# Aboriginal Girls Circle
enhancing connectedness and promoting resilience for Aboriginal girls

## Final Pilot Report

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ABORIGINAL GIRLS CIRCLE

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aboriginal Girls' Circle (AGC) is an intervention targeted to increase social connection, participation and self-confidence amongst Aboriginal girls attending secondary schools. Researchers from the University of Western Sydney (UWS)'s School of Education sought to evaluate the AGC pilot undertaken at Dubbo College and to provide recommendations for the program's further development. The following specific aims were outlined for this pilot research.

1. To determine the effects of the AGC for participants' resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity,

2. To investigate and track the development of culturally appropriate tools and methods for measuring these constructs, and

3. To evaluate the relative effectiveness of various components of the program and implementation processes.

Ethical protocols for working with Aboriginal communities were an important aspect of the research design, which was approved by the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee and by the by the NSW Department of Education and Communities. The research was undertaken in two stages, beginning with a consultation process that sought the views of community Elders, the AGC program developers and key school-based personnel.

The first stage of the research involved field observations of the AGC in action, together with a series of interviews and focus groups involving participants, group leaders, community Elders and school staff. The second stage used quantitative methods to measure the effects of the program on key variables relating to student connectedness, resilience, cultural identity and self-concept.

With respect to the three main aims of the research the findings included the following.

## Aim 1 – To determine the effects of the AGC for participants' resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity

The AGC was very well received within the school and the community, and achieved positive impacts for resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity of the majority of girls who participated.

» All stakeholders commented on growth in the girls' confidence derived from the AGC program. Specific gains were also reported for self-esteem and leadership ability.

» Reports of more positive attitudes and improved capacity to take a more considered approach to conflict suggested greater resilience.

» There were multiple reports from the girls of feeling more connected to each other, and the greater involvement with

school and engagement with school staff of some girls suggest improved school participation.

» Both students and Aboriginal staff highlighted the value of the girls coming together in shared acknowledgement of their cultural identity. It is noteworthy that the girls themselves chose topics around culture and cultural identity for their project work and nominated these elements as key factors in their sense of connection through the AGC.

» The importance of ensuring there is a strong cultural component to the AGC program was emphasised by community members. This is consistent with research showing links between a positive sense of cultural identity, wellbeing, self-concept and success.

## Aim 2 – To investigate and track the development of culturally appropriate tools and methods for measuring these constructs

The quantitative component of the research was geared to testing and evaluating the cultural appropriateness and validity of tools designed to measure resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity. Analysis of the survey measures has yielded a number of significant findings with the potential to advance understanding of the factors affecting Aboriginal students' mental health and wellbeing and indicate directions for the development of interventions designed to promote resilience.

The following results should be regarded as preliminary due to the small sample size (N = 41); however, further data-gathering planned for the second half of 2013 will supplement these numbers and enable more robust statistical analysis.

» Internal resilience scores were high for self-efficacy, empathy, self-awareness and problem solving, and moderate for cooperation and communication. Empathy was significantly higher amongst the AGC participants than the rest of the sample. This is an indication that the AGC's emphasis on emotional literacy is providing the girls with valuable personal and relationship skills.

» Bullying and racism were negatively correlated with positive school climate and respect for cultural diversity. Bullying was positively correlated with racism, indicating that being targeted at school for harassment on the basis of race was a common experience for Aboriginal students.

» The effectiveness of school and community settings for providing support and meaningful participation correlated strongly with environmental resilience. This is consistent with the emphasis in the AGC on enabling relationships to support students' social and emotional development.

» Internal resilience factors, including problem solving, self-efficacy, empathy, self awareness and cooperation/communication were strongly related to peer relationships, highlighting the positive role these relationships play in supporting young people's social and emotional development.

» The interactive effects of several environmental factors in supporting resilience highlighted the importance of a sense

of connectedness and support for Aboriginal students' wellbeing. In addition to peer relationships, meaningful participation and home support were strongly correlated with various aspects of resilience. School and peer factors supported cooperation and communication, suggesting positive effects from the cooperative and communicative processes of the AGC. Goals and aspirations were underpinned by school and community meaningful engagement and by home support.

» Aboriginal students' self-esteem was related to their social relationships within the community, at home and with peers and not with school. Their enjoyment of school was, however, linked to a sense of connectedness, support and meaningful participation. For Aboriginal students a positive academic self-concept was linked to positive peer relationships, connectedness and meaningful participation at school, as well as home support. However, both school support and academic self-concept were weaker for Aboriginal students than for non-Aboriginal students. This is consistent with both the qualitative findings and with the wider research literature which documents a tendency for poorer academic outcomes and greater difficulty engaging with school on the part of Aboriginal students.

» The results for a new measure of cultural identity were revealing. Whereas school connectedness was not found to be a significant contributor to students' internal resilience, it was strongly related to a number of cultural identity dimensions, these being taking part in cultural events, learning cultural stories and protocols, being involved with community and Elders and taking pride in one's culture. These dimensions also yielded significant correlations with community support which was also strongly associated with family and land. Overall, significant correlations with environmental resilience were obtained for eight out of ten dimensions of cultural identity. This supports the views of community members, Aboriginal education workers and AGC participants linking resilience and wellbeing to Aboriginal cultural identity.

## Aim 3 – To evaluate the relative effectiveness of various components of the program and implementation processes

» The findings from the pilot are very encouraging. Support for the initiative from the girls, the community and participating staff was clear and enthusiastic, with increases in the girls' confidence, social skills and leadership being the most frequently cited outcomes.

» Particularly notable were the very positive responses from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff who had participated in Circle Solutions training and in implementing the program. Staff felt they had learned valuable practical skills and gained substantially from their understanding of the Circle Solutions philosophy and framework.

» All the components of the program, including the Circle Solutions workshops, the camps, meetings with Elders and mentors, ongoing regular meetings with the school-based coordinator, the project work and the trips, were highly valued by the girls and by school staff.

» The extension of the Circle Solutions program into everyday use in classrooms provides a notable affirmation of the value of the approach taken and the engagement of school staff. For the AGC in particular, the decision to extend it to a new group of girls, to provide specially timetabled sessions and to structure student involvement developmentally from year 7 indicates the school's commitment to the AGC model and provides a sound basis for further development of the program.

» The success of the project in the community has generated a number of requests to extend it to provide Circle Solutions for other groups, including setting up boys' groups and engaging more girls as well as parents. While any such expansion will require careful planning and implementation, the endorsement of the program in this way provides convincing testimony of its appeal to the community.

## Priority areas for developing the AGC

» Plans are currently underway to develop the community engagement component of the program so as to enable AGC participants to achieve official recognition of their service learning at certificate level. This very promising development will further the girls' skills, engagement and aspirations.

» As highlighted by community leaders and Elders during the research consultation process, there is a need for further engagement with community particularly with regard to developing the cultural component of the program. NAPCAN and the UWS researchers have been in discussion about possible partnerships with relevant community organisations (e.g., AECG) and will be following this up.

» The pilot research highlighted several areas of risk for Aboriginal youth, including grief and suicide prevention, the need to address racism and learning to de-escalate violence in order to manage conflict more effectively. Consideration is being given to planning how and when to respond to these issues.

» Related to the above is the suggestion that the AGC might expand to set up boys' groups. This will need to be considered in terms of both potential programming and appropriate staffing.

» In addition to refining the structure and targeting of the AGC program the next phase in its development will need to plan and pilot resources and processes that can expand the program, including recruiting suitable trainers and supporting the professional development needs of local people who can deliver it. As part of a very productive research partnership NAPCAN and UWS researchers have discussed a model for building capacity amongst Aboriginal Education Workers.

# FULL REPORT

## Project Aims

This research investigated the development and effects of the Aboriginal Girls' Circle (AGC), an intervention targeted to increase social connection, participation and self-confidence amongst Aboriginal girls attending secondary schools. The AGC is based on the successful Circle Solutions framework (Roffey, 2006, 2014), which promotes principles of inclusion, respect, safety and positivity while teaching skills that aim to foster resilience (Werner & Smith, 2001) and wellbeing (Noble, McGrath, Roffey, & Rowling, 2008). The particular objectives of the AGC are to empower young women to discover and use their own strengths, identify, develop and be proud of positive personal and community attributes, learn how to make positive decisions and take action together to change things where they see a need, and find a sense of healthy belonging to both their own community and to the wider Australian society.

Consistent with the NAPCAN mission, the AGC seeks to reduce risk and promote the wellbeing of Aboriginal girls. The Circle Solutions framework has been used to strengthen resilience and connectedness. An added emphasis for the AGC is to promote increased community involvement. According to the Program Developer, *"It's looking at giving students the opportunity to understand a little bit more about healthy relationships, and what that's all about. Giving students the opportunity to think about their own communities. What they wanted to take forward with them into their future, and the things they wanted to do to improve their communities in some way."*

The importance of working with the local Aboriginal community in developing the project was acknowledged at the outset. NAPCAN's Program Manager explained, *"We had a process that we wanted to organically develop with the community to determine how we can support Aboriginal girls to reach their potential."*

The AGC emerged from the KiDS CAN initiative and shares its emphasis on building and sustaining healthy relationships through connecting young women with their communities. In providing opportunities and mentorship for girls to undertake projects within their communities, the AGC seeks to promote the development of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Pretty & Ward, 2001), while at the same time building resilience (Benard, 2004; Greenberg, 2006; Werner & Smith, 2001) and developing confidence and social skills (Bird & Sultmann, 2010; Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000). The philosophy underpinning the AGC holds that authentic wellbeing is not found in independence but in interdependence (Noble et al, 2008; Roffey 2011a).

The AGC pilot project has included periodic intensive residential programs run by the Program Developer and regular follow up activities facilitated by a local AGC Coordinator. The residential workshop provides an experiential introduction to the Circle Framework, which emphasises inclusive processes based on core principles of respectful listening, the right to pass and no 'put-downs' only 'push-ups' (McCarthy, 2009; Roffey, 2006, 2014).

The specific aims outlined for this pilot research were:

1. To determine the effects of the AGC for participants' resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity,
2. To investigate and track the development of culturally appropriate tools and methods for measuring these constructs, and
3. To evaluate the relative effectiveness of various components of the program and implementation processes.

## Research process

Based on community consultation, the original project design was adapted slightly and structured as a two-stage process. Given the dearth of research on resilience and connectedness in Aboriginal populations and the need for culturally respectful research processes, it was decided to undertake the qualitative component first and to use the information provided by the community to inform the development of the quantitative tools.

Accordingly, the first stage of the research involved field observations of the AGC in action, together with a series of interviews and focus groups involving participants, group leaders, community Elders and teachers. This included:

» Development of ethics protocol and gaining approvals from three bodies (University of Western Sydney – UWS, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group – AECG, Department of Education and Communities NSW – DEC)
» Multiple visits to Dubbo to meet with school and community members
» Participation in Circle Solutions training day
» Participant-observation at the AGC camp held in late March
» Consultation with AECG members
» Ongoing consultation with AGC leaders
» Development and canvassing of interview and focus group protocols
» Conduct of interviews and focus groups at three school campuses
» Follow up telephone interviews with several parents and community members
» Analysis of preliminary qualitative data and production of interim report
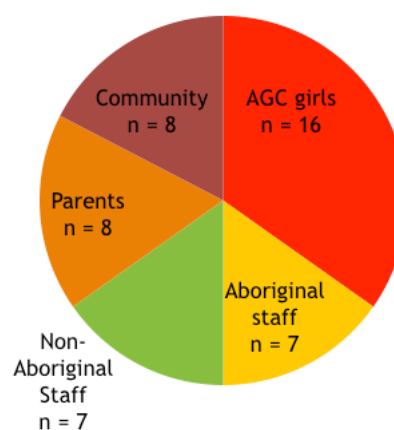


*Figure 1: Breakdown of Participants Interviewed stages 1 & 2, N=46*

The first stage of the research (up till July 2012) enabled the research team to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives from the community into designing a cultural identity scale (for students) as well as cultural awareness and social-emotional competence scales (for school staff). It informed our selection and adaptation of appropriate measures from the California Healthy Kids Survey, the Self Description Questionnaire and the Ohio State Teacher Efficacy Scale for use in the second stage of the study.

It should be borne in mind that the fieldwork, focus groups and interviews with the girls were restricted to those currently participating in the AGC. As it was not possible to interview those who had moved out of the area or who had dropped out of the program this limitation should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. An important aspect of the research has been the development of a culturally sensitive approach to this evaluation which can be used as a model in future studies.

The second stage of the research used quantitative methods to measure the effects of the program on key variables relating to student connectedness, resilience, cultural identity and self-concept. Due to the absence of well-established measures for use with Aboriginal populations, the quantitative component was undertaken as an exploratory pilot study. It employed a combination of existing measures and purpose–designed scales to enable evaluation for cultural appropriateness and psychometric robustness. **This pilot study aimed to test and validate these measures in order to develop psychometrically sound tools for use in future studies.**

To provide comparative cross-sectional data and to help validate the measures to be used, the study aimed to gather and analyse comparative data from other schools with similar populations. The initial survey phase was conducted at two school campuses where the AGC had been conducted and at a nearby high school. In order to explore the extent to which teacher attitudes may contribute to the student dimensions listed above, a short survey of teachers' perspectives was included as part of the study. The second stage of the research thus involved the following.

» Survey of students and school staff
» Analysis and interpretation of quantitative data

The survey instruments were approved by the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Communities SERAP ethics review process. The student survey included measures of resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity. In total 41 Aboriginal Students and 16 non-Aboriginal students undertook the student survey. Though commensurate with the scale of the pilot, for the purpose of statistical analysis these numbers are insufficient to perform robust validation of the measures. Consequently the research protocol has been extended to enable the enlistment of further schools in which to conduct the survey with the aim of enlarging numbers to allow sufficiently robust statistical analysis for testing the validity of the measures used.
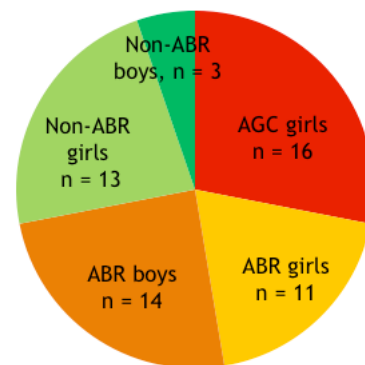


*Figure 2: Students surveyed, N = 41*

As shown in Figure 2 above, 16 of the Aboriginal students had participated in the Aboriginal Girls Circle. A further 14 male and 11 female Aboriginal students also completed the survey. In addition, 3 male and 13 female non-Aboriginal students were surveyed. While these numbers were deemed sufficient to conduct preliminary statistical analyses, a larger sample would enable more detailed statistical analyses to be undertaken. At this stage, due to insufficient numbers of male participants, analysis of gender differences has not been attempted. It is hoped that the further round of data collection currently in train will yield sufficient numbers for gender effects to be adequately investigated.

The teacher survey was completed by 22 staff occupying a variety of roles within the schools, including school executive, class teachers, Aboriginal Education Officers, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers and Norta Norta tutors. Figure 3 below shows the range and numbers of staff who responded to the survey. This survey included two scales purpose-designed for this study - one a 12-item measure of teacher effectiveness in supporting students' social-emotional development and the second a 14 item scale for assessing teachers' cultural awareness. The teacher survey also included a third 24-item measure of teacher self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). More detail about the measures used for both surveys will be presented in conjunction with relevant results throughout the report.
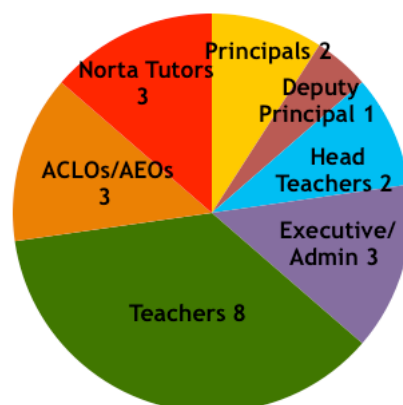


*Figure 3: Breakdown of Staff Surveys N= 22*

A variety of statistical techniques were utilised to glean the most information from the data available. For the student survey these included simple frequency and mean analyses to give a general indication of student responses to the data, multi-group difference testing using the Wald test and post-hoc comparisons (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2008), and correlational analyses for the Aboriginal students only (due to sample size limitations) utilising the statistical program IBM SPSS 21 (2012). For the staff survey analysis consisted of examining the mean total score for each item in the cultural awareness and supporting students' sections.

# FINDINGS

## Aim 1: AGC effects on participants' resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity

## Aim 2: Investigate and track the development of culturally appropriate tools and methods for measuring these constructs

For ease of interpretation, findings for aims 1 and 2 will be discussed in concert with one another as each key variable – resilience, connectedness, cultural identity and self-concept – is considered. Commencing with a theoretical overview of the construct being addressed, each of the following sections will present related qualitative findings and quantitative findings and provide an analysis based on issues highlighted in the research proposal and/or emerging from the research. Qualitative data is drawn from interviews, focus groups and observations outlined above. Note that only the girls who participated in the AGC were interviewed. The student quantitative data includes AGC participants as well as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal non-participants. The staff survey included staff from the AGC school and from another non-AGC school. As the AGC pilot had been under way for some time before the research commenced, pre- and post-test measures are not available for the girls involved in the pilot study. Accordingly the data presented is cross-sectional in nature.

### Developing resilience

In educational settings an emphasis on resilience often involves teaching students emotional literacy and social skills designed to enable them to cope better with emotional ups and downs (McGrath & Noble, 2003). Following this model resilience education is framed as a strengths-based approach that can support young people's capacity to 'bounce back' when faced with difficulties (Fuller, McGaw & Goodyear, 2002). The AGC initiative sought to support young Aboriginal women to develop a more positive sense of self, learn social and emotional skills that enable them to connect well with others, develop a pro-social orientation together with confidence and skills to set their own goals, make decisions and solve problems. Through applying a structured Circle Solutions framework (Roffey, 2006, 2014; Roffey & McCarthy, 2013), which incorporates a strengths and solution focused approach, the AGC aimed to foster more resilient individuals and stronger, healthier communities.

There was evidence of social skills development in the girls' comments on what they liked most about the AGC. Several comments emphasised "*the cooperation that goes on in the group*" or the "*communication*" within the circle. Others discussed the ability to "*meet new people*" and to have "*been with them for like two years and like we can be ourselves around them*", indicating that new friendships and trust within the circle were highly valued. The support for inclusion through the circle was also appreciated in that "*You feel welcome, everyone knows me*". A majority of girls endorsed the benefits of the AGC emphasis on social skills development through reporting gains in confidence as a result of their participation.

Asked about what, specifically, they had learned through the AGC that gave them confidence, the girls responded in terms of both personal development and cooperative gains. Personal outcomes including *"I spoke in front of people"* and *"I learnt how to communicate better"* were clearly articulated. Increased capacities for effective emotional regulation were also noted in the following examples: *"How to not take things for granted and stuff like that"; "Probably if someone spoke badly to me, I'd probably go back at them. Now I just don't."* Enhanced awareness of others and ability to cooperate were reflected in the girls valuing their learning for *"how to work as a team"* and *"respecting Elders"*.

The positive focus of the AGC sessions was strongly appreciated by the girls. *"You can go to AGC sad and you'll leave it like really happy."* In addition, the relational focus of the AGC facilitators appeared central to its success. This included their ability to create a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere which allowed the girls to express themselves and gain support for dealing with problems. *"You can talk to, like, [the facilitators] about your problems and stuff and they'll help you with it".* The sense of trust cultivated within these relationships has enabled girls to learn to reflect on and handle difficulties that might otherwise have remained bottled up. *"You can share stuff that you can't share really with anyone else and they'll like help you with it. I would say not even a best friend - I wouldn't be able to share."* As a result of experiencing this kind of authentic connection with the facilitators new capacities for communication and emotion regulation were developed.

Through their day-to-day mentoring role within the school context and their understanding of the girls' family and cultural settings Aboriginal staff members are uniquely positioned to comment on any changes they have observed in the girls, both within school and beyond. The core themes that staff reported as benefits were the improved confidence, communication and behaviour of the girls.

Staff commented that the girls' self-confidence and their ability to present to new people now *"is just outstanding. They write their own presentations to present at local AECG meetings and just the self-esteem and confidence…"* Further, *"I see kids now with more self confidence that do speak in front of other people and have developed those leadership skills". "Some of the girls have got different perceptions of themselves. They've learnt to think of themselves differently, because part of what we do in Circles is reflect on you and yourself and your community, and who you want to be. For some of those individuals, that's turned them around."*

An Aboriginal staff member clearly articulated the difference that participation in the AGC has made to some girls' capacity to disengage from conflict. *"Like the girls' circle has made a difference – if there's a fight brewing, I've noticed two or three girls could walk away from a fight now. ... Where before, it'd be a riot. There would be a mob. If you could understand, like you have one family against this family and then it would be full on. Where some of the girls I have found have walked back in the house and just shut the door and said I don't want nothing to do with it".* Such observations suggest that these girls have successfully generalised positive relationship skills learnt within the AGC with potential flow-on effects for their roles within the community.

Non-Aboriginal staff also saw strengths and benefits for the girls who participated in the AGC as well as for the staff who were involved. They noted improvements in the girls' confidence and commented on behaviours that exemplified this, including leadership and taking greater initiative in their engagement with teachers. *"I think they've been a lot more confident and assertive. I think they have taken on more of a leadership role."*

One teacher made the observation that *"They're not scared - I don't know if it's just me but they're not scared to come and ask me for help or come and question things or that sort of thing. The more that we can encourage students to do that, that's a positive, because a lot of Indigenous students are happy to sit back and be told what to do instead of investigating things for themselves."*

The College Director was particularly enthusiastic in her observations of benefits derived from the AGC.

*"I've been to some of the presentations that the Aboriginal Girls Circle did and even the first one of those that I went to I was really blown away. I guess having worked with so many Aboriginal kids … just to see the confidence of the kids and the enjoyment it was a really, really heart strings response for me. This is good because you could tell just by not so much the demeanour but the way the kids presented themselves just when they were being casual and I knew a couple of the kids who had come from really quite deprived backgrounds. I was thinking, this is good, this is really good. I think it has got a lot of transference."*

All school staff interviewed commented on changes in the girls' levels of confidence and communication skills. Improvements were specifically reported for girls who had previously been shy and unforthcoming. *"I saw these girls that were quite shy and not very outspoken in class engaging in these activities and being able to conduct themselves just like any other student would. So they were taken away from the classroom environment and put in another environment where they seemed to open up a lot better, so it was good."* In contrast with the inhibiting effect (for some girls) of the normal classroom environment, the more relaxed, engaging and safe environment of the AGC seems to have provided the necessary support to overcome their shyness.

*"I think it's given a lot of students a voice in the fact that in the classroom there are so many other characters and other things happening in a classroom when not everyone does get a say. Whereas definitely in this program the girls are given a chance to talk and their opinion is valued and that's made quite clear, in the expectations of the circle where everyone is allowed to say something, there are no put downs, it's a safe environment. … So it's definitely given a voice – I'd say this is one of the strongest things – plus boosted their confidence as well, definitely."*

An AECG member was especially clear in her estimation of its benefits. *"I'm hearing positive things. I'm seeing positive things, and just seeing the growth in those kids too because I've watched them grow up and I'm just really excited that they're taking their place and standing up. I think that's really positive."*
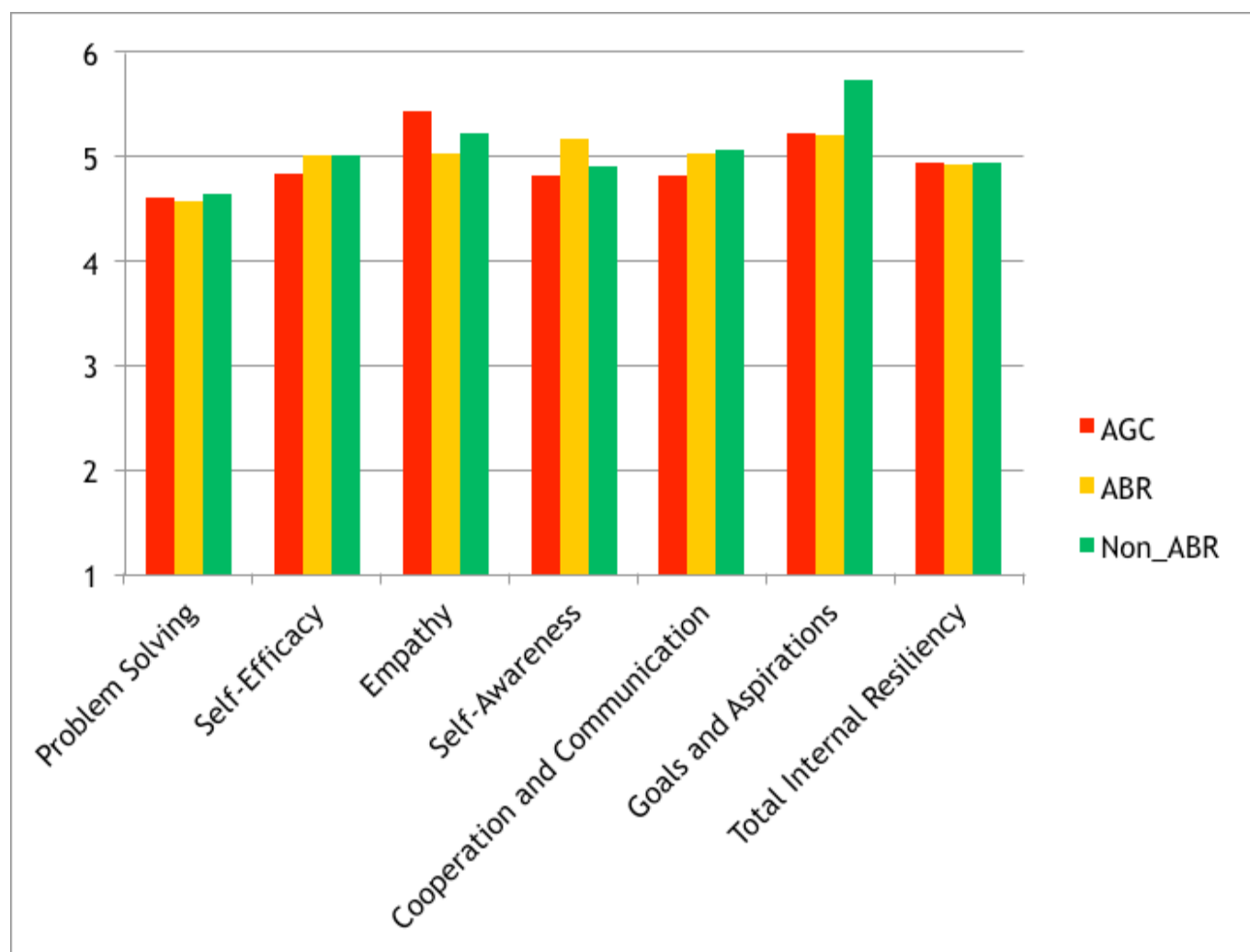
*Figure 4: Internal resilience measures*

Parents who were interviewed later by telephone reported that the effects of the AGC had been positive for their daughters, citing confidence and greater preparedness to speak up as the main gains. Beyond this, these parents were unsure as to any further strengths or benefits of the AGC program, indicating they had minimal knowledge of how it worked or what its specific goals were. They nonetheless appreciated the support it had provided to their daughters.

## Measuring resilience

A widely used international measure of resilience, the Resilient Youth Development Module (RYDM) from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) (Hanson & Kim, 2007), was adopted for this study. Its internal resilience scale is commensurate with views of resilience that highlight the development of personal social-emotional skills. This scale measures six internal assets – empathy, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-awareness, cooperation/communication, and goals/aspirations. It was selected for the quantitative survey due to the high congruence of these dimensions with the Circle Solutions methodology and aims. Inclusion of this measure allowed for testing the relevance of general concepts of resilience for the Aboriginal population in the community where the research was undertaken.

The RYDM items are rated on a Likert scale from 1(False) to 6 (True). Scores are computed by averaging the relevant items for each factor. A brief explanation of the six factors, with sample items, follows.

*Self-efficacy:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students feel they can successfully deal with setbacks and overcome challenges. Example: *"I can do most things if I try."*

*Empathy:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students connect with and understand the feelings of other people. Example: *"I try to understand how other people feel and think."*

*Problem solving:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students have skills for solving problems. Example: *"I know where to go for help with a problem."*

*Self-awareness:* A three item measure that assesses self-reflective capacities. Example: *"I understand my moods and feelings*."

*Cooperation and communication:* A three item measure that assesses capacities for peer-to-peer cooperation and

| Table 1: Correlations for internal resilience factors with mental health, self-esteem and total environmental resiliency – Aboriginal students only. | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Problem Solving | Self-Efficacy | Empathy | Self-Awareness | Cooperation/ Communication | Goals/ Aspirations | Psychological distress | Total Environmental Resiliency |
| Problem Solving | | | | | | | -.001 | .518** |
| Self-Efficacy | .370* | | | | | | -.142 | .458** |
| Empathy | .456** | .410** | | | | | -.119 | .417** |
| Self-Awareness | .226 | .419** | .230 | | | | -.357* | .481** |
| Cooperation/ Communication | .382* | .774** | .432** | .299 | | | -.096 | .544** |
| Goals and Aspirations | .325* | .341* | .159 | .268 | .320* | | -.058 | .285 |
| Total Internal Resiliency | .704** | .760** | .736** | .652** | .646** | .360* | -.230 | .654** |
| General self-esteem | .219 | .381* | .024 | .330* | .315* | .333* | -.422** | .491** |
| **p < .01   *p < .05 | | | | | | | | |

communication. Example: *"I can work with someone who has different opinions than mine."*

*Goals and aspirations:* A three item measure that seeks to gauge the extent to which students are purposefully involved in planning for the future. Example: *"I have goals and plans for the future."*

Figure 4 shows average scores for each of the internal resilience sub-scales, comparing those for the AGC participants (AGC) with other Aboriginal students (ABR) and non-Aboriginal students (Non-ABR). As can be seen all student groups had average scores above 4.5/6 for all internal resilience factors, with scores for problem-solving showing the lowest average for all three groups. Wald difference testing revealed no significant differences between the groups for self-efficacy (Wald = .37, $p$ = .83), empathy (Wald = 3.98, $p$ = .23), problem-solving (Wald = .05, $p$ = .97), self-awareness (Wald = 1.77, $p$ = .41) or cooperation and communication (Wald = 1.42, $p$ = .49).

Significant differences were, however, identified for goals and aspirations (Wald = 8.04, $p$ < .05), with the post-hoc comparison revealing that the non-Aboriginal student group was significantly higher than the Aboriginal student group ($p$ < .05), but not the AGC student group ($p$ = .09). There were no significant differences between the AGC and Aboriginal student groups ($p$ = .97). This disparity is consistent with concerns expressed by community members and school staff about lowered expectations and aspirations among Aboriginal students. Given that a number of the AGC girls had been recruited on the basis of disengaged behaviours the slight elevation of the AGC group results relative to their Aboriginal peers suggests that a positive shift in their goals and aspirations may well have occurred in response to the AGC program.

Similarly, although statistical analysis of the empathy scale did not find significant inter-group differences, it is nonetheless noteworthy that the Aboriginal Girls circle participants held the highest levels of empathy. While the lack of pre-test data for this pilot study does not allow for pre-post comparison, it seems likely, given the composition of the AGC participant group, that empathy scores reflect a probable improvement in

this area for the AGC group, consistent with the emphasis in the AGC program on emotional literacy and relationship skills.

Correlations were calculated between the subscales of the internal resilience measures. In order to further evaluate which particular features of internal resilience were most salient for Aboriginal students additional correlations were calculated for each subscale with mental health, self-esteem and overall environmental resilience. For these correlational analyses the data for the Aboriginal Girls Circle participants and Aboriginal students were combined. Due to the lack of sufficient numbers for undertaking meaningful comparisons the non-Aboriginal student responses were not included.

Table 1 shows that self-efficacy contributes most to overall internal resilience and also correlates highly with cooperation/ communication. This aligns with the qualitative findings regarding the AGC girls' development of communication skills. Though the value is somewhat more moderate ($r$ is from .410 to .456, $p$ +< .01), empathy correlates significantly with problem solving, self-efficacy and cooperation/ communication.  Moderate correlations with self-esteem were found for self-efficacy, self-awareness, cooperation/ communication and goals/aspirations. Psychological distress was moderately negatively correlated with self-awareness and strongly negatively correlated with general self-esteem. Distress and self-esteem have been found in the literature to be linked to mental health difficulties. The further correlation in the present data of psychological distress with self-awareness can be taken to support this association. The strong correlations between total environmental resilience and all the internal resilience factors except goals/aspirations, highlight the importance of taking into account the social-ecological dimensions of resilience.

## Resilience in Aboriginal youth
While educational approaches to resilience emphasise the development of social and emotional skills, as reflected in the CHKS internal resilience scales, it is important to recognise also that the concept of resilience has emerged from the mental health literature on risk and protective factors where it is defined as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar,

| Table 2. Correlations between school climate, cultural sensitivity, internal/external resiliency, bullying, racism and psychological distress. | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total Internal Resiliency | Total Environmental Resiliency | Positive School Climate | Respect for Diversity/Cultural Sensitivity | Target of Bullying/ Harassment (single item) | Psychological Distress |
| Positive School Climate | .475** | .662** | | | | -.278 |
| Respect for Diversity/Cultural Sensitivity | .239 | .256 | .554** | | | .190 |
| Racism | .051 | -.016 | -.099 | -.519** | .351* | -.026 |
| Target of Bullying | .133 | -.041 | -.245 | -.421** | .746** | .337* |
| Bully Others | -.194 | -.246 | -.364* | -.465** | .485** | .333* |
| Bully single item | -.381* | -.409** | -.374* | -.315* | .341* | .349* |
| **p < .01    *p < .05 | | | | | | |

Cicchetti & Becker, 2000, p. 543). Aboriginal populations remain subject to particular severe risks, such as inter-generational trauma, loss and the legacy of forced removal (De Maio et al., 2005; SEARCH Investigators, 2010).

Given the range of risk factors affecting the Aboriginal population, including social disadvantage, family stress and widespread racism in the general community, these sources of support can be expected to impact on students' overall wellbeing. This was reflected in the following comment from an Aboriginal teacher, who emphasised the need for a positive sense of self in the face of racist cultural stereotypes.

 "I think the biggest thing our girls need is self-esteem. A lot of them see the stereotypes on television and think that applies to them, without actually thinking about if that is true of themselves or not. They just accept what society tells them they have to do and be."

In addition to the main RYDM resilience module, the student survey incorporated the supplementary Safe, Supportive Schools (S3) module from the CHKS. The S3 module consists of 15 items which include subscales relating to learning environment, respect for diversity/cultural sensitivity and organisational support. As racism is a known risk factor (Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke, Grant, Denson & Craven, 2010b; Kelly, Dudgeon, Graham & Glaskin, 2010; Paradies, Harris & Anderson, 2008) and was raised by staff, community members and AGC participants, focussed correlational analyses were undertaken to consider the relationship between a cluster of relevant variables including racism, cultural respect/sensitivity, school climate, psychological distress and bullying. These analyses were undertaken for the Aboriginal students only, with results presented in table 2.

The above table clearly shows a strong positive relationship between positive school climate and resilience, with environmental resiliency in particular showing a correlation of .662. Respect for diversity/cultural sensitivity was significantly negatively correlated with racism, $r$ = -.519, and with bullying. While no association between racism and psychological distress was found there was a consistent moderate correlation between bullying and psychological distress. It would seem from these results that while racism alone was not a sufficient condition for psychological distress, there were effects when racism was augmented by bullying. Further research is required to tease out the extent to which

this posited interaction may be a reliable indicator of the psychological impacts of racism.

In relating the concept of resilience to different cultural groups, Ungar (2008) points to the need for "sensitivity to community and cultural factors that contextualise how resilience is defined by different populations and manifested in everyday practices" (p. 219). The importance of taking context and cultural meaning into account is stressed by Aboriginal researchers who point to the remarkable endurance of Aboriginal people as evidence of cultural and community resilience (Kelly et al., 2010; Merritt, 2007; Milroy, 2007). On this basis Merritt cautions that the survival strategies that Aboriginal Australians count as strengths could be quite different from the kinds of social adaptation that is considered as resilience in mainstream contexts.

A particular aim of this study was to consider ways that concepts of resilience might best be conceptualised and investigated in Indigenous Australian settings. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, and gathering narratives from participants, Aboriginal Elders, educators and community mentors, **this study aimed to elucidate Aboriginal perspectives on resilience. It sought to identify commonalities and differences between existing formulations of resilience and the ways in which Aboriginal girls learn to build a sense of strength, confidence and wellbeing.**

The qualitative data revealed a number of themes that Aboriginal community members related to the concept of resilience. When asked about the needs of Aboriginal girls, and what especially at this age they need to grow strong in themselves Aboriginal staff nominated a positive self-image, self-confidence, greater opportunities for educational attainment, cultural connection to community with reciprocal participation within the community, school engagement, resilience and support from authentic role models. A sense of shame due to lack of confidence and a correspondingly diminished sense of aspiration were highlighted as issues to be addressed.

A community member commented that *"A lot of them don't have a huge amount of confidence. They're shy, or ashamed. They're ashamed to get up and speak out or they're ashamed to do something. It plays a big part, the shame. Just a bit of a boost for their self-confidence. Ownership. Once they get that ownership as well, they get a bit of pride. Even like their shoes*

and their hats, if they feel - even respect their clothes, that's what I mean by their ownership, have pride in what they've got. They might not have the best of things but if they can have pride in what they've got, that's a big step."

Developing self-belief was linked with having a sense of direction and motivation towards the future. "To believe in themselves and to know where they want to go. Not many of them actually think about uni at the moment until nearly the end of Year 12, before they even think about what they want to do and where they want to go from there."

Complex issues were seen to arise from exposure to multiple risk factors, and senior members of the community and AECG emphasised the crucial helping role the school could play through building relationships and assisting families to access appropriate support. An Aboriginal staff member described the impacts on girls of exposure to high levels of distress in their social and familial milieus.

"A lot of them are living what they see every day. So if there's anger and violence at home that's how they respond to any negative scene. I think that's a sad place to be in because when they have children that's how they're going to respond. They actually - that's the sort of social skills they're going to need. They don't know how to respond to boys in a positive way. They don't know how to respond to boys who are very negative about them, in a positive way. They think that it's okay for boys to call them very bad names and still want to go out with them. They have such low self-esteem, low self-respect for each other."

Notably, the same staff member also commented on the potential of the AGC for providing alternatives by building more effective social skills.

"But the girls that have been through the circle, we have seen some improvement. They are able to be more resilient and stand up for themselves a little bit more. Maybe not always in the best light, and I would like to be able to say to them girls you know, come on, it's not really a great way to do it, but it's a start. It's a start."

Those who had been involved in a more direct capacity with the AGC particularly emphasised the importance of having respected Aboriginal people involved in the delivery of cultural knowledge components. "I think what [the girls] need is some help to value themselves more… I think they do need a lot more older Aboriginal women who are culturally secure and settled to have more time with them."

One important area highlighted by members of the community as a critical need for Aboriginal girls was managing the effects of grief, which was seen as having far-reaching effects. "One of the issues that our kids face at the moment is a lot of grief and having to deal with that. It is a big issue. It's for all our kids. They just don't know how to cope with it." Difficulties coping with grief were also acknowledged across the community, not just in its young people, and this was seen to spill over at times into anti-social behaviour.

The frequency of loss experienced by Aboriginal people has been identified as a very significant stressor, adding to the burden of cumulative trauma from a history of dispossession,

racism and violence that is intergenerational in its reach (Atkinson, 2002; Swan & Raphael, 1995). Grief was seen by community members as an underlying factor that influences the school behaviour of Aboriginal students and undermines their learning. "It is too much, and it gets to you after a while. Because sometimes, and it's been my experience that our kids get stereotyped. They don't want to learn. They just act up."

A local Elder, highly experienced in dealing with grief issues within the community, advised that in order for counsellors to assist Aboriginal students, "They've got to keep that cultural component in it too, so that it has a meaning for the kids, how to deal with grief." This underscores the extent to which the experience of loss and of grieving are culturally embedded processes. The sense of meaning is derived from shared cultural history and traditions, with 'sorry business' a crucial ritual and collective outlet.

To enable further quantitative assessment of the relationship between risk and resilience in this Aboriginal population it would be helpful to incorporate into future research a means of assessing the extent to which the participants have experience of stressful life events. The present qualitative data suggests that opportunities and support for learning to overcome racist stereotypes and for understanding and managing grief from an Aboriginal perspective could make valuable additions to the AGC program.

A number of the positive aspects of resilience highlighted by community members will be examined further in reviewing connectedness and cultural identity.

## Connectedness

Connectedness is emphasised in the contextual and relationally oriented social-ecological view of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Following from this approach and drawing on extensive cross-cultural research, Ungar (2008; 2011) argues that resilience is not a fixed individual trait but is determined by the extent to which the social environment can provide sufficient support to enable the individual to flourish despite obstacles. Similarly, Sun and Stewart's (2007) work on resilience in Australian school settings is based on the premise that resilience is crucially embedded in social relationships and interactions that occur between individuals, schools, families and communities.

In relation to schools, there is substantial research evidence that school connectedness is beneficial for the wellbeing of young people. Defining connectedness as the belief by students that adults care about their learning and about them as individuals, the Wingspread declaration (Wingspread Participants, 2004) determined that critical requirements for students to feel connected at school included high academic expectations with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and physical and emotional safety. School connectedness has been found to reduce behavioural problems, enhance student achievement and reduce the likelihood of developing mental health problems (Bond et al., 2007; Loukas et al., 2010; Resnick et al, 1997; Shochet et al, 2006).

According to Whitlock (2006) connectedness is not only 'received' by students, but is also reciprocated through young people caring about their school. Connectedness is thus both reflected in and enhanced by a school climate in which respectful and caring interactions are encouraged and valued. Roffey (2008) observes that "connectedness encompasses how students feel at school, their participation and engagement with learning, and the quality of the relationships they experience" (p. 29).

In relation to communities, connectedness has been emphasised in NAPCAN's KiDS CAN program which encourages young people's participation in community projects as a means of building a sense of belonging and connectedness. This strategy is coherent with evidence suggesting that families most connected to their communities are less likely to harm their children, that positive relationships inhibit violence (Wolfe et al., 1997), and that resilience for children is promoted by active participation.

Cultivating connectedness has particular relevance for Aboriginal people, for whom values of reciprocity and interdependence are very prominent dimensions of cultural identity and kinship. For example, Uncle Bob Randall has described how *kanyini*, deep connectedness, is central to the Anangu way of life (Hogan & Randall, 2006). Aboriginal people experience this connection through cultural beliefs and stories, spirituality, land and family. The disruption of *kanyini*, through dispossession, forced removal and loss of cultural identity is regarded as a principal cause for the high rates of dysfunction seen in some Aboriginal communities. Consequently, restoring and reconnecting to culture, family, community and country is seen as a vital pathway to healing (ATSI Healing Foundation Development Team, 2009).

## Qualitative findings

Given its emphasis on cultivating connectedness the AGC research sought to investigate the extent of any gains in connectedness for participants in relation to family, school, community and culture.

A sense of connectedness with each other was a very strong theme in the girls' interviews. "*You feel like you're a part of something; and like we all respect each other and respect others', like, ideas and stuff".* Learning to communicate with respect was clearly seen as a positive feature of the AGC that helped to build positive relationships and connectedness within the group. Importantly, while some girls felt it might be possible to extend the AGC model to include non-Aboriginal girls, the majority felt very strongly that the opportunity provided through the AGC to connect with other Aboriginal girls was a central benefit.

"*Being around not just any girls, like girls that mean a lot to you and you can share everything with them and you can be yourself around them instead of, like, other girls where you have to, like, be another person".* Another girl added that "*I feel connected in some way - that you've built a friendship with that person.  It doesn't get awkward or anything".* These statements clearly show the positive role of the AGC in building relationship awareness and supporting connectedness with other girls. They also demonstrate the

profound benefits the girls experience through the opportunity to validate and build their Aboriginal identity.

The AGC Coordinator emphasised the benefits to the girls' sense of belonging and connectedness as a result of participating in a dedicated Aboriginal girls' program. *"I think a lot of these girls walk around feeling like they're not connected to anyone or anything ... So for them to come to the circle and feel – and you can just see it – their eyes light up. They feel like a family and they know that they're allowed to say – it's not wrong, whatever they say. Just having that connection that they, I don't think they've ever had with anyone else. Same with myself. It's a good feeling."*

Improvements in the girls' sense of school engagement, belonging and connectedness were also noted by non-Aboriginal staff. *"It's given those particular girls an engagement and connection with the school and they have been working really tightly as a team. I think they saw it as a real support mechanism for themselves."*

Those attending a community forum held at the pilot school spoke about the effects of the AGC and its reputation in the community. *"What I'm hearing in the community is that it's a really positive program for the kids."* In spite of varying experience and knowledge amongst community members of the way the AGC works with students, this comment and others like it nonetheless provide evidence of community support and appreciation.

## Survey findings

Connectedness was measured using relevant items from the CHKS RYDM environmental resiliency scale. For this study the CHKS was selected as a quantitative measure that assesses both internal resilience, consisting of personal strengths and communication skills (discussed above), as well as environmental and social factors that contribute to resilience. The CHKS thus reflects a broad view of resilience that enables analysis of the relationships between environmental risk and protective factors and internal strengths.

The CHKS RYDM environmental resiliency scale includes measures of the extent to which one feels connected and supported at home, school and in the community. While a variety of other measures focus on school connectedness, the CHKS is based on the premise that youth who experience high levels of environmental assets in three areas—high expectations from adults, caring relationships with adults, and opportunities for meaningful participation—will develop the resilience traits, the connection to school, and motivation to learn that lead to positive academic, social, and health outcomes (Hanson & Kim, 2007).

Nine dimensions of relatedness are assessed across the key contexts of school, community, family, and peers. This range of contexts is particularly relevant for the AGC given its emphasis on promoting girls' connection to community as a means of enhancing resilience. Each dimension measured is described in more detail below. In common with the RYDM internal resiliency scale, most environmental resiliency items were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (False) to 6 (True). Items for school connectedness were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

*School Connectedness:* A five item measure assessing students' sense of connectedness to school based on positive feelings of connectedness and inclusion. Example: *"I feel close to people at this school."*

*School Support:* A six item measure assessing students' perceptions that there is an adult (e.g., teacher) within the school environment who is caring and has high expectations. Example: *"At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult who listens when I have something to say."*

*School Meaningful Participation:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students feel they are meaningfully involved and influential at school. Example: *"At school I help decide things like class activities or rules."*

*Community Support:* A six item measure assessing students' perceptions that there is an adult within the wider community who is supportive of them. Example: *"Outside of my home and school, there is an adult whom I trust."*

*Community Meaningful Participation:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students are engaged in meaningful community activities. Example: *"Outside of my home or school I am part of clubs, sports teams, church/ temple, or other group activities."*

*Peer Caring Relationships:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students are involved in caring and supportive peer relationships. Example: *"I have a friend about my own age who talks with me about my problems."*

*Prosocial Peers:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students' peers engage in prosocial activities. Example: *"My friends try to do what is right."*

*Home Meaningful Participation:* A three item measure assessing the extent to which students' home life provides for positive and meaningful community engagement. Example: "At home I help make decisions with my family."

*Home Support:* A six item measure to assess students' perceptions that an adult at home is caring, interested and has high expectations of them. Example: *"In my home there is a parent or some other adult who believes I will be a success*."

Figure 5 below shows mean scores on each of the environmental resiliency subscales for students in the AGC, for other Aboriginal students and for Non-Aboriginal students.

As shown, most scores are in the positive range between 4 and 6, indicating that the item has been rated as 4) more true than false (or agree more than disagree), 5) mostly true (or mostly agree), or 6) true (or agree). Within this range the degree of endorsement varies notably between the different subscales and between groups. Comparing groups, it is evident that scores for the non-Aboriginal group were more uniformly high across the suite of items, while the scores for the AGC group varied most.
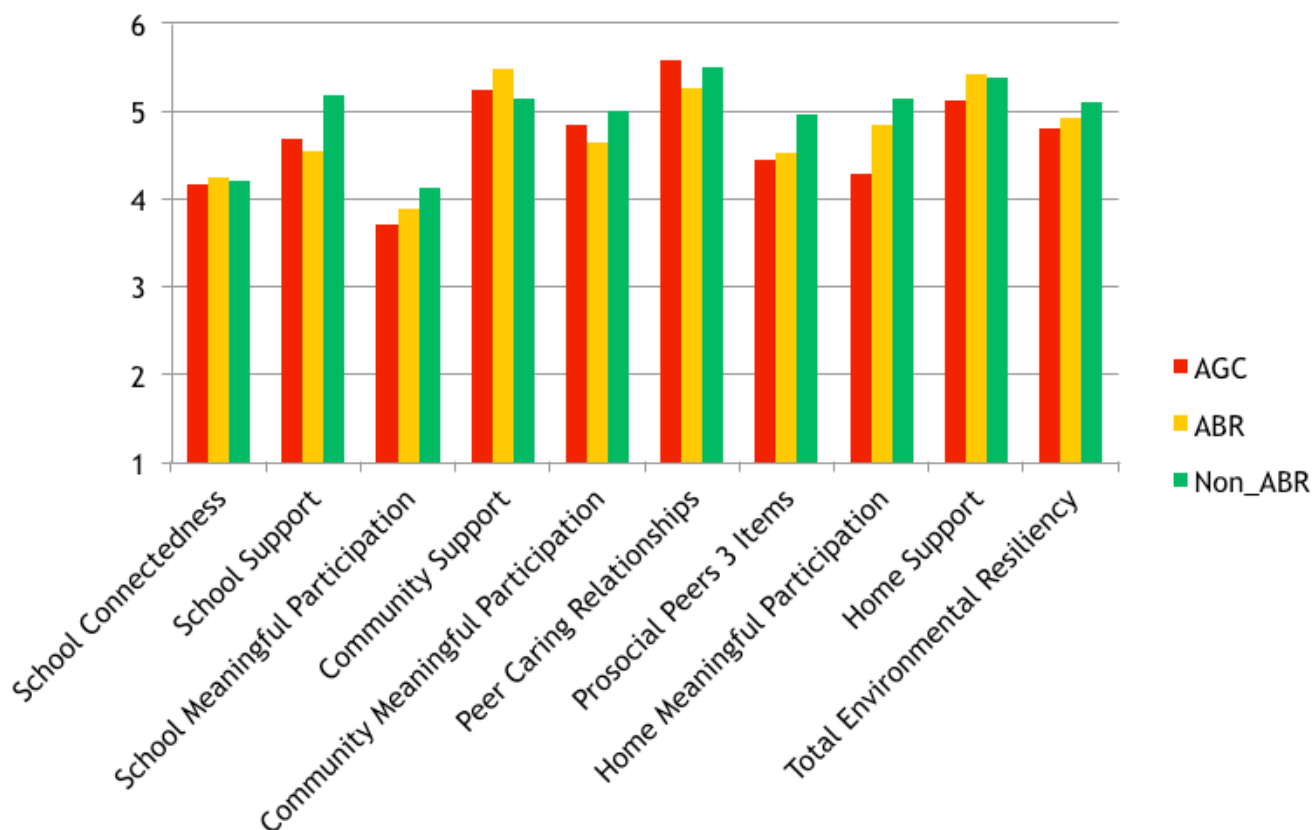


*Figure 5: Comparative Environmental Resilience Measures for AGC students, other Aboriginal students (ABR) and Non-Aboriginal students (Non_ABR).*

| Table 3: Components of environmental resilience correlated with internal resilience and self-esteem. | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Problem Solving | Self-Efficacy | Empathy | Self-Awareness | Cooperation and Communication | Goals and Aspirations | Total Internal Resiliency | Self- esteem |
| School Connectedness | .230 | .299 | .083 | .174 | .277 | .300 | .251 | .286 |
| School Support | .306 | .251 | 330* | .122 | .417** | -.055 | .357* | .220 |
| School Meaningful Participation | .478** | .373* | .335* | .226 | .570** | .570** | .472** | .270 |
| Community Support | .190 | .092 | .080 | .157 | .302 | .127 | .182 | .252 |
| Community Meaningful Participation | .041 | .303 | .131 | .357* | .174 | .339* | .295 | .449** |
| Peer Caring Relationships | .517** | .097 | .162 | .198 | .096 | -.006 | .349* | .041 |
| Prosocial Peers | .486** | .497** | .426** | .445** | .423** | .303 | .634** | .309* |
| Home Meaningful Participation | .383* | .445** | .365* | .579** | .293 | .166 | .624** | .490** |
| Home Support | .198 | .312* | .215 | .498** | .286 | .417** | .430** | .468** |
| Total Environmental Resiliency | .518** | .458** | .417** | .481** | .544** | .285 | .654** | .491** |
| **p < .01    *p < .05 | | | | | | | | |

The AGC group scored highest overall on peer caring relationships. The AGC group also scored higher than the Aboriginal group on school support and community meaningful participation. This pattern is interesting in light of the strong emphasis in the AGC program on peer relationships and community participation, with both supported by the school. The high score on peer caring relationships would also appear to be consistent with the AGC group's high scoring on the RYDM empathy scale.

Conversely, both the AGC and the Aboriginal groups scored lower than the non-Aboriginal group on the prosocial peers subscale. The AGC group scored lower than both other groups on School and Home Meaningful participation. While the timing of research commencement did not allow for pretest comparisons, these somewhat lower scores may indicate that these are contexts where a number of the AGC girls experience a degree of difficulty. Since in its initial setup a number of girls were specifically invited into the AGC because of behavioural difficulties it appears that base levels of risk and behavioural challenge could be expected to have been higher for the AGC group. These circumstances were identified by staff as follows.

*"Some of the students may have, you know, may go down the wrong - go down a path of, you know, developing behaviours which aren't necessarily positive behaviours. I think giving them or trying to redirect their focus on the concept of the circles has helped*."

*"Some of those girls from what I saw were involved in that program because of some of their behaviour and some lack of social skills … After being involved in it definitely there wasn't that stirring or that conflict that would carry on and girls being set off by the littlest things. They sort of were able to step back from it and other girls that weren't involved in the circle were seeing that and were able to I suppose model their behaviour as well."*

In this light the apparent gains in the areas directly addressed within the AGC may therefore be regarded as all the more encouraging. However, in spite of the tendencies towards between-group differences for the environmental resilience subscales shown above, statistical testing using the Wald difference test identified no significant differences for any of the scales. Further investigation involving larger group sizes will help to ascertain whether the present results reflect a significant pattern of difference in a wider sample.

As seen in Figure 5, for Aboriginal students in particular environmental factors of peer relationships and community contributed strongly to their resilience, with home also important and school less so. Interactions between the environmental and internal resilience factors were explored through correlational analyses, as shown in the Table 3 which includes environmental resilience factors, internal resilience factors and self-esteem for the Aboriginal students only.

The pattern of correlations in Table 3 highlights the contribution of prosocial peers and meaningful participation at home and school, in particular, to overall internal resilience. Prosocial peers contributes significantly to all but one of the internal resilience subscales. Of note also is the absence of correlation between school connectedness and any of the internal resilience subscales and the similar absence of correlation between community support and the internal resilience subscales. Although previous studies have highlighted the benefits of school connectedness for student wellbeing, these results would seem to highlight the importance of active engagement through participation in meaningful activities for building the specific social-emotional skills that enhance internal resilience.

A further pattern of particular interest in this data is the parallel between self-awareness and self-esteem. Neither is related to school factors, yet both are significantly related to prosocial peers, home meaningful participation, home support and community meaningful participation. While cautious interpretation is advisable given limited numbers of participants, this finding does appear to suggest that Aboriginal students' sense of self is influenced more significantly by their relationships with peers, home and community than by school-related factors.

## Reciprocal gains/inhibitors

This study also sought to identify any **reciprocal gains between participants and teachers, peers, families, community members and mentors, as well as any factors that may inhibit the development of positive relationships and connections.** Given the subtlety and complexity of these kinds of effects, aims for the present study were exploratory. The following discussion will highlight relevant findings from the qualitative interviews. Quantitative findings from the CHKS S3 module undertaken by students and from the teacher survey will also be reported and examined.

### AGC participants

As previously discussed, the qualitative data from the AGC participants described considerable gains in their relationships with each other, with Elders and with the AGC staff. The sense of identity and connectedness as a group of Aboriginal girls was highlighted in the girls' consistent endorsement of the opportunity created by the AGC to connect across campuses. *"We need to get the three schools together again."* However, although gains in interpersonal relationships with one another were seen as a general trend, such gains were not uniformly apparent. Some participants expressed frustration at the poor behaviour of others, one girl commenting, for example, that she did not like the attitude of some participants who would *"just sit there and laugh"* while the coordinator was speaking in circle meetings.

For the majority of participants interviewed the introduction of the Circles Solutions methodology to the classroom was seen as positive, suggesting that it was helpful for enhancing their relationships with peers and teachers who were not involved in the AGC. Again, however, this was not uniform, with one girl in particular expressing resentment at the way teachers were implementing circles in the classroom and at the loss of its special identification with the Aboriginal Girls.

The sense of loss that this student expressed about changes to the circle and its discontinuation (for them) at the end of the pilot period was shared by several other girls. This can be taken on one hand to underscore the positive impacts of the circle, but for some of the more behaviourally vulnerable girls it also seemed to mitigate against the transfer of a sense of connectedness from the circle experience to the school as a whole. Whereas the circle and its facilitators were held in high regard, it was not evident from the girls' focus groups that they had come to value school as a whole, or their regular classroom teachers, any more highly as a result of their AGC participation.

In relation to difficulties with group dynamics, the AGC coordinator also noted this as an issue. Notably, however, she did not feel that the disruptive influence on the group detracted from the individual benefits to those whose behaviour was challenging. *"I find that there's a couple of girls that sort of feed off of each other, in a negative way, in the circle. But when they're not together, they can just be a part of it like everybody else, and they get a lot out of it. Sometimes there might be a falling out between the girls around the circle, and that makes it a bit difficult."*

A teacher observed that although there were clear gains for individuals, the social and emotional skills of some of the girls needed to go further. *"The AGC can ... build that self-esteem*

*through leadership and that type of stuff, but I think the girls have got to internalise that a lot, which sometimes I don't see. You know, and sometimes you'll say to them, well how does that make you feel and they can't verbalise that, which I thought the AGC would help to overcome, especially in the way they communicate with each other."*

Tendencies for some girls to tease and exclude were observed during fieldwork at the camp, and in one of the focus groups – in contrast with the tenets of the circle process. This kind of bullying behaviour is consistent with wider patterns of lateral violence that have been linked in Aboriginal communities to the experience of disadvantage and internalised racism (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2011).

An Aboriginal teacher described how such behaviour is further embedded in gender stereotypes for Aboriginal girls that are very polarising, *"you're either violent and angry all the time at everything, or you're submissive and compliant."* She felt that while the AGC had helped girls who were submissive to become more assertive, *"the girls who are already very strong and gather their little girls around them in strong groups can become a little too much - too over the top. … It's all or nothing. Even within the girls groups, there's still that all or nothing concept, you're like this or you're like that."*

That some girls could claim to identify with the circle values and yet maintain an aggressive demeanour with their peers indicates a contradiction needing closer attention. As suggested by several community members, the introduction of Aboriginal-led identity work that includes processes for deconstructing the impacts of racism and examines the ways that gender roles play out within Aboriginal communities could be highly beneficial for helping to illuminate and address these sorts of patterns.

### Teaching staff

Those teachers who had become closely involved with the AGC felt that their relationships with the AGC girls had benefited. A senior staff member and champion of the AGC observed that her direct participation in the girls' circles had resulted in positive changes to the exercise of her disciplinary role.

*"My experience with some of the students where it was all negative, with confrontation 24/7, has turned out to be - They're actually coming and having adult conversations, working with me to solve other people's issues, instead of us bickering about what they have or haven't done correctly."*

Moreover, from her point of view, *"It's not only been a learning experience for the girls. But the things that I have gotten out of all of this with regards to knowledge about Aboriginal people and relationships with the kids."*

The enhancement of day-to-day relationships between staff and students was an important benefit for other non-Aboriginal staff who participated in the AGC circles as well.

*"… just a breakdown of barriers with those students. I was having a lot of trouble with two girls in particular and then when they saw me out there in that environment it was just totally different. I can still talk to them now and it's not a big*

*issue. So they were able to find ways to communicate and not see other people as sort of a negative figure I suppose. It was a just complete - I mean they enjoyed it, they like to see teachers and that involved in the circle."*

One Aboriginal staff member commented on her observations within the school setting of improved communication skills for individual AGC girls and the benefits for their relationship with her.

*"I have noticed that [some] have grown up a little bit. The other ones are a bit shy or one, she's sort of come out of her shell a bit and she talks to a lot more people; she used to just walk around the school with a couple of people at the beginning of the year but now she's hanging with more people which is good. One of our Leadership Girls … she's a lot easier to talk to."*

A more difficult issue, observed from different vantage points by several staff, was that of the small number of girls who didn't respond to the AGC or became disruptive to the progress of others. An Aboriginal staff member commented that *"It didn't work for a couple of girls but they were really bad attenders and it didn't change them, so I think you need to concentrate on the middle of the road type girls for it to be successful."*

### Family

Interviews undertaken with parents of AGC participants showed an appreciation that the school was making the program available and providing positive benefits for their daughters. In turn this appears to have broken down school barriers for some of those families and enhanced their relationships with school staff.

A non-Aboriginal staff member reflected on improvements she observed in her own relationship with families. *"I think we have developed that relationship with the families. I think they now - I see people down the street who - I know who they are. They actually give me that smile now... They call me what the kids call me, and that never happened before."*

One of the parents interviewed commented on the positive impacts of the AGC activities in helping the girls to build relationships and connections both inside and outside of school.

*"But the Girls Circle - like even with the book, then they had to interview people at the school and the Aboriginal teachers and other workers. So she got to know a few extra teachers and knowing them but by interviewing she got to know them, not just know their names. Just doing other stuff with the girls and it's just a little bit of extra involvement I think, just inside the school. As well as outside, because they do get - they did get to do a few things outside of the school."*

Another parent was impressed at the way that AGC activities enhanced her daughter's relationships with her family, particularly with family Elders. *"I know that she has spoken – taken it upon herself to talk – to my mother and her father's mother. Because my mum's in an Elders group and … they did a performance I think, once."*

Despite a general appreciation of the benefits of the AGC for their daughters, the parent interviews revealed that parents had limited knowledge of how the circles worked. The need to involve parents was raised at the November regional AECG meeting, where there was a consensus that Aboriginal parents needed help as much as their children, and that by involving them there would be better outcomes for the girls. One commented that *"the school has to get the parents in and they have to make it more than just NAIDOC week or a few activities here and there."*

An Elder who had participated in the AGC and was a frequent consultant to schools shared her frustration at the lack of awareness and engagement of school staff with regard to Aboriginal families.

*"They're targeting problems and saying, can you help to fix this or what can we do about this? I say to them you need to understand more about it before we're talking about how to deal with it. You need to have more understanding of the parents and community of the children that they're teaching. Because a lot of them didn't know any of the previous history."*

Recognising and respecting different family structures, histories, values and patterns of relationship in Aboriginal families is very important for working effectively with Aboriginal youth and communities (Penman, 2006). Without sufficient understanding and sensitive engagement with the particularities of Aboriginal kinship and social organisation all-important family and community partnerships may be jeopardised (Dobia & O'Rourke, 2011; SNAICC, 2004).

### Community

AGC impacts within the community were investigated through qualitative interviews and a forum with community members. As previously noted, there was substantial community support for the AGC initiative, particularly in light of the positive gains experienced by the participating girls and with the involvement of Elders in aspects of the program. Despite this strong support various community members indicated a need to strengthen relationships and communication between the school, families and the community as a whole. As noted by one community leader, *"I think girls' circle, school stuff, community stuff – I think it all needs now to be linked".*

The need for substantial, ongoing engagement with the community around issues of culture, history and identity was highlighted by several community leaders. Those attending the community forum recommended having all staff trained in the *Connecting to Country* package developed by the state AECG as the best means of ensuring that school staff can understand and relate to Aboriginal cultural values. *"I think that all schools need to be trained in the AECG state package, Connecting to Country. That's about a lot of issues that relate to the land, in particular, but also all those cultural obligations that you have."*

As part of the NSW Department of Education's Connected Communities strategy all school staff are required to undertake *Connecting to Country* training as an essential first step in developing competence for working effectively with Aboriginal students and communities (NSW AECG, n.d.; NSW DEC, 2011). In addition, through its Aboriginal Education

| Table 4: Correlations between school climate and school and community assets | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total Internal Resiliency | Total Environmental Resiliency | Positive School Climate | Learning Environment | Respect for Diversity/Cultural Sensitivity | Organisational Support |
| Positive School Climate | .475** | .662** | | | | |
| Learning Environment | .416** | .610** | .843** | | | |
| Respect for Diversity/Cultural Sensitivity | .239 | .256 | .554** | .213 | | |
| Organisational Support | .433** | .476** | .806** | .697** | | |
| School Connectedness | .251 | .446** | .322* | .278 | .281 | .151 |
| School Support | .357* | .743** | .466** | .425** | .134 | .257 |
| School Meaningful Participation | .472** | .708** | .360* | .451** | -.013 | .244 |
| Community Support | .182 | .486** | .364* | .273 | .230 | .419** |
| Community Meaningful Participation | .295 | .542** | .440** | .283 | .320* | .238 |
| **p < .01    *p < .05 | | | | | | |

and Training Policy, the NSW Department of Education is committed to building "competencies in Aboriginal Cultures for all staff in partnership with the NSW AECG, Elders and Aboriginal communities" (NSW DET 2009). While there was clear evidence at the pilot school of efforts to acknowledge and support Aboriginal students, it was nonetheless a concern that key non-Aboriginal staff recruited to work with the AGC had not undergone *Connecting to Country* training and was unfamiliar with cultural respect protocols.

Research into interventions for improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing has emphasised the importance of community engagement for success (Clelland, Gould &Parker, 2007; Higgins, 2010; Hunt, 2013). The need for substantive engagement with the Aboriginal community in the development of the AGC was highlighted in the following comments from Aboriginal staff.

*"really try and build that strong relationship because it is about - it is Aboriginal Girls Circle and it's about their community as well so making sure that that happens."*

*"It has to be Aboriginal people running it with the knowledge of what their community needs. It can't just be school teachers running it in the schools. It's got to be a community."*

A community member who worked as an Aboriginal Education Officer at another school also observed on the limitations of running programs with a school focus. She highlighted the need for broader community involvement so as to provide support beyond the school for young people's development.

*"A lot of the time, we do things in the implementing in schools, but then there is no further implementation outside of school. There's no connection. There's no place where they can go ... I think that's where it's important to bring the community and other organisations involved in the girls circle. So that kind of give a little wider support and gives them the wider community support that they can turn to when it's outside of school hours or in the school holidays or those sorts of things."*

One staff member elaborated further on the need for a whole of community strategy involving a multi-layered approach

in order to improve and sustain wellbeing and educational outcomes for Aboriginal youth.

*"I think it has to be multi-layered. It can't just be us running it here in schools, it's got to be - health fraternities where they're getting the information of childcare or child rearing or maternal health or whatever it might be. Ante-natal health. Or it could be teachers in conjunction with health and other things, with universities for the not at-risk kids."*

It would appear that there is local interest from the health sector in this kind of approach. The AGC Project Officer (now Community Development Officer within the school) reported recent interest from local agencies wanting to adopt the methods of the Aboriginal Girls Circle for their own work in Aboriginal communities. In addition, the importance of linking up services and providing coordinated support was a key message from Aboriginal community members attending local and regional AECG meetings.

Coordination of services is consistent with the Connected Communities strategy advocated by the State AECG and adopted by the Department of Education in fifteen NSW communities. A culturally appropriate and integrated approach to service delivery is currently recognised as the most promising approach for overcoming disadvantage in Aboriginal communities (Moore, Fry, Lorains, Green & Hopkins, 2011; Stewart, Lohoar & Higgins, 2011).

## School climate

Sense of connectedness or belonging is frequently conceptualised as an individual attribute that is nonetheless related to environmental factors (as assessed in the CHKS RYDM environmental resilience scale). In addition, different kinds of school environments may promote connectedness or provoke alienation, with consequent positive or negative impacts on wellbeing. Garvey (2008) has noted the harmful effects of schooling that promotes assimilation or is the source of racism and discrimination. In school settings where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience cultural disrespect, racism, low expectations and/or poor achievement, a sense of connectedness to school may be difficult to achieve. Conversely, schools that value Aboriginal cultural perspectives and nurture positive connections with

their communities and families, are more effective in engaging Aboriginal students and promoting academic achievement and positive wellbeing (Dobia & O'Rourke, 2011; Harrison, 2011; Sarra, 2003).

Whereas the RYDM environmental resilience scale measures student perceptions of direct personal impacts, the S3 module investigates broader student perceptions of school climate. Research into school climate has sought to identify the educational conditions established by schools to meet students' learning and developmental needs (Austin, O'Malley & Izu, 2011; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009). The module from the CHKS is a 15-item survey that seeks to measure school climate. It includes items relating to classroom instruction, student engagement, respect for diversity and organisational support. The following analysis looks at mean results for the full scale, labelled positive school climate, as well as for three sub-scales, learning environment (3 items), respect for diversity/cultural sensitivity (4 items) and organisational support (2 items).Table 4 presents correlations between these four scales and the school and community subscales of the CHKS RYDM environmental resiliency scale as well as the totals for the environmental and internal resilience subscales.

Table 4 shows that overall positive school climate as well as learning environment and organisational support are significantly correlated with both internal and environmental resilience. Although for this sample respect for diversity/ cultural sensitivity is not correlated with either resiliency scale, it nonetheless contributed to positive school climate and to the community meaningful participation subscale of the RYDM. This finding may indicate that cultural respect is not primarily viewed as a school issue but rather as something that has its genesis and most important expression in the broader community. For the AGC group in particular there was a strong focus on learning about culture and learning to respect their own culture that was developed through contact with community Elders rather than through school channels.

Also noteworthy are the correlations of learning support with school support and school meaningful participation from the RYDM, further demonstrating the importance of quality of instruction for environmental resilience. Organisational support, by contrast, was correlated with community support, suggesting that effective collaboration between school and community are significant factors in supporting Aboriginal students' resilience.

## Staff survey results

In addition to individual staff interviews, surveys were conducted with 22 school staff across three school campuses. The survey was designed to tap three key areas: support for students' social-emotional development, cultural awareness and teaching effectiveness. The social development support and cultural awareness scales were designed specifically for the AGC research. Teaching effectiveness was assessed using the teacher efficacy scale developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001).

As shown in Figure 6 (below), overall results of the staff survey indicated high self-assessments for each of the teacher survey subscales. The small number and self-selection of participants

suggests that this sample is likely to have been skewed in favour of those staff already committed to the areas assessed by the survey.
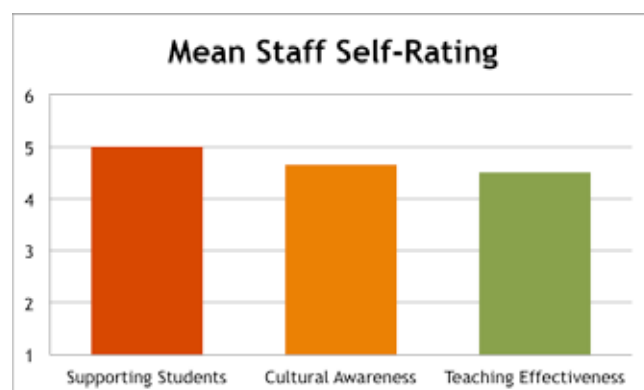


*Figure 6: Teacher's mean self-rating on Supporting Students, Cultural Awareness and Teaching Effectiveness Scores range from 1, Not at All, to 6, A Very Great Deal.*

In order to investigate which aspects of cultural awareness and student support factors were reported as being easier to facilitate by the respondents to the survey, the analysis also included standardising scores around the mean of each item. In this way it could be determined which aspects of student support/cultural awareness were endorsed higher than or less than the respondent average.

Although most staff who completed the surveys indicated on average a high degree of competence in relation to supporting students' emotional wellbeing, there were some indications that staff were less confident in relation to promoting positive values, use of student centred approaches, teaching good decision making, supporting and promoting social emotional learning, and facilitating student cooperation. These results suggest that these areas may benefit from further professional development. Other areas, in particular maintaining good relationships with students and enhancing supportive classroom environments, were endorsed at higher rates by the group indicating a greater sense of capability in these areas.

Results in relation to the staff's responses on the cultural awareness scale indicate a high level of self-perceived competence in this area. When comparing scores against the group mean it appeared that the respondents were more confident in areas such as assessing the needs of Aboriginal students, being able to engage culturally diverse parents and students, as well as with their overall sense that their schools provided a culturally responsive environment. They were less confident to some degree in relation to use of resources that value cultural background, adapting their communication to suit students of different backgrounds, and supporting cultural pride in their students.

Interestingly, there seemed to be a distinct pattern in relation to self-rated participation in cultural activities, being able to use resources that value cultural backgrounds, being able to value and celebrate diversity, and specifically work to overcome negative stereotypes. All of these facets were somewhat lower, but it should be noted that these differences

were only marginal and may be due to the small sample size and self-selection bias. Of particular note for the cultural awareness scale, the small sample size did not allow for testing of differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff. The inclusion of Aboriginal staff in the total may therefore have elevated scores.

The overall results of the teacher efficacy scale indicate that all of the respondents viewed themselves as quite efficacious in areas such as making expectations clear, helping students think critically, getting through to difficult students, and encouraging students to value learning. Such positive results across all three staff measures suggest the potential vulnerability of these self-assessment measures to response bias based on social desirability and limited knowledge.

The qualitative data yielded critical information with regard to the need for teacher cultural awareness. An Elder highly experienced in working with schools commented as follows.

*"If the teachers understood more the kids' background and where they're coming from - it's not that they'll be able to solve the problems but they'll have some sort of a background knowledge of the powerlessness of the children - [to change] things."*

This was not an argument for accepting the status quo, but rather for understanding the challenges faced by young Aboriginal people in order to target more effective support. Similar limitations were observed in relation to many teachers' lack of knowledge of Aboriginal history and cultural values.

*"Because the teachers don't know they look for things on the internet… well you get ten thousand years of history on two pages on the internet so I'm not really happy with you using it solely but here I am if you want to ask a question and I'll go find others to come in."* A telling implication arising from these observations is the profound need for humility, openness and mutual respect as a basis for effective teaching in Aboriginal contexts.

## Cultural identity

Cultural identity is regarded as a crucial dimension of self for Aboriginal children (Kickett-Tucker, 2009; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Purdie, 2003). A strong sense of Aboriginal culture can provide psychological benefits through affirming a sense of belonging, connectedness and self-worth (Dobia & O'Rourke, 2011; Kickett-Tucker, 2009). In addition to supporting positive mental health and wellbeing, a positive sense of cultural identity can be a source of resilience against the impacts of racism (Germain, 2004; Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Wexler, 2009; Zubrick et al., 2005).

Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke and Craven (2010a) have noted that research seeking to investigate the relationship between self-concept, academic achievement and cultural identity for Aboriginal youth has so far produced equivocal results. This may, however, be an artefact of differing conceptualisations and assessment methods (see Pedersen & Walker, 2000; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004). Working qualitatively from an Aboriginal standpoint, Kickett-Tucker's (2009) research demonstrated the centrality and complexity of young Aboriginal people's racial identity to their sense of self. In the

Voices of Indian Teens study Whitesell et al (2006) highlighted the dual contributions of personal and collective self-concept for American Indian youth as they negotiated the demands of developing self-identity across two cultures simultaneously.

The difficulty of this process of bi-cultural identity development for Aboriginal girls was articulated by one of the Aboriginal staff members. Her comments especially highlighted the inherent tensions for Aboriginal youth who are trying to negotiate a sense of identity within a social context marked by perceptions of culture that persistently purvey antagonistic stereotyping and racism.

*"Some of them are successful across the two worlds. Some of them not so. They're fighting that inner battle all of the time of I've got to do this, but that's not really valued as much in my culture as in the other culture. You know? If I follow their ways, or whatever, then I'm going to - not cop it, but I'm going to be teased or whatever about it at home, or if I follow the home ways then I'm going to be teased about it at school."*

The process of adolescent identity development is seen here as especially fraught for Aboriginal youth. In addition, particular demands were noted for Aboriginal girls' identity development. *"It's a very difficult time. They're trying to work out what it means to be a woman, negotiate relationships with boys and girls because friendship circles are just as difficult, then they've got the added layer of culture and cultural identity tacked onto that."*

In this study the girls undertaking the AGC placed a high value on the opportunity to learn more about their culture from knowledge experts such as Elders during camps and trips. For a number of them it was the first opportunity they had had to hear directly from Elders about important cultural knowledge and clan history and their appreciation was keen, as noted in the following comment. *"Going to Bondi. That was to learn about our family history. We so need to do that again".* Learning about family history is both a means of connecting to family and to culture for Aboriginal people. This student's response highlights the sense of pride and positive cultural identity that such activities generate, providing an important and authentic counter to the negative stereotyping found in mainstream media and in daily encounters in the wider community.

For Aboriginal community members cultural knowledge is highly valued as a source of strength and positive identity. All those consulted described the importance of cultural storytelling as a central component of an Aboriginal circle. They sought to make the sharing of positive stories by Elders and acknowledged cultural custodians part of children's education. *"But this sharing of stories and that, I've just come off cultural awareness training...The amount of stuff they got out of hearing their Elders' story and actually recognising that as a vital part of engaging our kids at school. I think if we shared stories, rather than dealt with the issues and the problems..."*

The sensitive links between the sense of cultural identity and self-perceptions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are generally not acknowledged in standard self-concept measures (Bodkin-Andrews et al, 2010a),

which are based on individualistic notions of selfhood that fail to capture processes of collective social identity making. Since a major aim of this study was to investigate and develop culturally appropriate approaches to research into the wellbeing of Aboriginal Australian youth, the researchers undertook to design and pilot a new measure of cultural identity based on the initial qualitative findings in conjunction with relevant literature and expert advice on Aboriginal identity development.

Taking into account the views of these Aboriginal participants and incorporating insights drawn from Aboriginal Australian research literature (e.g., Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Sarra, 2011), the cultural identity measure was developed with nine factors identified as being important components of students' sense of their Aboriginal identity (with an additional factor assessing one's personal experiences of racism). It should be noted that although the development of this measure was focused on the Aboriginal voice, the items were worded in a manner that could be applicable to non-Aboriginal students. Each item was rated on a Likert scale from 1 (False) to 6 (True). Following is a description of each factor with example items.

*Cultural Pride:* An overarching four item measure assessing how positively one feels about being part of one's culture. Example: "*Belonging to my culture makes me feel proud.*"

Cultural Learning: A four item measure assessing the recognition, understanding, and value of important stories that contributes to the unique history of one's culture. Example: *"I value learning the stories that are part of the history of my culture"*

*Cultural Protocols:* A four item measure capturing the knowledge one holds of their unique customs and protocols

of one's culture. Example: *"Knowing about the unwritten laws of my culture is important to me"*

*Cultural Elders:* A four item measure assessing the level of respect one holds for Elders within their culture. Example *"I have respect for the people who know a lot about my culture (e.g., Elders)."*

*Cultural Family:* a four item measure assessing the quality of one's close family connections within the context of one's culture *"My family connections help me understand my culture".*

*Connection to Country:* A four item measure assessing the value and respect for the cultural significance of the land from which one originates: *"Where I'm from is closely tied to my culture."*

*Cultural Mob:* A four item measure capturing the degree to which one feels connected to their wider cultural community/ mob. Example: *"My mob/cultural community helps me understand what's important to life."*

*Cultural Events:* A four item measure capturing the extent to which students are motivated to be engaged with specific events relating to their culture. Example: *"I would like to take part in ceremonies that belong to my culture.*"

*Cultural Community Support*: A four item measure capturing the extent to which one believes that the wider community respects one's culture. Example: "*The wider community values my culture.*"

*Racism:* A 6-item measure of personal racism drawn from the larger Perceived discrimination scale (Bodkin-Andrews, et al.,
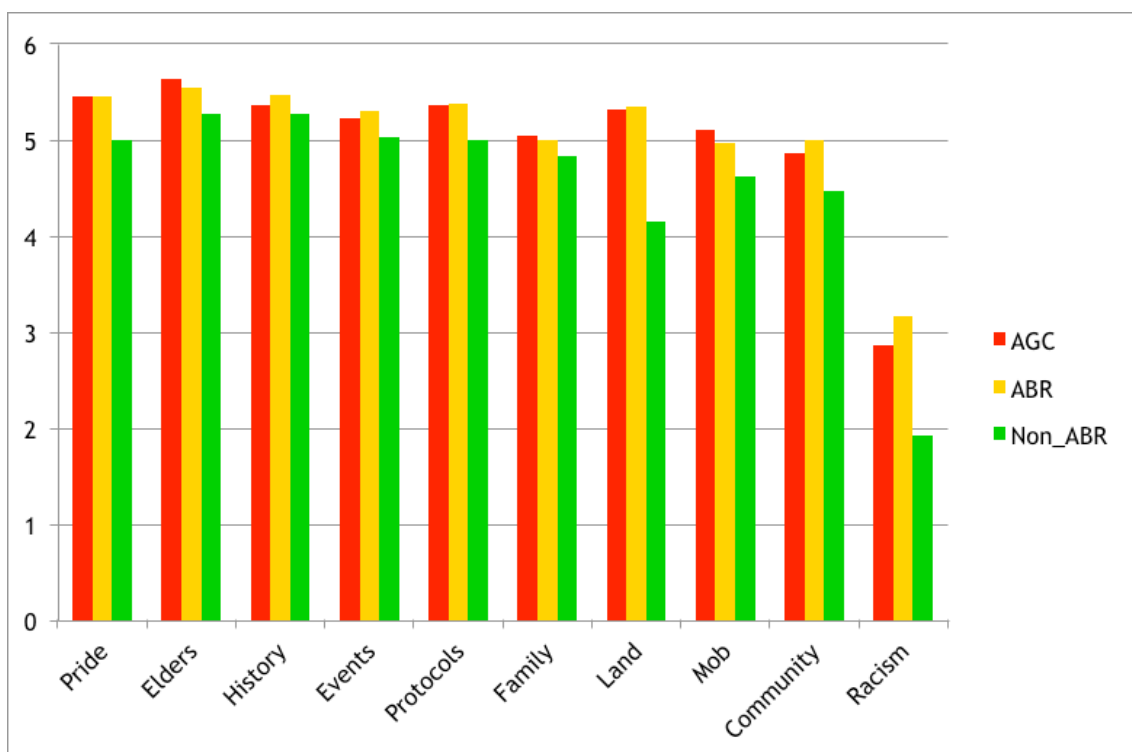


*Figure 7:* Cultural Identity Measures

| Table 5. Correlational values for the Cultural Identity scales, environmental resilience and selected measures for Aboriginal students only. | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pride | Elders | History | Events | Protocols | Family | Land | Mob | Community | Racism |
| School Connectedness | .327* | .314* | .410** | .437** | .311* | .065 | .189 | .262 | .335* | -.233 |
| School Support | .277 | .255 | .251 | .373* | .279 | .055 | .078 | .279 | .299 | -.042 |
| School Meaningful Participation | .057 | .074 | .033 | .219 | .227 | -.064 | .039 | .137 | .285 | .108 |
| Community Support | .390* | .613** | .628** | .413** | .558** | .345* | .509** | .299 | .532** | .032 |
| Community Meaningful Participation | .253 | .357* | .292 | .245 | .403** | .133 | .362* | .333* | .384* | -.101 |
| Home Meaningful Participation | .132 | .154 | .156 | .344* | .268 | .187 | .260 | .398* | .316* | .078 |
| Home Support | .248 | .405** | .349* | .339* | .354* | .162 | .304 | .289 | .405** | -.084 |
| Total Environmental Resiliency | .312* | .400** | .382* | .473** | .453** | .211 | .329* | 431** | .479** | -.016 |
| Total Internal Resiliency | .255 | .283 | .238 | .434** | .315* | .082 | .314* | .216 | .344* | .051 |
| Parental Self Concept | .152 | .109 | .021 | .154 | .092 | .553** | .374* | .331* | .147 | .036 |
| Positive School Climate | .181 | .005 | .351* | .374* | .357* | .265 | .310* | .368* | .376* | -.099 |
| Organisational support | .319* | .343* | .414** | .364* | .425** | .265 | .274 | .375* | .375* | -.056 |
| **p < .01    *p < .05 | | | | | | | | | | |

2010b). This measure was designed to assess an individual's experiences of racial discrimination at the personal (direct contact) level. Example: *"People have called me nasty names based on the culture I come from."*

## Comparative Results for Identity

Whilst it may be difficult to draw comparisons in the diverse and differing strengths in identity held between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, figure 7 reveals that all student groups held positive perceptions across all the cultural identity factors measured. However, for the racism measure, scores above the mean for the Aboriginal student group showed that, on average, they endorsed as more true than false items indicating that they experienced racism. Scores for the AGC students on the same scale were just below the mean, indicating that their experience of racism was on average endorsed as more false than true, whereas for non-Aboriginal students the experience of racism was, on average, endorsed as mostly false.

Overall each student group indicated that they were proud of their culture, respected the values and protocols of their culture, felt a connection with the land their culture belonged to, were motivated to take part in cultural events, felt supported by their immediate family or mob, and finally felt that their culture was accepted by the wider community. The specific results for the Aboriginal Girls Circle participants were by-and-large exceptionally positive. Not only did the girls respond in a consistently strong positive manner across all the differing aspects of cultural identity, but at no stage were their responses lower than the non-Aboriginal students.

In line with the results discussed above, difference testing across the varying cultural identity factors revealed two significant differences, reflecting connection to land and racism. For the connection to land measure Wald testing showed that both the Aboriginal Girls Circle and the Aboriginal students were significantly stronger in their connection to

country than the non-Aboriginal students (Wald = 11.76, $p < .01$). No significant difference was found in the post hoc comparisons ($p = .81$) between the Aboriginal Girls Circle students and the Aboriginal students for this measure. It may be argued that these results clearly reflect the stronger connection that Aboriginal youth have to their cultural lands when compared to non-Aboriginal youth.

For the perceived racism measure there was no significant difference between the AGC and the Aboriginal students ($p = .51$), indicating that both AGC and Aboriginal student groups were more likely to have perceived racism directed at them when compared to the non-Aboriginal student group ($p < .05$ and $p < .01$ respectively). No statistically significant between-group differences were found for cultural pride (Wald = 2.89, $p = .24$), cultural Elders (Wald = 1.30, $p = .31$), cultural history (Wald = .71, $p = .70$), cultural events (Wald = .93, $p = .63$), cultural protocols (Wald = 1.60, $p = .45$), cultural family (Wald = .38, $p = .82$), cultural mob (Wald = 1.99, $p = .37$) or cultural community support (Wald = 2.40, $p = .30$).

## Correlations with Cultural Identity

Table 5 presents correlations for all Aboriginal students between the cultural identity subscales and environmental resilience measures, overall internal resilience, parental self-concept, and aspects of school climate. It reveals a number of significant findings. Evidence of a strong association between cultural identity and resilience is underscored by the series of significant correlations between total environmental resilience and all but two of the cultural identity subscales. The lack of a statistically significant correlation with racism for any of the resilience subscales suggests that, for this sample, racism, resilience and cultural identity are quite independent dimensions of experience. Of note, however, is that the trend of available correlations is negative, thus indicating that higher levels of school connectedness, for example, are associated with lower levels of experienced racism.

Of the resilience measures, the community support subscale from the RYDM, which identifies support from an adult outside

of home and school, was significantly associated with the cultural identity measure across most of its subscales. Home support, reflecting individualised support provided by an adult at home, was associated with several of the cultural identity subscales (Elders, history, events, protocols, community), but only non-significant correlations were found for the remaining subscales (pride, family, land, mob). In relation to school-based support, the presence of support from an adult at school, measured by the school support subscale, showed low and non-significant correlations for all cultural identity subscales except events. By contrast, organisation support, which reflects clarity of expectations and fair treatment of misbehaviour at school, was significantly positively correlated with seven of the nine cultural identity subscales.

Interestingly, the cultural identity subscale that related most consistently to the resilience measures was community, which refers to perceived support for Aboriginal culture from the wider community. In addition to showing significant positive correlations with all but two of the environmental resilience scales, community was one of four cultural identity subscales that also correlated with internal resilience. Events, protocols and land were similarly noteworthy for their correlations with internal resilience as well as several environmental resilience subscales.

The overall pattern of correlations between the school resilience subscales and the cultural identity scales also bears attention. The lack of any significant association between the cultural identity subscales and school meaningful participation may indicate that involvement in day-to-day school activities is independent of cultural identity for this sample of students. Support from individual teachers, as measured by the school support subscale, similarly had little association with cultural identity, except for the events subscale. This finding suggests that although students may have a teacher or other adult who is monitoring them at school in a caring way, this encouragement is not significantly related to cultural identity. The exception may be when this care is in relation to community activities, as the significant correlation with the events subscale seems to indicate. This finding suggests the possibility that one way school support may be expressed is through teachers encouraging and valuing Aboriginal students' participation in cultural events.

Of the three school measures, connectedness, which focuses on students' feelings of belonging and enjoyment at school, was most related to cultural identity, showing significant correlations with pride, Elders, history, events, protocols and community. While correlational analysis does not determine causal relations between variables, this association with connectedness, particularly in the absence of associations with the other school variables, demonstrates the importance of schools valuing and promoting Aboriginal cultural and community engagement as a central means of enabling student connectedness.

Overall the findings on cultural identity support previous research indicating the importance of positive cultural identity for resilience and wellbeing, showing strongest associations to dimensions of environmental resilience. In particular, cultural identity was most strongly related to community factors and moderately to home factors. Of the school factors, school connectedness was the only subscale to show associations with cultural pride, Elders, history and protocols. This underscores the importance for schools of taking Aboriginal culture seriously and the benefits of doing so. It also suggests there is substantially more that could be done at the individual teacher and classroom levels to affirm and celebrate Aboriginal cultures.

## Self-concept

The research examined the effects of the AGC program on young Aboriginal women's self-concepts. Further, it investigated the nature of self-concept in this group through identifying and elaborating the relative importance of different dimensions of self-concept.

A positive sense of self is widely viewed as a key contributor to wellbeing (Noble et al, 2008). Conversely, poor self-esteem during adolescence is associated with heightened risk of mental health problems, especially depression and anxiety disorders, as well as poorer overall adjustment (Trzesniewski et al, 2006). Low self-esteem during adolescence has been shown to be related to externalising problems involving aggression, antisocial behaviour and delinquency (Donnellan et al, 2005). In Aboriginal children low self-esteem is related to mental health risk, experience of racism and exposure to family violence. Results from the West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey indicated that overall self-esteem was lower for girls than for boys and decreased with age (Zubrick et al, 2005).

While taking account of these problems and seeking to counteract them, the central focus of the AGC has been on building strengths and positive emotionality (Fredrickson, 2009). Adopting the Circle Solutions framework, the AGC aims for Aboriginal young women to develop a more positive sense of self, learn social and emotional skills that enable them to connect well with others, develop a pro-social orientation together with confidence and skills to set their own goals, make decisions and solve problems (Roffey, 2006, 2014, 2011b).

Raising the self-esteem of Aboriginal students has frequently been highlighted as necessary to ensure effective engagement in school and to support academic success (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Sarra, 2003). The relationship between self-concept and educational success in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been investigated by Pedersen and Walker (2000), by Purdie & McCrindle (2004) and by Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, Marsh & Simpson, (2005). Each of these studies has found a clear relationship between specific academic self-concept and educational achievement.

Less clear, however, is the relative contribution of different aspects of self-concept to the overall wellbeing of Aboriginal students. Craven et al. (2005) identified differences for specific dimensions of overall self-concept between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal secondary students. These differences included physical, appearance, art and general self-concept, which tended to be higher for Aboriginal students, while education, peer relations and emotions were significantly lower. This finding suggests differences in the overall structure of self-concept for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.
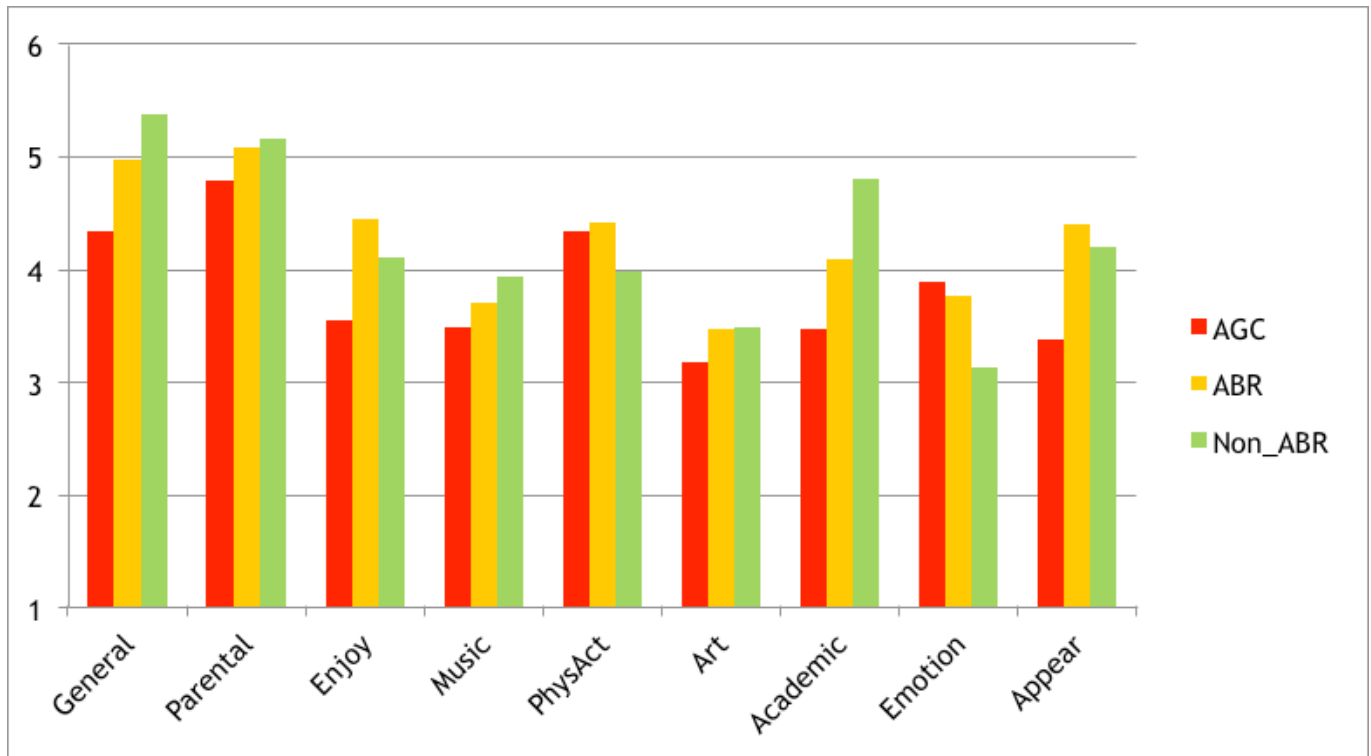
*Figure 8: Comparative results for the Self-Description Questionnaire*

For this study self-concept was measured using selected relevant scales from the short version of the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ was developed by Marsh to assess multiple dimensions of self-concept and has been validated in various cultural contexts (Marsh, Ellis, Parada, Richards, & Heubeck, 2005; Yeung & Lee, 1999).

## Key Findings from the Self-Description Questionnaire

The SDQ includes a number of subscales relating to specific forms of self-concept as well as general wellbeing. The questionnaire presents a series of statements that are rated on a Likert scale from 1 (False) to 6 (True). Scores for each factor are computed by averaging the relevant items. Descriptions and sample items for each factor follow.

*General Self-Esteem:* A six item measure assessing how students feel about themselves overall. Example: "*Overall, most things I do turn out well.*"

*Parental Self-concept:* A four item measure assessing how students feel about their relationship with their parents. Example: "*I get along well with my parents.*"

*Enjoy:* A four item measure assessing how students enjoy their experience of school. Example: "*I enjoy being at school.*"

*Music Self-concept:* A six item measure assessing students' perceptions of their musical abilities. Example: "*Compared to others my age I am good at Music.*"

*Physical Activity:* A four item measure assessing students' perceptions of their physical abilities. Example: "*I am better*

than most of my friends at things like sports, gym, and dance.*"

*Art Self-concept:* A three item measure assessing students' perceptions of their artistic abilities. Example: "*Compared to others my age I have always done well in Art.*"

*Academic Self-concept:* A five item measure assessing how students feel about their abilities at school. Example: "*I am good at most school subjects.*"

*Emotional Stability:* A five item measure assessing how students feel about their everyday emotions. Example: "*I often feel confused and mixed up*" (reverse coded). All negative items were reverse coded.

*Physical Appearance:* A six item measure assessing students' perceptions of their physical appearance. Example: "*I have a good looking body.*"

As shown in Figure 8, a number of significant between-groups differences were found. Wald testing for general self-esteem showed significant differences (Wald = 21.73, $p < .001$), with post-hoc contrasts suggesting that the non-Aboriginal students were significantly higher in general self-esteem than both the Aboriginal ($p < .03$) and AGC participants ($p < .001$). In addition, the Aboriginal students held significantly higher levels of general self-esteem than the AGC participants ($p < .05$).

For academic self-concept (Wald = 11.45, $p < .001$) post hoc comparisons revealed that the non-Aboriginal student group was significantly higher in academic self-concept than the AGC student group ($p < .001$) and the Aboriginal student group ($p < .05$). There was no significant difference between

the AGC and Aboriginal students groups ($p = .11$). This result is consistent with both the qualitative findings and wider research literature which documents a tendency for poorer academic outcomes and greater disengagement from school on the part of Aboriginal students.

For appearance self-concept (Wald = 8.72, $p < .05$), post hoc comparison revealed that both the Aboriginal student group ($p < .01$) and the non-Aboriginal student group ($p < .05$) scored significantly higher than the AGC student group. No significant differences were identified between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student groups ($p = .53$).

Wald difference testing revealed no significant differences between the AGC and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students groups for parental self-concept (Wald = .79, $p = .67$), school enjoyment (Wald = 5.10, $p = .08$), music self-concept (Wald = .76, $p = .68$), physical activities self-concept (Wald = .83, $p = .66$), art self-concept (Wald = .69, $p = .71$) or emotional stability self-concept (Wald = 3.27, $p = .19$).

For the AGC participants, the results presented in Figure 8 suggest that on average, the girls hold a strong level of general self-esteem, thus they largely have positive perceptions of themselves. However, participants reported higher levels of emotional instability. These results reflect tendencies to worry as well as frequently feeling confused and/or upset. While between-group differences in emotional stability were not found to be significant, there appears to be an inverse trend between the AGC and non-Aboriginal groups wherein the AGC group shows scores that are lowest for general self-esteem and highest for emotional instability, whereas the non-Aboriginal group is highest for general self-esteem and lowest for emotional instability. This trend is consistent with findings that demonstrate very high levels of psychological distress in Aboriginal populations (ABS, 2008; AIHW, 2011).

Given this is cross-sectional data gathered at the end of the AGC pilot, caution is required in the interpretation of these group differences. The AGC initially targeted girls who had difficulties at school and this group is thus very likely to have experienced poor academic self-concept and difficulties with emotion regulation. Cross-group comparisons therefore cannot demonstrate effects of the AGC intervention. These results do, however, demonstrate a common finding of poor academic self-concepts amongst Aboriginal students.

**The research into the impacts of the AGC aimed to examine the interrelationships between self-concept and Aboriginal cultural identity, and seek yields for our understanding of the interactions between these two dimensions of self.**

The limited data gathered in the pilot revealed few significant associations between self-concept and cultural identity, with parental self-concept only clearly related to family, land and mob in the cultural identity scale. Gathering and analysis of additional data is required to enable further examination of the relationship between self-concept and cultural identity. However, as noted previously, the present data did demonstrate significant associations between cultural identity and resilience. The following analysis will consider correlations between self-concept and the resilience measures.

## Correlations between Self-Concept and Environmental and Internal Resiliency

As shown in Table 6, results of the analysis between environmental resilience and internal resilience factors and self-concept revealed a number of significant associations. On the whole, both internal and environmental resilience were associated with greater levels of general self-esteem, while enjoyment of school and academic self-concept were associated with specific environmental resilience subscales.

General self-esteem was significantly related to total environmental resilience ($r = .491$, $p < .01$) and to the environmental resilience subscales for community meaningful participation ($r = .449$, $p < .01$), prosocial peers ($r = .309$, $p < .05$), home meaningful participation ($r = .490$, $p < .01$) and home support ($r = . 468$, $p < .01$). General self-esteem was also associated with internal resilience, and was in fact the only self-concept factor to be associated with total internal resiliency ($r = .328$, $p < .05$). This may be in part due to the fact that the self-esteem factor requires an assessment of general capability whereas other self-concept measures are much more specific. Having a high level of general self-esteem was also positively associated with increased self-efficacy ($r = .381$, $p < .05$), self-awareness ($r = .330$, $p < .05$), cooperation and communication ($r = .315$, $p < .05$) and goals and aspirations ($r = .333$, $p < .05$). Interestingly, none of the school-based resilience subscales were associated with general self-esteem, suggesting that home, community and peers are more salient contexts for Aboriginal youth to derive this kind of self-assessment.

School enjoyment and academic self-concept were significantly associated with the school-related environmental resilience scales. Enjoyment of school was correlated with total environmental resilience ($r = . 392$, $p < .05$), school connectedness ($r = . 434$, $p < .01$), school support ($r = . 380$, $p < .05$) and school meaningful participation ($r = . 488$, $p < .01$). It was also related to the internal resilience subscale of goals and aspirations ($r = . 346$, $p < .05$). Academic self-concept (e.g., beliefs of personal competence at school) was positively associated with total environmental resilience ($r = . 322$, $p < .05$) and with school connectedness ($r = . 357$, $p < .05$), school meaningful participation ($r = . 406$, $p < .01$), belonging to prosocial peer groups ($r = . 444$, $p < .01$) and receiving home support ($r = . 392$, $p < .05$). In common with the school enjoyment factor, the only internal resilience subscale related to academic self-concept was goals and aspirations ($r = . 512$, $p < .01$). From these results it appears that school factors are relevant to these Aboriginal students' sense of self only in relation to their assessments of general academic competence and enjoyment of school.

Physical activity self-concept was significantly related to community meaningful participation ($r = . 570$, $p < .01$), self-efficacy ($r = . 334$, $p < .05$) and cooperation and communication ($r = . 346$, $p < .05$), showing the relationship between sports participation and increased agency and cooperation with others. Physical activity self-concept relates to perceived competence in sports, dance, gym and other sport-related activities. It may be that these activities are being carried out as part of community events and participation and thus physical activity self-concept is significantly related to this factor of external resilience.

| Table 6: Correlations between Self-Concept and Environmental and Internal Resiliency for Aboriginal Students. | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | General Self-esteem | Parental | Enjoy School | Music | Physical activities | Art | Academic | Emotional stability | Appearance |
| School Connectedness | .286 | .064 | .434** | .086 | .132 | -.036 | .357* | -.254 | -.012 |
| School Support | .220 | -.035 | .380* | .250 | .278 | -.324* | .142 | -.075 | .112 |
| School Meaningful Participation | .270 | -.224 | .488** | .275 | .253 | -.209 | .406** | -.103 | .235 |
| Community Support | .252 | .081 | .184 | .225 | .101 | .108 | .054 | .073 | .053 |
| Community Meaningful Participation | .449** | .125 | .241 | .207 | .570** | .005 | .241 | -.308* | .343* |
| Peer Caring Relationships | .041 | -.016 | -.249 | .034 | -.174 | -.055 | -.223 | -.029 | -.234 |
| Prosocial Peers | .309* | .194 | .280 | .109 | -.076 | .052 | .444** | -.266 | -.111 |
| Home Meaningful Participation | .490** | .339* | .136 | .035 | .143 | -.002 | .172 | -.128 | .258 |
| Home Support | .468** | .328* | .284 | .019 | .106 | .158 | .392* | -.127 | .419** |
| Total Environmental Resiliency | .491** | .135 | .392* | .251 | .255 | -.095 | .322* | -.161 | .235 |
| Problem Solving | .219 | -.123 | .132 | -.032 | -.028 | -.161 | .243 | -.131 | -.110 |
| Self-Efficacy | .381* | .150 | .198 | .030 | .334* | -.075 | .276 | -.287 | .261 |
| Empathy | .024 | -.060 | .065 | -.049 | -.124 | .028 | .211 | .140 | -.125 |
| Self-Awareness | .330* | .166 | .035 | .007 | .056 | .046 | .185 | -.184 | .105 |
| Cooperation and Communication | .315* | -.093 | .297 | .164 | .346* | -.093 | .243 | -.120 | .288 |
| Goals and Aspirations | .333* | .078 | .346* | -.063 | .005 | .077 | .512** | -.245 | -.008 |
| Total Internal Resiliency | .328* | .054 | .128 | -.020 | .088 | -.072 | .299 | -.163 | .020 |
| **p < .01    *p < .05 | | | | | | | | | |

Of further note is the finding that as community meaningful participation increased emotional instability decreased. It is possible that there may be a reciprocal effect here where meaningful community participation helps to enable young people's skills for emotional regulation and in turn this brings about further opportunities for enhanced participation in the community. As reported, high significant correlations were also found between general self-esteem and home meaningful participation and support and between higher levels of community meaningful participation and physical activity self-concept. These results highlight the importance of community ties and participation for Aboriginal youth.

**Aim 3: Evaluate the relative effectiveness of various components of the program and implementation processes.**

## Strengths of the program

Across all the stakeholder groups there was broad agreement that the AGC had led to positive benefits for the majority of girls who participated. The overall highly positive response to the AGC is based on observations of an increase in confidence amongst the participating girls. Evidence for this change was typically a new or renewed capacity and willingness to speak up, take on leadership roles and in some cases resolve conflicts more effectively. Those interviewed for the study discussed these kinds of changes in the girls. Though there were differences in emphasis amongst the respondents, improvements in confidence and social skills recurred as common themes in all stakeholder groups.

The students were succinct and clear in reporting what they liked most about the AGC. They nominated

- » the camps;
- » time with Elders;
- » meeting new people;
- » the circle activities
- » the ability to connect to their culture and
- » connecting with other Aboriginal girls.

The **camps and trips** were valued as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the AGC for the girls. Common statements were simply "*I like the camps*" or "*the trips*" and "*Yeah, and you get to do fun activities. You get to go on camps and stuff*".

When asked about the **activities used in the circle**, the girls were very forthcoming about the fun and laughter shared. They liked the "*whole lot of laughs - all the fun games that we play*"; "*it's fun – I like playing Mrs Mumblebee*". One girl explained that she plays the circle games with her younger siblings, highlighting the value and enjoyment gained from the circle activities not only through the AGC circle but through her own way of extending its effects. A similar revelation further indicated the positive valuing of the AGC within families "*My little sister's coming here next year. She always talks about girls' circle.*"

In a similar vein, Aboriginal staff members reiterated the value placed by the girls on the camps, seeing the camps as core to the success of the AGC. They noted the students' participation and appreciation of the camps as well as the capacities of **the facilitators**. "*The camps, [the girls have]*

*really seemed to enjoy the camps when they have been at those. [The facilitators], my dealings with them have been wonderful."*

The **opportunity to learn and observe the circle process** was also strongly appreciated. One staff member especially noted the benefits of learning *"how she mixed them to separate from their friends because they always stayed with their friends. Then she'd play those games and then got them moving around. … it got them out to meet the community and meet different people".* This comment reflects on the effectiveness of the circle activities for developing the girls' social skills and on the benefits for staff development and understanding of group processes.

In particular, the role of the **school-based AGC Coordinator** in working closely with the girls to provide regular support and guidance was seen as crucial to the success of the AGC. Staff commented that *"the regular visits from [the Coordinator] have been very successful. She's a very personable person as well, and I think the kids get on really well with her".* Similar comments from a range of staff, including school leaders, further attested to the school's valuing of the efforts made by the AGC Coordinator, suggesting that despite a lack of formal training her openness to learning on the job and her ability to support the girls in culturally meaningful ways was highly beneficial.

The AGC Coordinator acknowledged that she had *"grown so much over the last two years."* She commented, *"I've been in training – learning with these girls as well."* It was evident that she was able to make a significant impact in the lives of the girls, with the support of the circles framework. *"In my role I've tried to teach them future life skills in respecting each other and respecting yourself which the AGC does. … Also resilience: just teaching the girls things do happen in life and you can always overcome it no matter what, even if you need support. Not to be scared to ask for that support."*

She further described the way she has learnt to guide the girls when they come to her with a problem. *"That's something I've learnt through AGC: the ways that I can deal with different situations and how to deal with it in a positive way, not a negative. Not to crumble even though things are happening; just to try and stand strong and you'll get through it. Just take responsibility for all your, for any actions you do."*

The **positive engagement of Aboriginal staff with the AGC** is clearly evident in the above comments. Their observations of its value in assisting the girls' development of social and emotional skills, and the ways in which they are applying them, are telling. Of particular additional significance is the benefit to the staff themselves. Aboriginal staff occupying support positions within schools often lack opportunities for professional development, despite frequently being required to deal with difficult and complex developmental issues. Comments from the staff quoted above indicate that they see the AGC as having provided a very significant benefit to their professional development and skill base.

In addition to the growth in connectedness and social skills development for the girls, non-Aboriginal school staff appreciated the project orientation of the program with its capacity to yield **demonstrable outcomes**. *"There's a concreteness about it. Like it's not a wishy-washy airy-fairy program, there will be things that you can see getting done at the end of the projects."*

The **Circle Solutions framework and training** were very well received by the staff, not only for the benefits they yielded with the girls, but also for the benefits that staff experienced when they applied it in their work with students. They commented that *"[X] is definitely more confident and [Y] has been a very big instigator of that in her lessons and I think she's developed a good rapport with the students because of it."*

*"I think it's a really positive thing. I think it's probably one of the better professional learning things we've done over the years."*

Having supportive, reciprocal relationships with their community was a very strong theme that was related to the AGC's emphasis on linking the girls up with **mentors and role models within the community**. *"They've got a lot of mentors within the community linked in now and I think that's important as well because it's so these girls can give back to their community and be leaders amongst their family and amongst their wider Aboriginal society as well."* It is noteworthy that perceptions of the role and effectiveness of mentors differed between community members and girls, both of whom regarded this aspect of the program very positively, and the AGC program developers who felt the mentoring project did not reach the level of engagement or impact they had hoped for. It would appear from the comments of the Elders and mentors involved with the AGC, that mentoring was conducted in more informal and subtle ways than originally envisaged by the program developers. It nonetheless seemed to have a significant impact for several girls at least.

One girl achieved the school captaincy and was also accepted into the IPROWD Aboriginal police recruitment program, despite experiencing the significant loss through suicide of a community mentor with whom she was very close. This girl attributed her success and positive focus to what she had learned through the AGC and other leadership programs she had attended, as well as to the support and mentorship she received from the community. Throughout the AGC program she maintained regular facebook contact with one of the initial mentors. This was clearly a very important personal connection for her; yet when asked about what had been most significant to her achievements she emphasised that she had received support and mentorship from many people in the community. This experience parallels the quality of collective responsibility and care for young people, which is a recognised strength of Aboriginal ways of growing up children (Penman, 2006).

## Current Developments and Directions

In light of issues raised during the pilot in relation to developmental and academic needs of the girls, recent planning has sought to make the AGC available from year seven. Providing support from the commencement of high school is aimed at helping to prevent difficulties emerging. A focus on years 7-10 along with dedicated timetabling in 2013 also sought to ameliorate concerns about the academic impact of removing girls from regular classes for the AGC sessions, which was particularly problematic in years 11 and 12 due to Higher School Certificate preparations.

The need to strengthen the community engagement component of the girls' projects has also been identified, and there are plans to introduce a service learning model that will facilitate vocational recognition of the community service undertaken by the girls. It is anticipated that this approach will both help to provide a more focused structure for this component of the program and build the girls' exposure and interest in a range of post school opportunities that they may not have considered.

Within the pilot school, the AGC and Circle Solutions initiatives have been championed by one member of the campus executive. Generating more systemic commitment is very important for ensuring the ongoing development and long-term sustainability of the programs. Circle Solutions training was undertaken as a whole staff, leading to plans to further embed Circles practices in regular classroom delivery. Effective implementation of whole school Circle Solutions is expected to cultivate a general sense of belonging and help to proactively cultivate positive social skills for the full student cohort. The enthusiasm with which the Circle Solutions philosophy and approach has been taken up for general classroom use across the College speaks for the success of the framework in engaging staff.

There was also considerable enthusiasm within the school for extending the AGC concept to working with boys. *"I think we could expand it to boys as well."* Staff have already found the circle concept useful for dealing with an ongoing conflict between two groups of boys. *"We did use the circle … it was very powerful and the boys continued that for a term with the male deputy principal and the AEOs and it just completely stopped any issues with those two groups."* This provides a clear indication of the value of the circles framework to this school for helping boys (in particular) learn ways to deal with conflict.

## Issues and challenges

As part of the research the pilot participants were asked to comment on challenges with the program or on things they would like to see changed. The majority of girls wanted more camps, finding the concentrated time away with the large group of girls very affirming of their sense of identity, connectedness and pride. Most of the girls interviewed nominated no or very minor changes to the AGC program.

Apart from scheduling issues that have since been addressed, the main challenges identified by school staff in the implementation of the AGC related to difficult behaviours that persisted with some girls. Aboriginal staff and community members stressed the need to build community and cultural connections with the school, as well as with other services, in order to effectively address social disadvantage and meet the girls' cultural, developmental and learning needs.

## Dealing with difficult behaviours

For non-Aboriginal staff, the key challenge facing the successful implementation of the Aboriginal Girls' Circle related to the range of life and behavioural issues presented by the girls. Initially the school looked to the AGC to address difficulties they were having with girls whom they had identified as being at educational risk due to behavioural issues. With

growing demand from the girls it was opened up to others who wanted to be part of it. A senior staff member and leading advocate for the AGC discussed the challenges this presented academically and socially.

*"Because this is a pilot program, we're learning what needs to be implemented, what needs to be left out, how we can help them to … move it from circle into whole school life. ... So these girls are part of girls' circle but also now moving the philosophy into the whole school."*

*"We've got a lot of levels in the girls' circle. We've got the girls that we sort of encouraged to join because we knew that they were at risk of all sorts of things - all negative things. So we encouraged them to join. Then we've got other girls who just joined because they wanted to be part of the circle. They could see where that was going to lead them. So there's levels within the circle. So there are the girls who really struggle to come to school, and they're still struggling to come to school. They come to circle but they struggle to come to school."*

It is evident from such accounts, as well as from comments by community members and Aboriginal staff, that some AGC participants face more significant challenges to their social and emotional wellbeing than do others. Current frameworks for school-based health promotion assume that enabling staff to recognise and address different levels of student needs is fundamental to improving student outcomes. They advocate a tiered approach to addressing needs at general, targeted and individualised levels (Graetz, Littlefield, Trinder, Dobia, Souter, Champion, Boucher, Killick-Moran & Cummins, 2008; Paternite, 2005; Weist & Murray, 2007).

According to this framework, the AGC was initially designed as a targeted intervention, open to interested Aboriginal girls but particularly catering to those identified as 'at risk'. More recently Circle Solutions has been taken up by the school as a general strategy aimed at enhancing all students' wellbeing. The simultaneous implementation of these initiatives could serve to strengthen social and emotional skills development. A community Elder highlighted the potential benefits for Aboriginal girls of *"work[ing] with classroom teachers to make sure that what's happening positive here [in the AGC] is transferred into that classroom."* While the introduction of Circle Solutions across the whole school means that more staff are developing capabilities for promoting social skills, it also signals the need to identify and distinguish the goals of the Aboriginal Girls Circle.

Alongside the benefits of the Circle Solutions emphasis on social and emotional skills development, the AGC enabled the participants to identify as and with Aboriginal girls, to connect with Elders and develop their cultural awareness and strengths. Accordingly, it is very important to retain the special character of the AGC as a space of cultural relevance and safety that caters for the particular cultural and developmental needs of Aboriginal girls. This requires careful attention to staffing and community engagement in both the development and delivery of the AGC initiative.

In addition, it remains important to develop strategies to cater for the needs of Aboriginal girls who require more intensive intervention. As noted previously, the AECG and

other Aboriginal community organisations advocate a linked-up service model involving active partnerships with local agencies, consistent with the Connected Communities strategy. Working with local, culturally competent agencies to coordinate the help required for students with complex difficulties would, as recommended by one AECG representative, *"take the pressure off some of the roles of the [school-based] staff and it would also have more options I guess for better outcomes for the students when it comes to linking them with non-government organisations or programs within or outside the school."* The development of these kinds of partnerships with key social and health service organisations has been demonstrated in the literature to be a key factor in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of health and education initiatives for Aboriginal communities (Clerke, 2013; Closing the Gap, 2013a).

## Staff development

At all levels of intervention the need to engage with Aboriginal students, their families and communities in culturally safe and respectful ways is essential for long term success (Clelland et al., 2007; Closing the Gap, 2013a). The role played by Aboriginal staff in providing crucial student support, mentoring and community liaison in schools is central and indispensable in this regard. It is most frequently Aboriginal staff who are called on to meet the complex needs of Aboriginal students when there are difficulties. *"But when it gets serious, it's – and it's us that, sometimes, we need help. Being the Aboriginal people, well the kids are going to run to us."* This comment from an Aboriginal staff member demonstrates the high importance accorded to cultural safety by Aboriginal students and families when seeking assistance.

It also highlights the level of demand on Aboriginal staff whose cultural expertise is not always well understood or acknowledged and who may consequently find their attempts to mediate between students, community and the school all the more difficult. *"The support – I think [we] needed more support … to understand our history ..."* As expressed by this Aboriginal staff member, non-Aboriginal staff demonstrate their support for Aboriginality and for the roles of Aboriginal staff when they are able and willing to actively understand and accommodate the cultural history and values of Aboriginal people. Addressing the support needs of Aboriginal staff, while acknowledging and valuing their cultural expertise, is vital for effective community engagement and for assuring the sustainability of the project.

For the AGC initiative, further professional development and empowerment of Aboriginal staff across the range of components of the package (i.e., circles, community projects, cultural identity work, community engagement and individualised support of young people at risk) is considered crucial to maximising positive outcomes and increasing the program's sustainability and reach. Involving Aboriginal staff as collaborators in the further development of the AGC would provide an ideal opportunity for professional development, ownership and empowerment through the initiative and is consistent with recommended best practice for undertaking research and community initiatives with Aboriginal communities (AIATSIS, 2012; Hunt, 2013).

Conversely, non-Aboriginal staff who lack adequate cultural awareness and sensitivity are liable to make ill-informed decisions that serve to further disengage and alienate students and their families. A regional AECG member emphasised the importance for non-Aboriginal staff of demonstrating their commitment to developing cultural understanding and partnering with Aboriginal communities.

*"When it comes to working with Aboriginal students [non-Aboriginal school staff need to be a bit more aware of where these children are coming from. The impact of colonisation is still with us today and we're seeing that in lots of areas, so understanding or Aboriginal competency training where they can actually show that they're working towards better relationships and partnerships and that with Aboriginal communities and the general community."*

Given the Aboriginal-identified focus of the AGC, it is especially important to ensure that any non-Aboriginal staff undertake cultural competency training prior to their involvement in the program. The necessity for significant Aboriginal involvement in staff professional and program development was emphasised by various community members, including an Elder highly experienced in working with schools. *"I would like to have our group develop an in-service for the teachers so the teachers learn more about the Aboriginal community that they're servicing."*

The research has identified several senior community members with significant expertise relevant to the goals of the AGC. As highlighted in national protocols developed for research, health and education initiatives with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, significant, meaningful and ongoing consultation with local communities should be undertaken for the purposes of developing the AGC content and delivery (AIATSIS, 2012; NACCHO, 2011; NSW AECG  & NSW DET, 2004).

## Dealing with grief

As previously discussed, community members indicated that learning to cope with grief was a priority for Aboriginal girls and families. One of the AGC girls reflected that funerals seemed to be the occasions when Aboriginal families came together most strongly. The significance of funerals and sorry business was highlighted by the suicide of a young community leader that tragically preceded one of the AGC camps. Following this loss, Aboriginal support staff at the camp expressed feeling torn between their personal grief and sense of cultural obligation in response to the death, and the need to maintain the positive emphasis of the circle process. A visit and campfire with Elders who had particular expertise in working with issues of grief brought a sense of relief and healing that would otherwise not have occurred. This emphasis on inviting those with cultural expertise to participate needs to be furthered.

*"I think maybe, if you're talking about where do we go with the circle, maybe that's having that grief component in there, where they're just dealing with it in their learning stuff - learning skills to be able to cope from people who know how to deliver this stuff. Bringing in those proper people."*

*"I've got a package designed especially for my people, how we deal with grief and we've transcribed that into dealing with a Catholic school in Bourke. It's something I'm happy to come and talk with you guys about and maybe train you because I just don't have the time anymore."*

## Cultural identity

The research findings provide substantial support for the association between a positive sense of cultural identity and the resilience and wellbeing of Aboriginal youth. In addition, the AGC girls, Aboriginal staff and community members emphasised the importance of learning about Aboriginal culture to support positive development, confidence and strength. *"If they don't know their language groups, to teach them that. They need to know where they come from, what areas they're from and that gives them more sense of who they are."*

Concern was expressed about the deleterious effects of cultural stereotyping within schools. *"We sometimes forget and stereotype our kids - oh well, they don't want to learn. That is a wrong assumption because kids - young black kids come to school with a lot of stuff - home language, home skills, because they have a special role right from birth. So they've got all those things when they come here."*

One Elder, whose regular contribution to the AGC was highly valued, discussed the importance of challenging negative stereotypes through providing cultural information in a way that shows its strengths.

*"If I tell them some of the great things that I've learnt about Aboriginal culture, women's role and that I just think that the girls here, it'll encourage them more to be - because they don't know much about it either and of course, what they're learning is not really all that encouraging.  Because the teachers don't know and the parents aren't telling them."*

Understanding and valuing Aboriginal culture was seen as central to overcoming the influence of racism.

*"You'll be out in the big wide world where you'll face racism still even though you don't - people tell you that there's no racism in Australia.  You'll experience it, you'll have to be fighting for everything you get and you'll be expecting your parents to support you. … I think that it's just that we need to talk more to young people about these things."*

Reasons for supporting young women's cultural identity development were very clearly related to both methods for doing so and the resulting benefits.

*"I'm more into things that will help them with their identity. … I'd like them to know more about what it means to be a woman and also what it means to be an Aboriginal woman. I'd like to introduce that by also getting them to know their mothers, aunties and grandmothers."*

*"I asked them did they know what tribal area their parents came from or what their parents ... and none of them answered.  But the next time that I went in the classroom with them I could hardly get in the door, they all wanted to tell me. So obviously they'd gone home and asked their parents."*

*"I think it helps them to know where they come from and who they are.  Because when we see nothing but - well, not always but a lot of negativity about - but there are so many great things that happened, that our Aboriginal people did in fighting for our human rights.  It is because those people fought that these young people have got what they've got today.  That should be respected anyway."*

This kind of cultural identity work has clearly been beneficial for the AGC participants. Community members, Aboriginal staff and AGC participants regarded the opportunity to explore their cultural identity as an essential and central component of an Aboriginal Girls Circle. The design and delivery of this content must be undertaken by Aboriginal educators who have the knowledge and respect of their local communities.

## Community involvement and ownership

There is clearly substantial interest from the community in the AGC and its development. Community members considered the purpose and future direction of the Aboriginal Girls Circle, with some areas being suggested for clarification or inclusion. Several indicated they would like to see the AGC's effectiveness extended to address the needs of girls displaying difficult behaviours. They also expressed a particular interest in having Elders and respected community members involved in strengthening the cultural component of the program.

The community forum discussed the need for schools to do more to acknowledge personal and cultural strengths and to ensure that culturally relevant support is available through adequate access to Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) was emphasised, along with the importance of engaging with families, especially through the development of Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs). Gathering this kind of information was advocated as a means to help link up home, school and community so as to provide more effective support for young people in need.

*Incorporating community involvement in schools through appropriate consultation with parents and the wider Aboriginal community was considered essential to understanding and meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.* "I think schools have got to be encouraged to use their school community, their relatives within, more to gain that knowledge." *The importance of understanding students' personal and cultural contexts was similarly a significant focus.* "We're talking about resilience, and you need to know that [contextual information about each student] to be able to build your programs."

The need for strong community connections was also highlighted by an Aboriginal teacher who expressed the hope that programs such as the AGC could help to build bonds between young women as a further resource for building community resilience. *"Community-wise, we need strong Aboriginal women, you know, that's the only way we're going to overcome domestic violence and alcohol related issues – if the women stand tall and strong together."*

The importance of direct interactions with local Elders and community members as a means of building cultural identity and self-esteem for the girls, and also for strengthening connections within the community, was explained as follows.

"They definitely need more role models and they need to see other Aboriginal people or students and hear what - you know, just role models that actually can - because there's not many in our communities, well not what you see on media for example. … Broaden that scope I guess for visits too, for guest speakers and guest people and there's not just one recognised Elder in Dubbo. It's got to be varied where you have lots of different people talk with the group, not use the same people all the time. … It gives kids a better outlook on the diversity of Aboriginal people and of kids who live and grown up in Dubbo but there's some other countries and areas of Australia or New South Wales. To share the diversity when they're learning about Aboriginal culture, the diversity within the tribal language groups."

Building community engagement through Aboriginal ownership and involvement is essential for the sustainability and success of initiatives in Aboriginal communities (Closing the Gap, 2013b). The need for a network of support that serves, enables and is owned by the community was a theme that recurred throughout the adult interviews and focus groups. The final quote is from an Aboriginal teacher who reflects on the potential for strengthening the initiative through shared community ownership.

"I think though at the moment we're still all doing our own thing. Like teachers will get together - all the Aboriginal teachers will get together and we'll have a conversation about that - about what they need, and then you know. … I think that needs to be more of an inter-weaving of agencies to make - to make sure that we're there together, that we're standing there together, I think. Because you get bits and pieces of help from everywhere it's hard as a teenage girl to mesh that all together.  I think it would work better if [it] was hatched as a community and allowed to grow. It would be stronger for our girls."

While the AGC has been designed to involve the girls in community projects, greater emphasis on engaging and involving local Aboriginal people and services has the potential to draw out strengths within the community and enhance the range of "linking up" support options available to Aboriginal girls, their families and their communities. In order for this to occur effective partnerships with local communities should be pursued through directly involving Aboriginal school staff in planning and delivering the AGC and through collaborating with AECG, key community members and organisations in its further development.

# CONCLUSION

The Aboriginal Girls' Circle (AGC) aims to develop social connection, participation and self-confidence amongst Aboriginal girls attending secondary schools as a basis for empowering Aboriginal women to be socially and emotionally resilient and active community citizens. This two stage research project was well received within the schools and communities, and revealed positive outcomes for resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity for the majority of girls who participated. The review of survey measures indicates a renewed understanding of Aboriginal mental health and wellbeing along with suggesting effective intervention components for enhancing resilience. Overall, the findings from the pilot study have been significant and promising. Building on the success of this project requires further engagement with community, particularly with regard to developing the cultural component of the program. Further directions for research and development of this project include fostering community partnerships, greater official recognition for AGC participants involved with service learning, addressing identified risk areas for Aboriginal youth, selection and mentoring of staff roles and possible expansion of the project to involve Aboriginal boy's groups. Consistent with the NAPCAN mission, this pilot research of the AGC has found success in promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal girls. Continuing to develop this work in collaboration with Aboriginal community organisations will further strengthen the communities and capacity of the girls within them.

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