

Respect for Culture - Social and Emotional Learning
with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth

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Respect for Culture - Social and Emotional Learning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander¹ Youth

In 1982 a young Aboriginal man came to stay with me (Dobia). At the request of a social worker friend I had agreed to provide the supported accommodation he required as part of his bail condition. My friend introduced us at the courthouse and then left us, both rather shy, to get acquainted.

Ray was polite, softly spoken, a neat and tidy house guest who was willing to do whatever he was asked. As an emerging clinical psychologist, I felt if I taught him the latest on interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills (Spivack & Shure, 1982) it might help Ray feel more in control of his behaviour so he could make better decisions. He seemed to appreciate my enthusiasm but didn't talk much. Still, I thought we were making progress. I remained concerned, however, that Ray slept late, only emerging from his room at lunchtime. I assumed he was depressed.

Then the police arrived. It turned out that the late sleeping was to compensate for spending nights out stealing cars. Ray's bail release had lasted for three days.

This story can be read from several distinct vantage points. Looking through a social-emotional learning (SEL) lens it seems apparent that, had skills for emotion regulation and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2015) been available to Ray, he might have been able to meet his bail conditions and avoid an unceremonious return to court. This position says that Ray had not learnt the skills necessary to make a constructive choice. A fairly simple assessment along these lines seemed good in theory, if not in practice.

In this instance, however, the magistrate took the view that Ray's behaviour indicated that he did not want to make a different choice, despite having had the opportunity. This kind

¹ There is no single descriptor that adequately represents the diversity of Indigenous people in Australia. This diversity spans languages, stories, customs, living context and more. In this chapter we use the collective designations 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' Australians while acknowledging the limitations of both terms.

of pragmatic assessment, widely held in the Australian community, views behaviour as up to the individual, who can simply choose to do the ‘right thing’ or not. It is justified via a ready logic: No-one made Ray go out at night and steal cars. It was his choice. He needed to take responsibility for his actions. He needed to face the consequences. His behaviour therefore meant he ‘chose’ to go back to gaol.

Despite their evident divergences of treatment these two rather different perspectives share some common assumptions. From both viewpoints, learning how to make responsible decisions is understood to require the ability to link actions to consequences, as well as a capacity to exercise choice over one’s actions (as, for example, highlighted in the work of Elias & Kress, 1994; Kusché & Greenberg, 1994). Both views also assume that the pathway for Ray to achieve responsible pro-social behaviour is through individual, independent effort and determination to change his thinking patterns.

Neither of these views, however, considers the role of culture and the complexities of connecting with a broken heritage in order to achieve a positive sense of cultural identity against a backdrop of denial, dispossession and denigration (Carlson, 2016). For Ray, who had been adopted into a non-Indigenous family as a young child and cut off from contact with his kin, it was forming relationships with Aboriginal Elders and learning about his Aboriginal cultural history that ultimately enabled him to find his way, and himself.

In this chapter we examine the crucial role of culture and identity in mediating self-awareness and social development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. We provide a cultural analysis of the reasons why standard approaches to SEL are inadequate for supporting social-emotional development amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and their communities. Drawing on our work in schools we consider implications for SEL from research into the ‘Indigenous adaptation’ of *KidsMatter*. We evaluate the usefulness and benefits of the Aboriginal Girls Circle initiative, discuss implications for

effective engagement and learning, and provide recommendations for undertaking ‘two-way’ SEL approaches with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. As non-Indigenous researchers working with Aboriginal colleagues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings we seek to open up a space for deep listening and respectful communication in order to effect genuine collaboration towards enhancing social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Closing the gap?

In 2005 the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey found that 24% of Aboriginal children between the ages of 4 and 17 years demonstrated signs of serious emotional or behavioural difficulties (Zubrick et. al, 2005). More recently, a national report on young people’s wellbeing (AIHW, 2011) indicated that 33% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 18–24 years reported high or very high levels of psychological distress, compared with 14% of non-Indigenous youth. On a range of indicators Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth were found to be at heightened risk of exposure to trauma, violence and abuse (AIHW, 2011). Persistent evidence of the weight of social and emotional difficulties affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people highlights an urgent need for effective, preventive efforts to reduce a disproportionate burden of distress, increase educational success, and improve life chances (AIHW, 2015; SCRGSP, 2014).

Underlying the statistics is an array of interlocking risk factors that are often chronic and pervasive (Zubrick et al., 2014). These include social disadvantage relating to educational, economic and employment opportunities and outcomes, as well as specific impacts due to colonisation and ongoing discrimination. Dispossession, loss of culture, racism, reduced access to appropriate services and resources and high rates of adverse life events have a cumulative effect on the stress felt by many Aboriginal people, contributing to

health, social and behavioural problems that in turn increase vulnerability to health and wellbeing risks (Carson Dunbar, Chenhall & Bailie, 2007; Kelly, Dudgeon, Graham & Glaskin, 2010).

Initiated in 2008, the 'Closing the Gap' agenda has focused Australian government policies on reducing health inequality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within a generation (COAG, 2008). The National Indigenous Reform Agreement outlined six measurable targets aimed at reducing inequality and improving health outcomes. Of these, three targets are informed by an early intervention emphasis on schooling outcomes: ensure that all Indigenous 4 year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within 5 years; halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade; halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment (COAG, 2008). In 2014 a further target to close the gap in school attendance by the end of 2018 was added to the list (SCRGSP, 2014), reinforcing the government's emphasis on education as a major building block for achieving social equity and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (COAG, 2012).

Although there is evidence of the direct benefits of social and emotional learning for enhancing both mental health and academic success (Dix, Slee, Lawson & Keeves, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) the Closing the Gap targets, up till now, have not incorporated an explicit emphasis on SEL. In pursuing its school attendance target, the government instead sought to enforce a consequence-driven model, with 'choices' and punishments prescribed by policy objectives rather than evidence (Biddle, 2014; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Intentionally or not, this coercive approach reinstates the project of assimilation in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are unquestioningly expected to adopt the standards of white Australian society in order to be included in what it has to offer (Beresford, 2012).

Under such an assimilationist agenda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are seen as deficient and in need of remediation. This view has historical roots in colonialist psychological research, which advanced the belief that differences in tested IQ were due to an innate racial deficit, and that differences in educational performance were due to a cultural deficit affecting cognitive development (Dudgeon, Rickwood, Garvey & Gridley, 2014). Despite new initiatives that seek to move beyond assimilation towards more socially and culturally inclusive approaches, deficit orientations in educational practice remain significant obstacles to achieving equity for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Price, 2012).

The lens of ‘whiteness’ through which educational goals and initiatives are (still) refracted has significant impacts not only on educational outcomes but on social-emotional wellbeing. Parbury (2011) highlighted “the vicious cycle of attitudes and expectations, experiences and practices that have affected and still affect the education of Aboriginal students in Australian schools” (p. 140). Figure 1 depicts the influence of deficit thinking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout the education system, showing the multiple feedback loops that entrench low expectations, low motivation, low self-efficacy and diminished self-worth, all of which may be expected to come with emotional and behavioural sequelae.

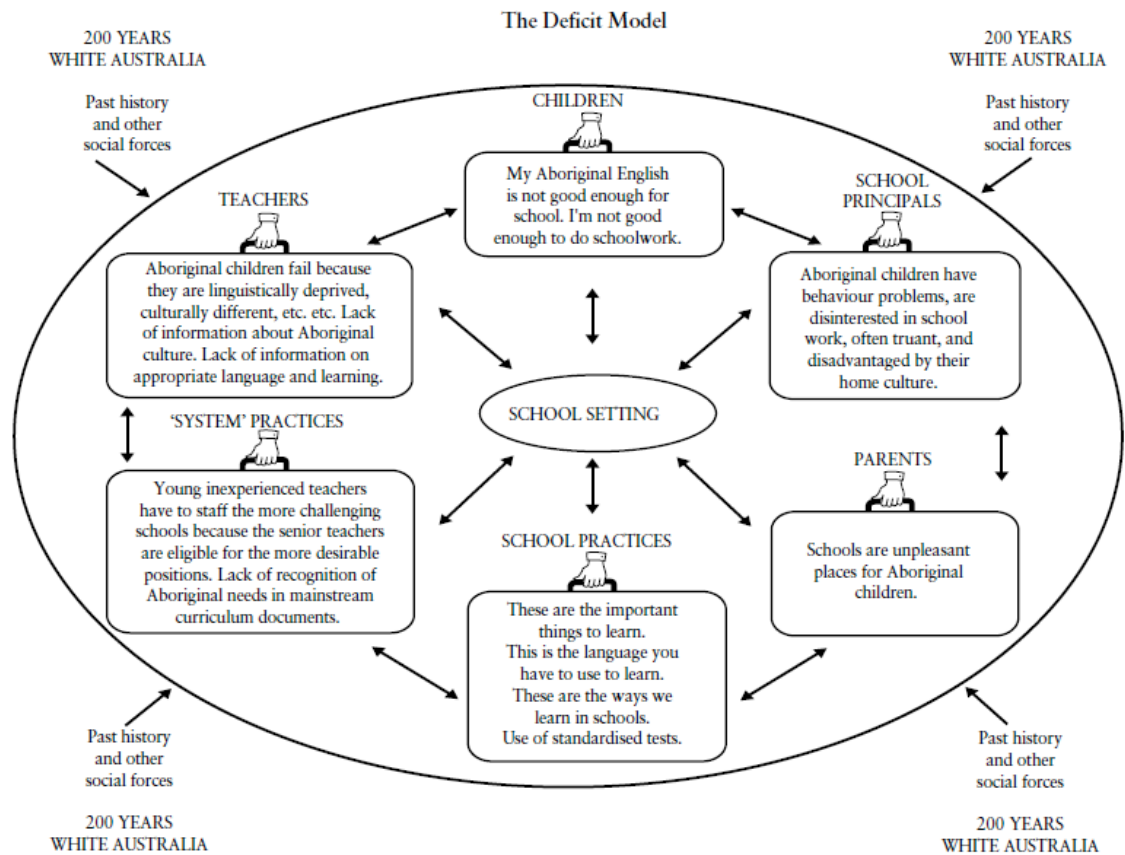


Figure 1: The deficit model, reproduced from Parbury (2011, p. 140).

What perpetuates this cycle is not the supposed cultural deficit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families, but what Rose (2012) terms the 'silent apartheid,' which is based on practitioners' ignorance of Aboriginal issues in education and in the wider society. This blind-spot is maintained by an absence of meaningful engagement between non-Indigenous educators and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities with whom they work. While the opportunity for students to develop social emotional skills would seem a useful way to counteract some of the effects of the deficit model, SEL programs based on explicit classroom teaching of formal skills that privilege non-Indigenous ways of thinking, feeling and behaving may reinforce rather than challenge a deficit lens (Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013).

Despite the Closing the Gap framework, there are worsening trends for the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Holland, 2015;

SCRGSP, 2014). Incarceration rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth have increased to 24 times the rate of non-Indigenous youth (AIHW, 2016; Amnesty International, 2015). Aboriginal communities and Elders have expressed alarm at a sharp increase in self-harm and youth suicide (Culture Is Life, 2015; DoHA, 2013).

In its 2015 report the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee called for a new priority focus on addressing mental health and suicide prevention. As part of this emphasis it advocated that school-based social and emotional programs could play an important role in addressing mental health risks, observing that “promoting social and emotional wellbeing and resilience should also contribute to improving school attendance and performance because it will support children to cope with bullying and racism” (Holland, 2015, p. 39). The evidence of increasing distress and inequity makes a concerted emphasis on prevention strategies imperative. However, though the argument for SEL as the ‘missing piece’ may seem compelling, it seems wise to follow Humphrey’s (2013) lead in critically appraising the state of our knowledge before charging in, as I (Dobia) attempted to do in 1982, with the latest ‘evidence-based’ cure-all.

Universalism vs cultural fit

Internationally, systematic evaluation of outcomes from school social-emotional learning programs has provided impressive evidence for its effectiveness in improving not only social-emotional skills but also attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance (Durlak et al, 2011). On this basis SEL programs are often assumed to be universally applicable. However, as the majority of ‘evidence-based’ social-emotional learning programs have been developed and tested in urban contexts in the US, any claim of universal effectiveness is at best premature. While a number of Australian SEL programs have been found to be effective for a general population, we have only identified one ‘evidence-based’ program available in

one region in Western Australia (Coffin, Larson & Cross, 2010) that has been rigorously developed from a cultural perspective for and with Aboriginal students.

In assuming universality of psychological norms and constructs, much of psychology is blind to its ethnocentric biases (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). In fact, as Hecht and Shin (2015) elaborate, there is substantial evidence of cultural differences in relation to social and emotional development. These differences may be seen in the structures, functions and processes through which culture manifests.

Of the many psychological constructs that are shaped by cultural assumptions, Hecht and Shin observe that “none [is] more basic than how the self is defined” (2015, p. 52). In contrast to individualist notions of self that prevail in Anglophone and other Eurocentric societies, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies culturally prescribed kinship structures support collectivist notions of self that are “inseparable from, and embedded within, family and community” (Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, & Kelly, 2014, p. 57). Connections to land, cultural heritage and language (where possible), also profoundly influence the sense of self for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Gee et al., 2014; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011), as does a sense of connection to the particular spiritual beliefs and lore that relate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to place, to the Ancestors, and to all living things. Stories, ritual and ceremony are the traditional vehicles for passing down such knowledge (Grieves, 2009; Poroch et al., 2009).

Hecht and Shin (2015) demonstrate that cultural differences in understandings of the “self” have implications for all five of the SEL competencies promoted by CASEL (2015). This is of particular importance when considering SEL programming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Emerging research on cultural identity and self-concept suggests that the “self” is both more complex and more nuanced than is implied by the seemingly simple distinction between collectivist and individualist identities (Dobia et al.,

2013; Kickett-Tucker et al., 2015; Usborne & Taylor, 2010). Cultural differences occur in relation to structural aspects of the self, as well as functional aspects, such as kinship rules governing social engagement, and processes that influence the ways that communication occurs.

Widely assumed developmental norms based on non-Indigenous cultural values and lifestyles are generally a poor fit for the socialisation experiences and challenges that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Carson et al., 2007; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011). Differences in social circumstances and cultural values are particularly evident in remote locations where Indigenous languages and traditional lifestyles have survived despite threats of territorial encroachment and social abandonment (Altman, 2010; Kral, 2010). In urban contexts, though less visible outwardly, cultural values and practices also remain important, against the impacts of institutional racism, negative social stereotypes and associated stressors (Priest, Mackean, Davis, Waters & Briggs, 2012).

Unfortunately, racism is also a major contributor to cultural identity (Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011). Whereas a strong positive sense of cultural identity is associated with wellbeing benefits (Dockery, 2011; Dobia et al., 2013; Priest, Mackean, Davis, Briggs & Waters, 2012), ongoing racism can perversely strengthen cultural identity but undermine wellbeing (Paradies & Cunningham, 2012) and academic engagement (Bodkin-Andrews, Denson & Bansel, 2013). Kickett-Tucker (2009) found that Aboriginal students' wellbeing related to where they 'fit' as an Aboriginal person, how they were accepted and treated by others, how they socially interacted with others and how they were engaged by others.

Yeatman (cited in Dobia & O'Rourke, 2011, p. 16) has highlighted the problems of miscommunication that transpire when non-Indigenous teachers work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students without taking account of cultural differences in the conventions governing social interaction. This contributes to discrepancies over behavioural

expectations and may quickly escalate into conflict and punitive measures. As noted previously, a lack of cultural understanding too often leads to inequitable or discriminatory practice towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools. If SEL is to contribute to improved practices and outcomes, it would seem that “there is much more work to be done in order to develop a framework for SEL that is appropriately culture-sensitive” (Humphrey, 2013, p. 23).

KidsMatter pilot - implications for closing the gap

In Australia the KidsMatter initiative has been successful in championing the inclusion of evidence-based SEL programs as part of a comprehensive approach to school-based mental health. Evidence from the KidsMatter pilot evaluation indicated widespread benefits for children’s mental health and resilience as well as academic gains (Slee et al., 2009; Dix, Slee, Lawson & Keeves, 2012). However, for schools catering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, implementation effectiveness during the pilot was limited due to a lack of cultural specificity (Dobia, 2010a, 2010b). This was particularly an issue in remote schools with student populations at or near 100% Aboriginal. All four remote schools in the pilot withdrew without completing the implementation.

To inform the ‘Indigenous adaptation’ of KidsMatter, research consultations were undertaken with eight pilot schools selected on the basis of having a population of 20% or more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Three of the eight schools also hosted more extensive field visits. The purpose was to assess the suitability of the KidsMatter pilot implementation resources and to investigate ways that KidsMatter could support schools to cater more effectively for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and communities.

Only one school was demonstrably successful in engaging Aboriginal students in SEL. The SEL program chosen used a circles framework to guide delivery, with core rules around

respect and inclusion. It was clearly seen to have particular strengths for addressing shyness, inclusion and responsible behaviours, as well as other skills. Program flexibility was essential to support engagement, as was the active involvement of Aboriginal facilitators. In observations and in interviews with students the benefits of this approach for social skills development and responsible behaviour were impressive.

The 'right to pass' was found to be especially valuable for overcoming 'shame' and encouraging student ownership. Shame is common in Aboriginal people's social interactions, often manifesting as shyness and inhibition about stepping forward (Harrison, 2008). In this context shame is not so much related to guilt as it is to an awareness of one's place as part of the collective. In this way it may be seen to reveal a heightened sensitivity to how one fits in with others. However, shame may also indicate a low sense of self-efficacy and heightened caution in social situations, consistent with the effects of bullying and racism.

The benefits for Aboriginal students of the program undertaken at this school were seen by Aboriginal staff as profound. "[It] is very inclusive. The kids are all involved – mutual respect, attentive listening, appreciations, no put-downs, right to pass." Having the right to pass was very effective for promoting inclusion. "They have a right to pass, but they have the opportunity to have a part of it. ... they see the other kids doing it and it comes back around to their turn again." This process of vicarious learning may be seen to be particularly effective due to its congruence with familiar cultural processes for negotiating social interactions and opportunities for expressing oneself in relation to the collective.

Taking a proactive stance to counteract racism was also evident at this school where events that valued Aboriginal culture were regularly incorporated and Aboriginal students were provided with opportunities to learn more about their heritage. The 'Little Yorgas' was a program developed by an Aboriginal staff member.

It's a program that we've put in place for the self-esteem side. You get them doing things they wouldn't particularly do and get their pride back into them. Show them cultural things. Get them out on excursions, show them what's what, be proud of who you are and stand up for what you believe in. ... The girls always ask me 'Auntie, When's the little Yorgas going to be on, when's the little Yorgas going to be on?'

For the girls who participated: "It makes us feel good because we get to know more about a long time ago and we want to keep our spirit up" (Dobia & O'Rourke, 2012, p.4)

A similar emphasis on keeping spirit up was prominent in remote schools where keeping language and culture intact was an overarching priority. They identified their goals as 'growing a strong spirit', and sought to find ways of supporting social-emotional development through strengthening traditional frameworks for kinship and respectful relationships. In these schools, where English is spoken as a second, third or fourth language, staff wanted to develop their own SEL programs, in language and with cultural strengths embedded (Dobia, 2010b).

Findings from the KidsMatter Indigenous adaptation project afforded the following recommendations for undertaking SEL with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: To promote cultural responsiveness SEL teaching must acknowledge and work with differences in communication and relationship styles. Sharing planning and co-facilitation of SEL between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous teachers is ideal for promoting culturally inclusive teaching and learning. Exploration of values associated with SEL approaches is necessary for developing culturally responsive practice (Dobia, 2010a). An interactive, egalitarian pedagogy, such as the Circles approach identified above, is likely to be effective for working across differences and seems well suited to the autonomous

communication styles of Aboriginal children (*cf.* Yeatman, in Dobia & O'Rourke, 2011, p. 16).

The Aboriginal Girls Circle – principles and processes for empowerment

The Aboriginal Girls Circle (AGC) is a SEL intervention targeted to increase social connection, participation and self confidence amongst Aboriginal girls attending secondary schools. It was developed with the support of the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) in response to a request from a regional high school in NSW for a program specifically for Aboriginal girls that would address significant behaviour issues, develop their confidence and improve their relationships within the school and community. The school's commitment to implementing the AGC, embodied in the tireless support of its deputy principal, was critical to the success of the pilot.

This school serves a population where socioeconomic disadvantage is common. Its 49% of Aboriginal students include a majority with affiliations to the immediately located Indigenous custodians; however, the town is a meeting point for people from numerous other traditional language groups, and tensions between groups are known to fuel conflict at times. While a concerted effort to revive the traditional language of the area is now under way, English has long been the dominant language of communication and learning here. The focus of our pilot research into the AGC was not only to evaluate the program but also, centrally, to investigate its cultural fit, with particular attention to exploring the nature of resilience and wellbeing in Aboriginal youth and their links to cultural identity (Dobia et al., 2013).

Using a strengths-based approach, the AGC combines Circle Solutions methodology (Roffey, 2014) with community-based project work in order to build girls' social-emotional skills and develop their sense of agency, leadership and community connection. The AGC includes the successful features of the program identified in the KidsMatter evaluation cited above and extends its focus. In common with other school-based social-emotional learning

programs, the Circle Solutions process provides structured support for skills development (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich & Gullotta, 2015). It is underpinned by a competency-based framework that aligns with, and extends, the CASEL model (Roffey, 2010; Roffey & McCarthy, 2013); however, its emphasis on flexible delivery, on building student engagement and ownership, and on eliciting student strengths differs from the standardised frameworks typical of most other SEL programs.

The Circle Solutions pedagogy of engagement places student voice and agency at the centre of social and emotional learning, and provides for flexibility of content dependent on age, need and context. The Circle Solutions framework employs specific structured processes for group interaction that are designed to meet a core set of governing principles articulated in the ASPIRE framework. ASPIRE stands for Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equality. The rationale, evidence and application for each of these principles are outlined below.

Agency. When students have agency they are empowered to make decisions on behalf of themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). This is not only about choice, but also about taking responsibility. Unless young Aboriginal women know they can take control of their own lives and make their own decisions they will be at the mercy of others who want to control their futures (Dudgeon, Lazaroo & Pickett, 2003). Evidence of the AGC girls' growing sense of agency was apparent in stakeholder reports of a new or renewed capacity and willingness to speak up, take on leadership roles, and resolve conflicts more effectively (Dobia et al, 2013).

Agency is cultivated in the AGC through a power-sharing pedagogy that invites the girls to be co-determiners of the processes and topics covered. For example, the girls work together to produce a set of guidelines to ensure they will be safe and responsible on the overnight camps. They decide together on the focus of their community projects, which they

are responsible for carrying out. Over the two years of the AGC pilot the girls' choice of topics included cultural awareness, anti-racism, friendship and fighting, and community health issues. These choices reflected the intersection between the development of a strong sense of cultural identity and the girls' growing capacity for personal and collective agency. Their work on these projects was supported by Elders from the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) who provided invaluable guidance in the planning and implementation of the girls' community engagement.

Safety. Critical to effective pedagogy in SEL is the need to ensure that Circles are safe places for students and teachers (Ecclestone, 2004). The promotion of safety is embedded in the Circles pedagogy in several ways. The 'right to pass' and stay silent has proved to be a critical aspect of the pedagogy. Many girls pass when it is their turn to speak when they first attend the Circle. This alleviates the risk of 'shame' and enables the girls to establish a sense of comfort and trust that promotes growing confidence.

Issues are addressed but specific incidents are not, and opportunities to share highly personal information are limited. The use of role play, stories, games and creative activities enables issues to be explored in an impersonal, indirect way. For example, the girls who chose 'friendship and fighting' as their project developed a play and dance to show alternative ways of handling conflict.

Cooperative learning is valuable across the curriculum but especially so in SEL (Johnson & Johnson, nd). Activities take place in pairs, small groups or encompass the whole Circle, providing opportunities for interaction that put developing skills into practice. Learning to work effectively with others increases a sense of safety and support. The pilot data showed that positive peer relationships were strongly related to resilience factors, including problem solving, self-efficacy, empathy, self awareness and cooperation/communication (Dobia et al, 2013).

Maintaining cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involves “enhanc[ing] rather than diminish[ing] individual and collective cultural identities” (Walker, Schultz, & Sonn, 2014, p. 201). For girls in the AGC pilot the sense of safety in the circle was apparent in a growing sense of openness and connection with one another. Being together as Aboriginal girls was particularly significant. “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” (Dobia et al., 2013, p. 13). The opportunity to come together in this way enabled the girls to build a positive sense of cultural identity and shared strength. The AGC Project Officer, herself a young Aboriginal woman, elaborated on the benefits: “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” (Dobia et al., 2013, p. 13).

Positivity: Resilience research has shown that a positive outlook is a protective factor (Werner, 2004). This is incorporated in the focus on strengths, solutions and the active generation of positive emotions. The AGC works with students to identify positive individual strengths and take pride in community strengths. One activity uses the Yarnabout Cards (Nungeena Aboriginal Women's Corporation) laid out in the middle of the Circle. These are a set of photographs portraying a wide spectrum of Australian life. Girls work in pairs or small groups and each chooses a picture that makes them feel proud. They talk with each other about why they chose this photo and what it means to them, identifying what they have in common. Girls not only look to discover their own character strengths but also identify those of others. The aim of Circle Solutions is not just to develop skills but to change perceptions.

The AGC encourages girls to look to the future. What would life be like if things

were going well? What would be happening if we were feeling good? So how do we take steps in that direction? Positive emotions promote an effective climate for learning. They not only enable students to focus but they also facilitate creativity and problem solving (Fredrickson, 2009).

Positive emotions include a sense of belonging, feeling valued, safe, comfortable, cared for, respected and loved. Positive emotions are also experienced in moments of exuberance, excitement and shared humour. Humour is a strong feature of Aboriginal culture, developed in resistance to colonisation and affirming of community bonds (Duncan, 2014). The playfulness, fun and positive focus of the AGC activities (Hromek & Roffey, 2009) were particularly highly valued by the girls. “You can go to AGC sad and you’ll leave it like really happy” (Dobia et al, 2013, p.8).

Inclusion. Feeling included and connected at school and in social relationships is one of the most important factors in resilience and psychological wellbeing (Roffey, 2011). 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). It is critical, however that this connectedness is inclusive and not exclusive. Inclusiveness is about ensuring that everyone is valued, not just those who can achieve academic targets (Roffey, 2013) or fit specific cultural norms.

The Circle Solutions approach actively promotes inclusion with the expectation that everyone works with everyone else. Energetic games mix everyone up. This breaks up cliques and helps people to get to know and develop new perspectives on one another. Pair activities focus on looking for things the participants have in common, building skills for collaboration and care. Although some activities take place in teams the emphasis is on inclusion and collaboration rather than competition.

Fostering inclusion through the AGC is particularly important for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander students because they are exposed to high rates of social exclusion. One indicator from NSW shows that in 2014 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were 6.8% of the total student population but accounted for 26% of suspensions (NSW DEC, 2014; NSW DOE, 2015). Schools which lack effective strategies for engaging Aboriginal parents and students and have inflexible disciplinary systems are more likely to ignore racially based discriminatory treatment that may manifest in institutional practices, teacher attitudes and student behaviour (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013). Our research into the AGC confirmed that Aboriginal students experienced more bullying and racism than non-Indigenous students (Dobia et al, 2013). For girls in the AGC, choosing to undertake their project on anti-racism promoted a sense of agency towards addressing racial injustice and enhanced their sense of cultural and community connectedness.

Cultivating connectedness has particular relevance for Aboriginal people, for whom values of reciprocity and interdependence are prominent dimensions of cultural identity and kinship. Restoring and reconnecting to culture, family, community and country is seen as a pathway to wellbeing (Kingsley, Townsend, Henderson-Wilson, & Bolam, 2010). The focus in the AGC on promoting inclusion is multi-dimensional: positive connection between the girls, connection with culture, connection with community and a greater sense of belonging at school.

Respect: Respect is also multi-dimensional. It applies to self-respect - how you think about yourself, who you are and who you are becoming, respect for others - not dismissing someone's opinion or making quick judgements; and respect for culture - where you are from, your community history, identity and protocols. Respect is incorporated in the two Circle guidelines: when one person is speaking everyone will listen; there are no put downs.

Although respect means listening to what others have to say, this can only happen when there are opportunities to speak. Young people who have little control in their lives

might shout to be heard and are then seen as disruptive. In the AGC everyone has a regular chance to speak. Using games, photographs, stories, discussion cards and role plays the girls have many opportunities to reflect on and discuss issues that concern them - such as friendship and feelings. 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. "You feel like you're a part of something; and like we all respect each other and respect others', like, ideas and stuff" (Dobia et al, 2013 p.13).

Respect incorporates both what is said to others and what is said about others. Students are given opportunities to acknowledge each other's efforts and strengths such as the "Guessing Good Game" where each person turns to the person on their left in the Circle and says 'I am guessing you are good at...' The student then has to acknowledge this strength or identify another, thus owning what they are good at. Personal positives are the opposite of put-downs. When put-downs are not allowed in Circles they are less likely to happen outside (McCarthy & Roffey, 2013). Respectful conversations about others demonstrate that you believe in the best of them, you accept and value who they are even if you don't always like their behaviour. In order to do this you need to appreciate diversity. We all are different but have much in common and we all have something to offer.

There is a strong focus in the AGC on learning to respect Aboriginal culture. This was not something that was forced but rather something that the girls themselves sought. When asked by the researchers what respect meant, the girls highlighted respect for Elders as both an important principle and an opportunity that they had learned and appreciated. The AGC's impact in cultivating an internalised sense of respect was highly valued by community Elders. "The program basically encourages them to think about respect...respect is one of the major components of the activities" (Elder quoted from Roffey, 2014).

Equality: The goal of the AGC is to empower students rather than control them (McCashen, 2005). Equality is embedded in the AGC processes, where all the participants, the facilitator and any other adults sit in a Circle together. Everyone participates in all the activities, adults and students alike. It is not a time for a teacher to 'stand and deliver'. The proceedings are structured in a way that is socratic rather than didactic, encouraging students to take responsibility. Everyone has the opportunity to have their turn and have a say. Although it might take a while for someone to contribute, each has a voice. This process also puts limitations on more dominant voices.

The principle of equality and the way it is facilitated is essential to the success of the AGC. The ability of the facilitator to sit back and be on the same level as everyone else is a critical skill for changing perceptions and behaviours. Changes were observed not only in the girls' behaviour but also in the staff. The Circle Solutions pedagogy enabled a shift in relationships that went well beyond the programmed sessions, as identified in the following comment from a key member of the school executive. "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" (Dobia et al, 2013, p.16). We see here how the Circles emphasis on equality has cultivated the understanding needed to achieve greater equity for Aboriginal students within the school.

Asked what she had learned in one of the first AGC camps, one girl said "I learned I had a voice". This is equally important for the girls and the adults involved. Plans for further development of the AGC will extend this emphasis by ensuring that schools embed processes for working in partnership with community and enabling Aboriginal staff to build skills and confidence for taking up leadership roles.

The Closing the Gap initiative was introduced with a goal of achieving health equality within a generation. It was based on a human rights approach that emphasises the social

justice principles of fairness, access and recognition of the distinctive rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Social justice is also an essential principle of the AGC embedded within the notion of equality. Circles aim to promote power-sharing and citizenship.

Respect for culture – towards two-way social-emotional learning

The research presented in this chapter supports a growing body of evidence that identifies the central importance of cultural identity for the social emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Dudgeon, Walker et al., 2014). In addition to the accounts and observations elaborated above, quantitative findings from the AGC pilot research identified strong correlations between cultural identity amongst Aboriginal youth and a range of resilience factors (Dobia et al., 2013). These findings clearly demonstrate the salience and protective benefits of Aboriginal constructions of self as opposed to individualistic notions of self-concept.

Working through the challenges of applying a cultural lens to SEL will ultimately “produce richer theory and practice” according to Hecht and Shin (2015, p. 62). To this end it is critical that those seeking to implement SEL with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples interrogate the cultural assumptions that underpin psychoeducational practices. Adopting a decolonising stance will help to ensure that ethnocentric bias and damaging deficit orientations are replaced with culturally sensitive approaches that affirm the experiences and distinctive cultural values of the particular communities whose needs are to be served (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015).

Despite the burden of disadvantage caused by colonisation and discrimination, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have shown great resilience in the effort to preserve their rich cultural heritage and values. However, the continuing dominance of Eurocentric ideologies and knowledge systems ensures that the ‘cultural interface’ between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing and being remains fraught, a site of contention and struggle (Nakata, 2007). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, negotiating a sense of identity between two cultures requires navigating this contested ground. The space and support provided within the AGC to explore a sense of cultural identity increased the girls' agency and their pride. The direct involvement of community Elders was essential to this outcome.

For working between cultures the flexible and open-ended methodology of Circle Solutions proved to be generative. Rather than prescribing fixed content, the Circle Solutions process provided a clear, engaging format and structure that guided the girls' exploration of key themes around relationships and resilience. It enabled the girls to own and lead processes that supported their sense of resilience and connectedness, encouraging them to take up issues that they found significant. The role of the school-based AGC Project Officer, an Aboriginal support worker, was essential for ensuring cultural relevance and maintaining connections with key community members and families. Equally vital for the AGC pilot was the ongoing involvement and support of the AECG and local community Elders.

Two-way learning seeks the respectful integration of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous knowledge through a commitment to culturally responsive teaching and effective community partnerships. In this approach "both cultures have much to learn from each other ... [within] ... a neutral, negotiated space in which neither presumes superiority or authoritarian dominance" (Purdie, Milgate & Bell, 2011, p. xx). Our findings suggest that a two-way approach to building resilience should support the development of effective social-emotional skills while addressing the key issues of cultural identity and anti-racism that have been identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as essential to growing up strong children and healing communities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, 2013).

SEL skills are related to context as well as to culture. Schools contexts differ in their commitment to supporting student wellbeing, the capacities of their staff and leadership teams, and the quality of engagement with their communities (Roffey, 2010). In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings considerable contextual differences exist between schools in urban, regional and remote settings, in schools where only English is spoken compared with schools where Aboriginal languages have been maintained, in schools with high concentrations of Indigenous students compared with schools where concentrations are low. Tailoring two-way learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in different kinds of school settings might bring to light SEL competencies that we have not previously thought of.

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