation provided additional motivation for Lisa to alter how she engaged in school and, more specifically, in reading. Lisa started living with her biological mother and wanted to please her. Lisa considered that 'doing good at school' was a strategy to keep her mother happy.

> I started living with my mum and she told me if I didn't keep on going to school and doing really good at school I'd get taken off her and stuff and thinking about losing my mum because I lost her two times [before] because she had to go to hospital, so thinking about losing her again was really, really scary so I decided to start doing the best I could. I felt as if it was my responsibility to become more responsible and grow up from my little kiddie ways and start doing things for mum like helping her by doing good at school.

Although Lisa's mother was illiterate, she told Lisa that reading was an important skill. Despite not reading with her daughter or discussing what Lisa had read, Lisa's mother explicitly reinforced messages about the value of reading with statements that make Lisa proud of her reading achievements.

> Mum said, "If you read, you'll be really smart. Smarter than anyone I know." She said I was a dumb idiot and [now] she's like "and now my baby's a reader" and I go "mum I've always been a reader I just [didn't] want to read." I never wanted to read. It makes me feel like my mum's proud of me. I don't want to achieve anything to make anybody proud of me. I just want to achieve it to make myself proud of me.

The support Lisa received from her mother with reading was not confined to verbal reinforcement. Lisa's mother physically supported her by taking her to second-hand shops to purchase pre-loved books and visiting local community

libraries. In the excerpt below, Lisa explained how her mother brought her to the library where she engaged in her solitary pursuit of reading.

> I'd go [to the library] three times a week after school. I like to go to the ones that my friends aren't at so I don't get embarrassed. Mum drops me off at the library. I go on the computer, do some work and read some books. Books are my thing. I don't like mum invading my privacy with books and she doesn't like to read. On a scale of one to ten I like going I'd say about eight, most of the time.

## 4.6 Verifying Reader Identity

When asked what the most powerful influence had been in shaping her identity as a reader, Lisa's reply was definitive.

> Barb. Barb. She encourages me, she loves me, she tells me that she cares about me, she's like a mum that I can tell anything to except my report card because she already knows! Next year I'm going to visit her every day because I love her.

Lisa's assertions support the body of the literature testifying to the significant impact of student–teacher relationships on student learning, engagement and achievement (e.g. Averill, 2012; Eccles, 2004). Barb also argued for the importance of the relational factor in supporting Lisa's reading improvements. She indicated they both knew each other very well as a result of being together for Years 6 and 7.

> I think it's about establishing a good relationship with all the students – even the 'difficult' ones. Being aware of where they're coming from, any issues at home and just supporting them in any way that I can. In the beginning, Lisa was a bit rough around the edges but listening to what she had to say and supporting her no matter what really helped. It was about being available and showing an interest in Lisa. Being positive and promoting a sense of belief in Lisa's abilities and setting attainable goals also really helped. It was important to keep it real and not try to stifle her into something she wasn't. We worked a lot on developing a sense of self-worth and attempting new things without being worried about 'failing'. Lisa enjoyed reading but she wasn't confident – a self-esteem thing – so that was the focus, enjoyment and having a go.

Although Lisa has already moved to high school, the extent of Miss Redman's impact and influence on Lisa can perhaps be best summarised by the regular weekly after-school visits Lisa made to see her former teacher. The profound impact she had on Lisa has clearly transcended their classroom teacher/student relationship. Whether the changes in Lisa's reading practices are sustained is a matter for future follow-up.

## 5   Discussion

This study sought to identify why one Indigenous student had changed her attitude to reading in school and the factors that supported this change. The data collected from Lisa's case indicated that the change was influenced by her membership of two contrasting social contexts. Initially, Lisa's reading behaviours and attitudes were congruent to the values, beliefs about reading and Lisa's capabilities as a reader that was held by her reading group peers. However, as Lisa became cognisant of her peers' negative feelings towards her, her reading behaviours and attitudes shifted to align with parental and teacher values and beliefs about reading. Although Lisa considered reading 'personal' and insisted that she improved her reading because of her own choice, her radical change in reading cannot be understood sufficiently without situating it within its social context and the influences derived from its members. In short, relational factors in these social contexts played a significant role in her decision to read or not to read in school.

In Year 5, Lisa hid her reading ability and interest in order to stay close to her school peers who neither valued reading nor considered Lisa a reader. As a group member, Lisa acted in concert with her peers who distracted each other during reading periods. Nevertheless, Lisa talked of contrasting reading behaviours, including reading novels and keeping her own book collection at home, where she could freely pursue her reading interest. These contradictory reading behaviours and attitudes are consistent with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) description of American black students' conscious act of hiding their real learning motivation in order to sustain their peer group membership. Avoiding the accusation of 'acting white' and maintaining the African American collective identity were the motive for African American students' decision to hide their learning motivation. In Lisa's case, however, the fear of 'acting white' might not have been present and the impact of a collective identity of being an Indigenous student was unclear. Nevertheless, peer influence has clearly played a significant role in Lisa's disengaged reading behaviours observed in Year 5 and in Lisa's decision to hide her real interest in reading. Some studies have shown that where peers make fun of academic achievement and effort, students' reading achievement can decline (Johnson, 2000). Lisa was not immune from her peers' negative influences. Her disengaged reading behaviours in Year 5 were reflective of her relationship with a group of peers who did not value reading. An interesting finding in this study was that Lisa deliberately hid her real reading interest in order to stay with her school peers. It would be of interest to know whether many Indigenous students hide their real reading pursuit when facing peer pressure or influence. This is a worthwhile research question needing further investigation.

Detaching from her peers in Year 6, Lisa's reading behaviours and attitudes changed radically. With support and assistance from her teacher, she was able to overcome her reading anxiety and build up her confidence in reading. This case highlighted how the unwavering support and trust Lisa received from her classroom teacher, together with affirmations and a discourse of expectation, improvement and

praise, allowed Lisa to overcome the embarrassment she associated with her public reading performances. The support and trust also enabled her to develop the confidence to show her ability as a reader at school and during her participation in the outreach reading programme at the home for the elderly. Lisa's case of change is illustrative of how school-level (e.g. school programmes on reading to ESL students and elderly people) and student-focussed supports (e.g. encouragement from her teacher) can work together in effecting change in students' reading behaviours (Lamb & Rice, 2008). Consistent with studies highlighting the importance of the student–teacher relationship (e.g. Averill, 2012), Lisa's class teacher has played a significant role in providing personalised support based on her understanding of Lisa's reading strengths and weaknesses and offering of care. More importantly, the class teacher has taken a mastery orientation in her interaction with Lisa and insisted that she could learn to read and read better. As found in the study by Munns et al. (2008), Lisa responded positively to her teacher's call for mastery learning in reading. Lisa's parents supported the explicit messages she received at school about the importance of reading and her mother acted as an enabler by providing access to books and libraries. She also communicated how proud she was that her daughter was a reader, despite being illiterate herself. Further research needs to investigate ways that Indigenous parents can support their children in reading, irrespective of their literacy levels. In short, the synergistic provision of consistent, positive and value-laden messages and support from significant adults in Lisa's life, in both the school and home contexts, may have worked to constrain the distracting influence of peers in the classroom and improve her reading outcomes.

This longitudinal case study clearly shows that there were two social groups that exerted major influences successively on Lisa's reading behaviours during the research period. Her changes in reading engagement and achievement were tied to the values and beliefs held about reading by the groups, together with the group's perceptions of Lisa's reading capability. An interesting point about Lisa's case is the simultaneous presence of these two social contexts in which their key members hold contrasting orientations to reading. This speaks of the importance of offering constant support to Indigenous students' reading engagement despite the possibility that they may not respond. In Lisa's case, she responded actively to the support from her teacher once she had made the decision to leave her peer group and read. One limitation in this study is that we have not been able to ascertain the point of transference when Lisa began to act on her teacher's and mother's messages and started identifying as a reader at school.

Lisa's powerful assertions about her teacher's role in supporting her change in identity as a reader suggest the significance of relational support was considerable for her, but more cases are needed to determine the types and benefits of relational support for other Indigenous students. Furthermore, the sustained relational support Lisa benefited from over a two-year period is not the norm for most Australian students. It is understood that sustainable change occurs over time with support.

This begs the question: is the standard contact time of one year sufficient for teachers to positively impact students' engagement with reading? Further examination of the benefits of extended relational contact with teachers that Indigenous students have an affinity for is also warranted.

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