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Indigenous Education In Australia:  
Policy, Participation and Praxis

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

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# Volume 4, Issue 1

## Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

### Guest Editors

*Marnie O'Bryan*

*Prof. Mark Rose*

### THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

### COVER ART

*Majority Rule*  
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Andrew Baker  
Art Dealer, Brisbane*

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan  
Guest Editors

# Reflections on the value of holistic mentoring support in education

***Andrea Goddard***

## **ABSTRACT**

This article reflects on the value of a formal mentoring program in a school-based environment with a population group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male youth. A case-study highlights the potential for supporting improved social and emotional wellbeing through the strength-based approach undertaken, in addition to the measured education and employment outcomes which are the broad goals of the program.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Indigenous youth, mentoring, Clontarf Foundation, resilience, health, wellbeing, school engagement, strengths based*

*“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”*  
- Mandela

## INTRODUCTION

*“The education of Indigenous Australians, particularly Indigenous youth, is the key to overcoming disadvantage in other areas such as health, life expectancy, employment, living conditions and self-esteem.” Sir William Deane, 18 May 2001*

Schools provide a valuable setting for supporting outcomes beyond just education. In this article I reflect on my experiences which have demonstrated that with school-based holistic mentoring support provided for students, it is possible to see improved outcomes in health, social and emotional well-being, employment and justice outcomes, to name just a few. Underpinned by the principles of positive youth development - of valuing young people and doing things of value – an understanding of the intersections and interrelationships between health and well-being, education and employment, enables programs with a holistic focus on youth development.

In reflecting on my observations of such a program, I disclose that they were largely made during my seven and a half year tenure as General Manager of Development for the Clontarf Foundation, a school-based mentoring program for young Aboriginal men. During this period, most of my time was spent in remote Western Australia, the Northern Territory, regional Victoria and New South Wales establishing new programs for the Foundation. With responsibility for the growth and development of the organisation, my core activities involved: stakeholder engagement, including with Aboriginal communities, Commonwealth & State/Territory Governments, Education Departments, schools and corporate partners; staff recruitment and training; staff support and mentoring. In my view, the most critical component of my role was the recruitment of the mentors, as without success in this area, success elsewhere (for instance fundraising or stakeholder relations) would not have resulted in the same level of outcomes for the students.

The opportunity to work with these amazing and committed mentors was certainly the highlight of my time in the role. From 2005, when I first commenced work with



the Foundation to 2013, the number of mentors increased from approximately 10 to 150, as the numbers of programs grew from 3 to around 50.

The Clontarf Foundation works to improve the education, discipline, life skills, self-esteem and employment prospects of young Aboriginal men and by doing so equip them to participate meaningfully in society (Clontarf, 2013). These outcomes are achieved through the medium of football. Clontarf 'Football Academies' are formed in association with selected schools and colleges. Each Academy's football program attracts young Aboriginal men to school and then helps to retain them. Academy staff mentor and counsel Academy members on a range of behavioural and lifestyle issues while the school caters for their specific educational needs.

Unlike myself, whose role required a high level of mobility, the men who undertook the mentoring roles to the students were employed full-time to work, and importantly long-term, in the partner schools. These men were some of the most outstanding people that I have ever met and I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with them. Their ability to develop meaningful relationships with the young men in their programs was testimony to their levels of integrity and skill. These committed and capable men were at the coalface every day, supporting the program participants to develop and achieve their goals. The benefit for me of the high level of mobility, was that I witnessed similar outcomes across metropolitan, regional and remote locations in four different states and territories. Whilst the locations varied considerably, the consistency of certain inputs and more importantly, the qualities held by the mentors resulted in consistent outcomes. With the support of the mentors through the program, many of these young men certainly experienced more positive education and pathways than they otherwise would have.

This paper is not an evaluation of the Clontarf program, but is a reflection on the impact that effective mentoring can have on building resilience and capacity for disadvantaged young people, in this case Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male youth. The observations that I make are not exclusive to Clontarf, they are adaptable to any school setting and have particular pertinence for mainstream schools that have a number of Indigenous students enrolled, or indeed for schools that cater for a larger number of marginalized youth. The program is an example of how observations of local circumstances and creative abilities (in this case, Indigenous youth engagement and success with sport) are used to build social capital and well-being. It is my belief that all young people would benefit from such a program, particularly those who experience social, emotional or environmental challenges or disadvantage.

By highlighting the interrelationships between health, education, social and emotional wellbeing and mentoring, and exploring some of the theory and the rationale that predicates success, I hope to demonstrate the progress that can be made when a holistic approach is taken to program design and delivery, and young people are supported across dimensions simultaneously.

It is, unfortunately, not news that there continues to be inequality in health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. Aboriginal youth, as a subgroup of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are the most disadvantaged group across all areas of life (Wyn & Woodman, 2006). They are more likely to experience poor health (NACCHO, 2003; ), far less likely to complete school (Lamb, Dwyer, & Wyn, 2000; DEECD, 2008), with literacy

and numeracy results consistently below the national average (Wyn, 2009), far more likely to experience the justice system (Cunneen, 2008) and far less likely to find employment (SCRGSP, 2007).

It is not my intention to detail the causes, manifestations and outcomes of this disadvantage, as there is a litany of data and literature already available on these matters. Nor do I propose to have the solutions to ensure equality and equity across all measures of health and well-being for Aboriginal Australians. I do, however, passionately believe in the ability of education to change the world, but only if it is enabled with holistic support for the social and emotional well-being essential for learning.

I acknowledge that my reflections are based on my observations and experience working with Aboriginal youth and people. I am a non-Aboriginal Australian and, as such, do not have the personal experience of growing up as an Aboriginal person to comment from that perspective, so my reflection is based on observation and views shared by Indigenous youth and adults in numerous discussions over many years.

## **THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH**

There is a well-researched, highly positive association between health and education (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2012). Socio-economic factors, especially those related to income prospects, explain between one third and one half of the observed health differences between populations (Booth & Carroll, 2005). Similarly, up to one-third of the difference in life expectancy could be attributed to differences in income, school education, employment status and overcrowded housing (DSI Consulting PL & Benham, 2009). More affluent groups enjoy power and social connections that they utilize effectively to the benefit of their health and increased longevity. Socioeconomic status, therefore is considered a “fundamental cause” of health disparities (Booth & Carroll, 2005 Sept). Those with greater resources are able to more easily live a healthy lifestyle, choose healthy neighborhoods in which to live, obtain safe and fulfilling jobs, and surround themselves with an effective social network (Link & Phelan, 1995).

Even after controlling for different measures of socio-economic status, such as income and race, and regardless of how health is measured (mortality rates, self-reported health status, or physiological indicators of health), the finding holds (Grossman & Kaestner, 1997). Social inequality and the determinants of health are pivotal to long term health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999) and so, only through addressing these core issues, can improvements be made in indicators like education level and health status.

Those with poor social and health environments at the beginning of their lives are likely to have poor education outcomes and then, in turn, poorer health outcomes later in their lives. Improved education can independently override these effects, resulting in improved health outcomes (Dewalt & Berkman, 2004). It has been shown that improvements in health are likely to see improvements in education, which contribute to further improvement in health (Wilkinson, 1996).

To be more specific, higher levels of education are associated with healthier lifestyle choices and improved health literacy. For example, we know that adults are less likely to smoke if they have completed Year 12, are employed and have higher incomes (AHMAC, 2012). Conversely, low levels of education and literacy are linked to low income and poor health status, and affect the capacity of people to use health information (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999).

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth experience life circumstances that seriously challenge their social and emotional wellbeing and limit their capacity to fulfill their life potential (Haswell, Blignault, Fitzpatrick, & Jackson, 2013). I acknowledge that there is a lack of research undertaken into the education–wellbeing relationship among Indigenous peoples living as minorities in first world countries, which is the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, however for the purposes of this discussion I assume that the relationship holds. There is a reasonable basis for expecting that an improvement in educational status could impact positively on wellbeing and that, in turn, would have a positive impact on educational status (Askill-Williams, et al., 2004).

There is also a possibility that the positive health effects of schooling that have been found in third world populations may be cancelled out for Australia's First Peoples because of socially exclusionary policies and practices that may extend to school classrooms (Malin & CRCATH, 2003). Nonetheless, extensive literature demonstrates the links between child development, education and health along the life course: at an individual level, at the level of the family, and of the community (COAG, 2012).

It is no surprise then, that of the agreed targets set by the Australian Government for closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage outlined by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in the National Indigenous Reform Agenda (COAG, 2012), five of the six relate directly to health and education while the sixth, employment, is arguably directly impacted by both health and education (See Table 1).

Table 1

The Six COAG Closing the Gap Targets

- close the life expectancy gap within a generation (by 2031);
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade (by 2018);
- ensure all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013);
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018);
- halve the gap for Indigenous people aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020); and
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade (by 2018).



## **ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH, WELLBEING AND EDUCATION**

Among some of the health factors identified by research as disproportionately affecting Indigenous children that may impact on learning are the following (AMA, 2013):

- about 50% of Indigenous children are raised in ‘community and family environments which are replete with early childhood adversity’;
- high levels of family stress, sub-optimal nutrition and recurrent infection;
- higher rates of drug and alcohol use by Indigenous Australians;
- Indigenous women have a higher birth rate, have children at a younger age and are markedly more likely to experience stress during pregnancy;
- Indigenous children have higher rates of stunting, both underweight and obesity in urban areas, and nutritional anemia; and
- Indigenous children are dramatically more likely to suffer from hearing loss.

We know that this translates, among other things, to Indigenous students compared with non-Indigenous students, being (ABS, 2003):

- less likely to attend preschool (Link & Phelan, 1995);
- well behind mainstream rates in literacy and numeracy (Wyn, 2009)
- likely to leave school much earlier;
- less than half as likely to complete Year 12;
- more likely to be taking bridging and basic entry programs in universities and vocational education programs;
- under-represented in higher education; and
- likely to obtain fewer and lower-level qualifications (McRae, et al., 2002).

Nationally, Indigenous education participation levels are low, with retention rates at about half that of other Australians (SCRGSP, 2007) limiting employment options (Wyn, 2009) and largely reinforcing economic disadvantage and negative stereotypes of Indigenous people (Wyn, 2009). The proportion of Indigenous people aged 20–24 with a Year 12 or equivalent qualification was 54 per cent in 2011 compared with 86 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians (COAG Reform Council, 2013).

## **SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES**

In 'Learning Lessons' (Collins, 1999) it was argued that '...children must attend school consistently to progress. In relation to Indigenous education, poor attendance is without doubt the primary cause of poor educational outcomes'. Attendance and engagement with school is critical to achieving satisfactory education outcomes.

The issues described in the report include the lack of consistent attendance and the lack of expectation from a school, community and system perspective. A culture of low expectation and low motivation to engage in schooling was seen as a major contributor to poor attendance and education outcomes. So, just as a person's social and economic position in society, educational attainment, employment (or lack of) and other social determinants exert a powerful influence on their health throughout their life (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003), so too do they exert an influence on school attendance which, in turn, effects education outcomes.

## **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IMPROVES SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT**

With school engagement critical to education outcomes, there is a growing recognition that disengagement from school is not just about school. Whilst the theory of the social determinants of health highlights that many of the factors determining illness lie outside of the conventional boundaries of primary clinical healthcare, there are similarly a multitude of factors that contribute to student engagement and education. Many of these are outside the realm of what we consider the conventional boundaries of 'education' including, but not limited to things such as: family mobility; lack of parent and community support for attendance; overcrowding; social disruption affecting children including gambling, substance abuse and violence; timing of royalty payments; cultural activities; lack of employment and the routines and benefits that accompany employment among parents (Wilson, 2014).

Some of this translates to young people grappling with personal and family issues, including conflict, violence and abuse; high family mobility requiring lots of "fresh starts"; family history of negative experiences with school; lack of transport; parents with physical or mental illness or drug related issues; financial pressures; trouble managing work and school; drug and alcohol issues; and mental health issues (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle, & Seal, 2005). All of these issues, and more, can impact school attendance and engagement.

Studies highlight the need for safe but intellectually challenging school environments in which students can negotiate these challenges (Butler, et al., 2005). A supportive school environment that is sensitive to the external challenges that young people face and enables them to feel that they belong, can assist with attendance and engagement. Research and practice in both education and public health has increasingly focused on the school experiences of early adolescence as crucial in promoting engagement with learning and enhancing physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being (Patton, Bond, & Glover, 2003). Certainly, the educational, personal and social experiences at school impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing, as well as on their

learning and life options (Mind Matters, 2007). Research also shows that a strong sense of connection is associated with positive educational outcomes and lower rates of risk behaviours (Mind Matters, 2007).

The feeling of belonging and connectedness are protective factors that can offset the deleterious effects of risk factors on wellbeing (Resnick, 2000). The concept of connectedness refers to a person's sense of connection and closeness to parents, family and other adults outside the family, to school and to community-based organisations.

Conversely, there is a close relationship between lack of connectedness, resulting in social marginalisation (incorporating racial discrimination and economic and social exclusion) and criminalisation (White & Wyn, 2008). Disengagement from the education system is also related to social marginalisation and a predictor of juvenile justice contact (Cunneen, 2008), further reasons that education is seen as critical to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for Indigenous people and schools are therefore such important settings for creation of health and well-being (Burns et al, 2008).

## RESILIENCE, RISK & PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Youth, the period from puberty to young adulthood, is a time of growth and transition. Prevention and promotion for young people involves interventions to alter developmental processes. It is therefore important for the field to be grounded in a conceptual framework that reflects a developmental perspective, including multiple contexts, developmental tasks, and interactions among biological, psychological, and social factors (Sameroff & Fiese, 1990) .

Within a developmental framework, resilience is considered to be the attainment of wellbeing or positive outcomes, as indicated by the successful attainment of stage-salient developmental abilities and accomplishments, despite adversity (Burack et al., 2007 ). Resilience has been most frequently defined as positive adaptation despite adversity (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008).

Much of what seems to promote resilience originates outside of the individual (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). This has led to a search for resilience factors at the individual, family and community levels, from where both risk and protective factors have been identified. The risk and protective factor framework is based on years of international research into youth development and resilience (Fuller, Goodyear, & McGraw, 1999). The framework identifies important 'risk' and 'protective' factors that influence young people's behavior and development of resilience.

Protective factors are defined as the factors, which if present, diminish the likelihood of negative health and social outcomes (DHS, 2000). Protective factors are those strengths and supports that help youth and families get through negative exposure or life experiences without negative consequences—in other words, they can increase resilience. There are three levels of resilience identified in relation to protective factors: individual (e.g., personal characteristics, knowledge, skills); family and close social connections (e.g., family relationships, supportive adults, supportive peers); and community (e.g., available services, school characteristics, community social and economic resources).

Protective factors include (Fuller, et al., 1999):

- good peer connections
- positive achievements & evaluations at school
- contributions are noticed and valued
- experiences positive relationships with adults
- a sense of belonging & fitting in
- having someone outside your family who believes in you
- active participation in school and/or community life
- high expectations for achievement
- learning has meaning and significance

Whilst not directly noted as a protective factor, for Indigenous youth it can be argued that affirming young people's Indigenous identity and values builds a sense of control, affording them a sense of agency in their own pursuit of education (Sarra, 2011). This can in turn positively impact on other protective factors.

Conversely, risk factors are defined as hazards that if present for a given individual, make it more likely that the individual will develop difficulties. Many of the health factors that may impact on learning noted earlier as disproportionately affecting Indigenous children are risk factors if looking through the lens of the risk and protective factor framework.

Risk factors include (Fuller, et al., 1999):

- detachment from school
- academic failure, especially in middle years
- early and persistent antisocial behavior
- low parental interest in education
- transitions and mobility
- poverty
- family history of problematic alcohol or drug usage
- inappropriate family management
- family conflict
- alcohol/drugs interfere with family rituals
- harsh/coercive and/or inconsistent parenting

An important aspect of the risk and protective framework is co-morbidity. If one risk factor is present in a young person's life, it is likely that they will develop further risk. This principle also applies to protective factors. The promotion of at least one protective factor will increase the likelihood of the development of further protective factors (Fuller et al., 1999). Many Aboriginal people face a set of interrelated risks to their social and emotional wellbeing (Silburn, et al., 2005). While single risk factors—such as particular negative life events—might have a minimal effect on their own, when combined they can have a strong interactive effect, and exposure to multiple risk factors over time can have a cumulative effect (Kazdin & Kagan, 1994).

Whilst there is a wide diversity of adolescent experiences and it is therefore simplistic to consider adolescent development as a linear pathway, secondary students are often dealing with multiple challenges: physical, emotional, intellectual and social changes; developing independence and autonomy; social acceptance and changing relationships with peers; and developing identity, including personal values, sexual orientation and expectations about education and work (Butler, et al., 2005).

Given that health is defined as not just the physical well-being of the individual, but the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole community (NAHSWP, 1989), it makes sense that improving the social and emotional wellbeing of a young person is essential to developing healthy, resilient individuals who contribute to building strong communities that in turn are imbued with a strong cultural, spiritual and community identity that supports all members to reach their full potential (Haswell et al., 2013).

## **IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EDUCATION, HEALTH AND LIFE OUTCOMES**

In response to the knowledge of the significance of resilience, risk and protective factors and the relationship to school engagement, there is a growing body of research reporting on strategies that make a difference to outcomes such as learning, school attendance and engagement (NRCIM, 2002). Strategies abound for working at the various levels of individual, family, school or community to address various social determinants impacting on health, wellbeing and education. We will discuss one such strategy for improving social and emotional well-being, engagement in learning and subsequent improved academic outcomes: a model involving school-based mentors within a positive youth development framework.

The two underpinning and over-arching values of positive youth development are valuing young people and doing things of value (Wierenga & Wyn, 2011), promoting a strengths-based approach. Strengths-based approaches to youth programs arise from the important outcomes of research into risk and resilience (Blum, 1998), which show that risk reduction approaches do not appear to work. That is, traditional programs that have focused on negative issues and remedial strategies in program delivery to target drugs, pregnancy, violence and so on are ineffective. Rather, the only programs that appear to make a sustained difference are those that enhance adolescent development (Blum, 1998).



A strengths-based perspective is one that recognises the resilience of individuals and focuses on the potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities of individuals, rather than their limits (Nixon, 2002). It is in this way that a strengths-based approach differs from traditional deficit models (Scerra, 2011). A focus on positive behaviours and attitudes assists and encourages young people to work towards better results. By building on or engaging enthusiasm in areas of strength, young people can change behaviours and improve achievement (MYD, 2005).

## **A SCHOOL-BASED MENTORING MODEL IMPROVING HEALTH, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING & EDUCATION OUTCOMES**

A significant body of evidence highlights the importance of mentoring in youth development (Sullivan & Larson, 2010). Mentoring involves an ongoing relationship to develop capacities, in this case between adults and young people (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). The term mentor is sometimes used fairly loosely, though often used to describe a naturally-evolving relationship, usually between an older 'wise' person and a receptive younger person. Such partnerships are increasingly recognised as a useful strategy for promoting youth development and youth participation as well as for building strong programs and communities (Libby, 2005).

In the example to follow, it will be evident that the mentors' role includes a valuable link between school and community, which can be viewed as a key contribution to building social capital. High-quality partnership programs that contribute to social capital such as the one described, have been shown to contribute to positive results for students, including improved achievement, attendance, and behaviour (ACER, 2008).

There is a substantial body of literature on the factors and conditions that contribute to highly effective schools. This has been distilled into the following summary of six key features (Masters, 2004):

- strong and effective leadership that engages with the community to build partnerships to support the school's objectives
- a recognition that improving learning is the central purpose of the school and a celebration of student learning and achievement
- knowledgeable and highly skilled professionals in the classroom
- a school culture that challenges and nurtures students and instils a sense of belonging and pride
- a well-developed system for monitoring and evaluating performance and a commitment to continuous improvement
- high levels of parent and community involvement and partnerships designed around school goals.

The principles can be equally applied to the following example of a school-based program in providing a summary of the essential elements for consistency, sustainability and success.

It seems a reasonable assumption to make that few people reading this reflection would be where they are today without someone who has been there to support, encourage and listen to them when challenges arose, or even just on the daily roller-coaster of life- a mentor of some kind. Mentors can be highly valuable, but it can be difficult for people to find a mentor at times, particularly in disadvantaged communities where people are often occupied in dealing with extraordinary challenges. To be truly open and available to listen to someone and have the time and energy to invest in another person usually requires a conscious decision to prioritise that activity over other tasks and activities.

In the following example, we will look at a model that brings together a number of the elements discussed above, involving mentors, strengths based youth development and the benefits that can be realized to education, social and emotional wellbeing, employment and health outcomes. In doing so, there is no suggestion that there is a lack of love, loyalty, capacity or care amongst Aboriginal families or community. There are, however, circumstances which can make it difficult for a young Indigenous person to access a relationship with an adult outside of the family (AMA, 2006), who believes in them and has the time available to invest in their development. All young people can benefit from a mentor or 'trusted other' adult in their life (Sullivan & Larson, 2010) and the example that I describe supports the research in evidencing that a good relationship with an independent adult is a protective factor for adolescent development and can result in improved health, education and wellbeing outcomes (Sullivan & Larson, 2010).

School settings provide an opportunity for youth to have regular contact with adults from circles outside of their own (in this example, the mentors) (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). By being based in the school and providing a safe, supportive environment to enable the students to engage with the education system, the mentors assist further development of resiliency and life-oriented skills, affording the students multiple benefits.

Through developing meaningful and trusting relationships with the students, the mentors encourage the participants to engage with the education system, believe in themselves, develop life skills and make healthy choices for themselves. They focus on developing the youths' capacity, resilience and ability to deal with the rigours of life, and in doing so, improving the students' self-belief, confidence and ultimately their social and emotional wellbeing.

In the Clontarf programs, sport is used as a vehicle to attract students to the program and provide an opportunity for them to experience positive achievements. Having clarity about opportunities for participation, roles and expectations is important to young people (Holdsworth, 2004). Young people value having opportunities to get things right and sports clubs are often identified by young people as places that allow them to do this. Roles, time commitments and expectations are all clear which helps young people to feel that they belong (Holdsworth, Cahill, & Smith, 2003). The sport orientation allowed the program to readily implement this principle through the expectation of participation in the program overall, not just the sport.

Additionally there were extracurricular activities offered regularly that strengthened relationships, promoted experiential learning and increased connection to school and community. The key elements of a resiliency-based program have been identified as being people, contributions, activities and place (Blum, 1998). Each of these elements are well addressed through the program model (Wierenga, 2003):

- *People* refers to adults who care, who are connected; a network of adults who are involved in the life of the adolescent and the mentors more than ably fill that role
- *Contributions* refers to the opportunities a young person has to contribute to family, neighbourhood and community life, and multiple opportunities are provided through the program model for the students to contribute to school and community events;
- *Activities* refers to school and community activities that develop a sense of connection/belonging and, again, frequent opportunities are provided for program participants to engage in activities that promote a sense of belonging;
- *Place* refers to where youth congregate, to recreate with adult supervision, to develop friendships. An essential component of the program is having a dedicated space where students and mentors spend time together daily.

A sense of connectedness and belonging is very important for young people (Dawes & Larson, 2011), so a welcoming program atmosphere and a feeling of being part of team is an important feature of the programs. Creating a supportive context that recognizes a young person's strength is a strong element of any youth development strategy (Haswell et al., 2013). Acknowledging young people's participation and celebrating their achievements are also particularly important and the mentors focus on this as a core principle of the program delivery (Benson & Saito, 2000).

Australian and International work highlights that strength-based approaches double as preventative approaches. People engage with and remain connected to voluntary organisations because of the quality of the social relationships they experience there. There is a strong sense of 'looking out for each other' (Wierenga & Wyn, 2011) which helps to promote this quality.

Opportunities to engage with the 'real world' beyond school, in community-based activities that the participants perceive to be meaningful or purposeful ensures that the young people remained engaged. Research suggests that young people can be very perceptive about what is 'real', purposeful and worthy of respect and choose to participate in those things that they perceive as meeting these criteria (Larson & Walker, 2010). Similarly, providing opportunities for 'active' engagement and on accessible ways for people to engage with their communities is an important component of effective youth development programs (Arnold, Dolenc, & Wells, 2008).

Becoming reflective, resilient learners is also a focus. Action and reflection are central to the idea of resilience (Brennan, 2008), and interestingly a number of the mentors were themselves active participants and champions of reflective practice, modelling the behavior in the truest sense.

The model provides a successful example of the positive association between youth development-focused school-based mentors and improved school attendance and educational achievement, coupled with improved well-being and confidence. In recognising and supporting the development of the young person across physical, social, emotional, spiritual and mental dimensions, the school-based mentor can play a critical role in achieving such outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

As mentioned in the introduction, the ability of the mentors to develop meaningful relationships with the young men in their programs was testimony to their levels of integrity and skill. They are typically committed to their roles, and the young men that they care for, in a way that sees them go 'over and above' what would be expected of anyone fulfilling the requirements of a job. Having the right people in these roles is therefore critical to the outcome. Indeed I have heard the talents and qualities that the mentors possess being described by many educators as the 'magic ingredients'. If I was to describe the qualities that typified the mentors and hence were essential to successfully connecting with and supporting a young person within this environment, they would include:

- Passion – to making a difference in the lives of Indigenous youth. The mentors are always available to the students and this can mean being there night and day. It is a commitment that extends far beyond the school gate or bell times as the mentor will often be the person that the student turns to when in need of support outside of school as well as during school hours.
- Belief – in the students and that positive change can be achieved. This does not mean that they view the students, or indeed the world, through rose-coloured glasses, so to speak. Their belief in the students translates to intense personal attention being given to the students, sometimes in the form of what could be described as 'tough love'. The relationship is based on respect and the respect is mutual and real. Feedback is honest and genuine and able to be given, and received, due to the strength of the relationship. Without this, it is my belief that such positive changes could not be realized.
- Leadership – natural role models and community leaders with integrity who are able to influence, inspire and motivate others. The students are drawn to the mentors because of the qualities that they exhibit and the respect rightly afforded them by the broad community
- Reliability - do what they say they are going to do. Just as the mentors expect high standards of behavior, honesty and commitment from the students, they demonstrate the same
- Energy - to undertake the role. The personal energy levels exhibited by these men is extraordinary and they seemingly never tire.
- Resilience - able to work with optimism to overcome obstacles. The mentors deal with setbacks, disappointments and challenges with a remarkable 'unflappability', always with a view to the future and a realistic acceptance that if they were not 'needed', their role would not exist

- Humble - approachable, patient and are good listeners. Modesty seems to be the norm, and this is often coupled with the ability to enjoy good humour (which may well assist resilience also!) The mentors understand the unique and privileged role that they have in the young person's life and afford it the level of respect and responsibility that it deserves.
- Open to learning – encouraging learning so must model it in practice. Mentors typically seek new knowledge and an understanding of an evidence base that supports their experience in practice
- Compassionate - non-judgmental and able to express understanding and empathy, though not to the detriment of expectations of high standards

Of course, it takes more than a list of qualities to result in the outcomes discussed. I am mindful that trying to distill the unique abilities, qualities and principles of these men does not do justice to the role that they play in a young person's life or the skill and commitment that they bring to the role. I have seen many youth blossom with the support of such mentors and it appears that the strength of the relationship can result in a truly transformative experience, resulting in positive outcomes across multiple dimensions including education, health, social and emotional wellbeing, employment prospects, life choices and opportunities.

## CASE STUDY

The potential impact of the program is best described in story, using an example of a young man whom I spoke to recently and had previously participated in the program for four years. The young man, whom I shall call Duki, had a fairly unsettled childhood and had lived in several different regional towns with various family members before starting primary school.

As described by Duki, his early years involved the separation of his parents; multiple homes in various regional locations; a poor relationship with his step-mother with whom he lived, involving regular conflict; deaths of significant family members; alcoholism of other family members; and experiences of racist behaviour from the broader community.

When I was first introduced to him nearing the end of 2009, Duki was in Year 8. The Principal noted at the time that Duki had missed a lot of school that year. In response to the question of why he had missed so much of his early schooling he replied that “there wasn't any real reason”, he had just “preferred to stay at home and do nothing.” Despite this precarious start, Duki finished Year 12 last year, an outstanding achievement.

He states emphatically that he wouldn't have finished school (Year 12) if it hadn't have been for ‘Turk’, his mentor for the four years (Years 9 – 12). “He was always there for us, believed in us, helped us when we needed it. It was just good to have him there, I could rely on him and trust him.” Duki also talked about the benefits of having friends and cousins who were also involved in the program and the regular sport and other activities that were involved. “If it hadn't been for the program,



there's no way I would have finished school, I would probably just have stayed at home doing nothing."

Not only did Duki complete school last year, but he had the confidence to relocate to a capital city and commence employment in construction with a large company. His days are long, with his alarm waking him before 5am to allow him to arrive at work by 7am, after taking two trains and a bus to the worksite. He says he's never worked so hard but he is happy and grateful that he is in a position to take on such a job. He is presently saving for a car and enjoying spending his leisure time with his family, friends and girlfriend. He has many plans for the future and his future looks bright indeed.

Duki states that it "still feels unreal, that I can be here and have this job. I still can't believe it, but I did it. I guess I just worked out that school was important. You need it to have chances like this. Lucky I had Turk, I wouldn't be here without him."

It may have been very different, however, had he not had his mentor to support him through this critical stage of his development and education. If he had disengaged fully from school at Year 9 or 10, which was looking likely until his mentor arrived at the school, his life course would likely have taken a very different path.

Many of the protective factors for youth development referred to above were addressed through the mentoring relationship that extended over the four final years of schooling for this young man. The school involvement itself is a protective factor, provided that the experience of schooling is generally positive and the support of the mentor reportedly changed the experience for Duki dramatically. He no longer felt that school "just wasn't a place for me" but was a place that he could succeed and set goals for the future. This scenario is typical of the students who are supported with the level of and type of support that the mentors offer. Indeed, the Clontarf program expects to see a retention rate of over ninety percent from year to year and over eighty percent of Year 12 graduates in full-time employment or further study within six months of completing school (Clontarf, 2013).

I believe that a large part of the success of the mentoring relationship in this example, and countless others that I have observed over recent years, is due to the unfailing commitment of the mentors and their belief in the youth. They always go above and beyond what is expected of them and they never give up on the youth. I believe it is this consistent belief in the young people, over many years, which helps the youth, like Duki, to feel positive and comfortable with their own identity, and believe that they have choices about their future. The mentors also create opportunities for the youth to increase their control over what happens to them, and around them. They encourage the youth to believe that they can contribute something of value to society and to their family, friends and community, and enable them to feel connected to society as a whole. All of these elements are critical to the health and well-being of a young person (MYD, 2005). Thanks to mentors like Turk working in the fifty-odd programs across the country, over 200 young men are expected to complete Year 12 this year. Their life opportunities will be greatly enhanced as a result of this support.

## FURTHER OPPORTUNITY

Clontarf is an example of one of a range of programs and initiatives that have been developed over recent years that target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys specifically. It is understood that these programs have been supported in response to the perceived high risk profile of male youth and the opportunity to capitalize on the widely held passion of boys for sport in improving educational performance of boys and young men. However, fewer programs have been developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls and there is presently not a comparable program of similar scale that exists for girls (Doyle & Hill, 2012).

It is well acknowledged that improving the health, education and well-being of women are often described as having a significant 'multiplier effect' based on the cross-generational benefit that those investments support across the life-span (WHO, 2014). Hence, the challenge that now presents is to provide young Aboriginal women with a similar level of investment and opportunity as benefits the young men.

## SUMMARY

I hope that this discussion has highlighted the possibilities in working with youth from a strengths-based perspective. A school-based mentor, adequately resourced and with the right mix of qualities, beliefs and commitment can make the difference between educational engagement and the multitude of health and well-being benefits that flow from that across the life course, and the poor health and life outcomes associated with youth disengagement from the education system.

By building on the talents, skills, passions and strengths of individuals and groups rather than a deficit model approach where the 'problem' is the focus, a positively transformative experience can be achieved. I hope that my reflection on the potential impacts of holistic school-based mentoring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth demonstrates the enhanced potential and opportunities for young lives over what might have been otherwise. If nothing else, I hope that it pays due recognition to the incredible people who give so much of themselves to support young men like Duki succeed in their lives.

*Andrea Goddard*

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## ABOUT THE COVER

*Majority Rule*  
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Andrew Baker  
Art Dealer, Brisbane*



Michael Cook is an award-winning photographer who worked commercially both in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years. In 2009, Cook was drawn into art photography by an increasingly urgent desire to learn about his Indigenous ancestry and explore that aspect of his identity. Cook's first solo art exhibition, *Through My Eyes* (2010), contained images of Australian prime ministers overlaid with the faces of Australian Indigenous. This work explored the potential interconnectedness of generations of Australians and its importance was recognised with selection for the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011 at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Cook was adopted and brought up in a family who, while not of Indigenous descent, were heavily involved in supporting Indigenous rights. He said, "I was raised with a strong understanding of my Aboriginal ancestry thanks to my parents... When I produce art, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestry. This helps me to understand Australian history-in particular, my history." His Aboriginal heritage informs and extends his art.

Cook's photographic practice is unusual. He constructs his images in a manner more akin to painting than the traditional photographic studio or documentary model. Instead he begins with an idea, regarding the image as his blank canvas. Photographic layering is then used to build the image to provide aesthetic depth. Also, he characteristically works in photographic series. Unfolding tableaux offer enigmatic narratives which are not prescribed but left open to interpretation.

In 2011 he exhibited two new series, *Broken Dreams* and *Undiscovered*, together under the title of *Uninhabited*. Their importance was acknowledged when they were acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and shown in its *UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*. They show Cook's developing artistic vision in their exploration of incidents from Australian colonial history, both real

and imagined. Visually striking, technically complex and with sensitive invention, Cook's images occupy a new space in the Australian artistic imagination.

His series *Civilised* (2012) was selected to promote The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7) at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2012, and was included in the ground-breaking *My Country: I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* (QAGoMA, 2013). Cook's latest body of work, *Majority Rule* (2013), has been selected for inclusion in the international 19th Biennale of Sydney: *You Imagine What You Desire*.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, *Michael Cook* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

## MAJORITY RULE- DESCRIPTION

*Majority Rule* is marked by its aesthetic departure from Michael Cook's previous work. While thematic and conceptual connections with some of his earlier series are evident, the setting of this suite is in contrast to the Australian land- and beach-scapes of earlier images.

This is a depiction of the urbane within the urban. Colonial buildings, the style of solid sandstone architecture which may be seen in almost any city in the Western world, paved streets and a city skyline are the backdrop for a black man, dressed in a suit, carrying a briefcase like the archetypal businessman. His figure, in different attitudes, populates the footpath. He is multiplied (in some scenes up to twenty times), a pointer to the unreality of the scene.

Currently, Australia's Indigenous are a small minority, comprising only three to four percent of the total Australian population. Consequently, black faces have little visibility in Australian capital cities and this series of images defies that reality—yet acknowledges it simultaneously with the use of only one model multiple times to build the crowd because, Cook noted, “The reality is it is hard to find models who look characteristically Indigenous. ‘Indigenous’ is many things and physical characteristics have little to do with this identification. So while looking Indigenous has nothing to do with Indigeneity, in my aesthetic I seek out a strong character in a model's physicality.”

The multiple versions of the subject populate generic city locations: a subway tunnel, an old-style bus, and city streets. Old Parliament House and Canberra's High Court are more iconic buildings, and take Cook's protagonist to the seat of Australian political power. As such, Cook's imagery challenges our ingrained belief systems, yet these images do not offer judgement—they are observational, asking questions, setting up lively interactions within their scenes, without proffering neat nor prescriptive conclusions.

Cook noted, “I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia. What I learnt in school was similar to the first European settlers' beliefs, with words like ‘natives’ and ‘discovery of Australia’. Looking back now, I realise that it was a false way of teaching, and that it hid the truth about the treatment of Aborigines over the past four hundred years.”

The colour of the man's skin is the disjunction that prompts the viewer to wonder, and then wonder at their own wonder. It becomes a gauge for internalised racism. Australian audiences may ponder why this collection of well-dressed black men in a city street strikes a discordant note, an atmospheric that feels wrong, unusual, discomfiting. The era of the photograph is undefined but feels vintage, retro, with its black and white tonality speaking to our protagonist's clothing—the lapels of his jacket, the flare in his pin-striped trousers, the sober hat, the dark braces over his white shirt and the stately dignity of his bearing, all of which suggest a period up to fifty years ago. Yet there are other references to iconic Western culture—the bowler hat in *Majority Rules (Memorial)* revisits the shape of the anti-hero in the anarchic 1971 Stanley Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange*, or a silent Charlie Chaplin-style comedic figure.

In *Majority Rule* Cook poses an insoluble dilemma as he acknowledges the discriminatory nature of society. How it would be if these statistics were reversed? After the explorers arrived in Australia, the Indigenous population was decimated. This was, in part, because Aboriginal people were without immunity to introduced diseases. “The majority always has the rule and the minority doesn't. Then there is racism that arises as a result.”

There is a formality in these works, with strong architectural lines and perspective to a distant vanishing point. *Majority Rule (Bridge)* is suggestive of Raphael's *School of Athens* (Raphael Sanzio, 1509-11). The synergistic connections between variations on the individual, the vanishing points created with the straight lines of the street, footpath pavers and the collection of rectangular assemblages of city buildings and windows provide a stage-like setting for Cook's individuals. The figures standing in the street appear as if alone, and lacking a social or familial relationship to each other in their physical attitudes, yet are visually bound together. Cook may be positing the kind of anomie or normlessness that isolates individuals within community—the type of First World dysfunction that regularly fills the columns of Australian newspapers.

Another image from the series, *Majority Rule (Tunnel)*, records Cook's model in multiple attitudes, standing, static again, in a public transport space generally characterised by rushing—of people and of the wind that echoes through these underground spaces as trains arrive and leave. Individuals are frozen within their tightly composed cocoon of concrete and tiles. This conformity—of dress, behaviour and social norms—is another theme in this series, particularly evident in *Majority Rule (Memorial)*.

Most Western cities have war memorials and in a particularly poignant image, the black businessman ascends and descends the sandstone steps that surround a rotunda-style war memorial in a city centre. The war memorial is sacrosanct returned servicemen's territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been involved in fighting for Australia in all wars since the Boer War in 1901 but, while they were paid equally for their work in the armed forces and fought alongside white Australians, on their return home they were subject to the same discrimination they faced before serving their country. Following World War II, only on Anzac Day were they welcomed into returned services league clubs. On other days of the year, Aboriginals might meet their white comrades for a drink but had to stay outside



the building or on the verandah. (It is interesting to note that the right to vote on a country-wide basis was not granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders until 1967.)

Cook's images populate the war memorial with the black faces that have been unacknowledged in Australia's military history. The memorial itself speaks to other colonial buildings in the central business district, its roundness inspired by Grecian classic revival buildings, and Cook's figures occupy the steps, moving up one side and down the other, so as to surround and possess the rotunda.

Cook's use of the bespectacled figure in *Majority Rule* (Parliament) evokes the precedent and dignity of Australia's first Indigenous Member of Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner. In *Majority Rule* (Bus), a figure at the front reads a vintage magazine titled *WALKABOUT*, noting and satirising the stereotypes that have driven popular expectations.

There is a lean aesthetic and increased contemporary edge in this series. Cook's interest in the impact of Australia's history on its original inhabitants comes into sharp focus, and the highly choreographed images are witty, stylish and slick.

LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW, FEBRUARY 2014