

# Closing the gap through secondary school education

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An action research project applying the principal of improving secondary education outcomes for Indigenous and marginalised rural secondary school students, as a way of boosting community employment and economic participation, ultimately leading to improved individual and community health, has been operating in western NSW for 4 years. In 2008 the Federal Department of Health and Aging commissioned an external evaluation of the Will and a Way program. This paper provides an overview of the findings of that study.

## Program overview and model

The program was established in 2005, funded by The Rowan Nicks Russell Drysdale Fellowship in Indigenous health and welfare. This led to 3 years of Commonwealth funding from the Departments of Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Health and Aging. The program represents a unique collaborative effort between local business, government departments, school communities, a university and students and their families.

The program operates by placing a dedicated officer into a secondary school to focus on identifying and assisting students at risk of leaving school prematurely, devoid of the skills and attitudes necessary for finding sustained lifelong employment. The program aims to keep students in school where possible or with the help of local businesses (over 80 are already assisting in some way) move them into employment as a second option.

The program was initiated in Dubbo and extended to Wellington, Warren and Nyngan high schools in the surrounding region. This equates to 4 coordinators being responsible for over 1,000 students. The various models developed by the different schools differ in terms of delivery, coordination and governance. This is as a result of the 4 philosophical elements underpinning the program model and the success of the programs hinge on them.

- That each school and community must be prepared to embrace, develop and design their program to meet the specific needs of their young people and the resources available to them.
- That the success of the program is absolutely contingent upon the abilities, passion and dedication of the coordinator
- That there be a blanket assumption that there is no such thing as a bad young person. All young people are innately good but are products of their environment.
- That using the tough love philosophy<sup>1</sup> is about respecting individuality and rights but in return expecting accountable responses and behaviours.

## Research method

The research was designed as a hybrid micro-ethnography and participatory action research. Micro-ethnography is the study of narrowly-defined cultural groupings<sup>2</sup> and this study concentrated on the sociology of meaning through close field observation of socio-cultural phenomena occurring amongst

the senior school students of a school. Typically, the ethnographer focused on their school community, selecting informants who were known to be participants in a broad range of activities in the community. Such informants lead to identification of other informants representative of the community, using chain sampling to obtain a saturation of informants in all empirical areas of investigation. Informants were interviewed multiple times, using information from previous informants to elicit clarification and deeper responses upon re-interview. This process intended to reveal common cultural understandings related to the phenomena under study. These subjective but collective understandings on a subject are often interpreted to be more significant than objective data<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted that ethnography may be approached as a descriptive rather than analytic endeavour.

Participatory action research has emerged in recent years as a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within communities and groups. Participatory action research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it<sup>4</sup>. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts, which make sense of it. Participatory action research is action that is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by the researcher and the participants. It aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped and tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry.

The study entailed the researcher embedding into the socio-cultural context of the students in school to observe, interview and participate with the respondents in order to discover the issues being faced by them from the social, familial, and academic perspectives in order to assist the students to develop skills and methods to overcome the barriers to successful transfer to the world of work.

Surveys were designed to gauge the effectiveness of the program by assessing the benefits to individuals, families and community. Extensive interviews were conducted using the surveys forms, the data from which was transcribed by an independent research assistant. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

## The findings

The key findings from this study provide important information about how rural communities need to plan for the future. As the baby boomers move into retirement communities are going to find themselves in the position of having more vacancies than employees to fill them moving work choice squarely onto employees. However, if we fail to provide the essential skills to assist all young people to join the workforce the ones who are left behind will find it increasingly difficult to compete for jobs, even in unskilled work environments which even now necessitate literacy, numeracy and computer literacy.

Simultaneously, society will be moving into a period where expendable income to support a welfare system will be compromised. Centrelink already suggests that unemployment benefits as they are currently structured will not exist within 10–15 years<sup>5</sup>.

## Identified value of the program

One hundred per cent of program participants, families, teachers and community representatives identified the program as being valuable. This value was established in different ways and can be reflected using the following concepts:

- individual value—student achievements and personal development
- educational value—outcomes and results
- social value—community and business involvement.
- health value—better health outcomes
- financial value

### Individual value—student achievements and personal development

In the case of this program, improving individual outcomes involves far more than providing tutorial assistance, career advice or employment opportunities. One co-ordinator reported conducting 52 home visits. 'This has reinforced to the students that I do what I say and that their circumstances matter and I want to make a difference. This also builds better relationships with the parents. They feel someone is on their side too'<sup>6</sup>. This type of activity goes beyond the school gate which is outside a teachers jurisdiction and often beyond the ability of parents who do not have the capacity to maintain sustained levels of responsibility and effective parenting.

'It was more than just help in the classroom. The coordinator did everything even getting me out of bed and getting me to school, TAFE and work sometimes. My self-esteem and confidence grew and I now do it for myself'<sup>7</sup>.

One coordinator spoke about how so much of what she does is related to the development of social skills and working with students on how to deal with their emotions. 'If we don't do this who will? So many young people end up in crisis before it is realised that they have not had that type of help and support in their lives'<sup>8</sup>.

Co-ordinators work within the school system with a high level of intensity to establish relationships based on trust and respect. For example students are encouraged to walk away from situations when they feel they are losing control and there is a risk of aggressive or unacceptable behaviour. There was criticism suggesting this was 'an easy out'<sup>9</sup>. However there was story after story of students changing their behaviours and attitudes. 'They have somewhere to go and someone to talk to who is not making a judgement'<sup>10</sup>. At these times the coordinator can discuss the consequences without the immediate threat of disciplinary action. It is reported that in all schools aggressive behaviour is reducing. Principals and year coordinators in all schools reported reductions in referrals to them for unacceptable or antisocial behaviour and reductions in suspension rates. 'Behavioural issues have reduced, attendance has improved, suspensions have gone down. Students are more prepared to ask for help. Their language is changing from never to maybe or I might'<sup>11</sup>.

'The school of tough love'<sup>12</sup> Djarragun, a High School in Cairns have teachers spend half an hour each day teaching values. One of the things they have found is that basic norms of social behaviour need to be reinforced constantly as many of the children just don't get it at home. They stated that many children from dysfunctional families have emotional problems that materialise between 13 and 15. For many students feeling safe and valued is a higher priority than learning. This evaluation reflects similar findings. 'We started to believe in ourselves because someone believed in us'<sup>13</sup>. It is documented that a major influence in the development of self-esteem is interaction at school with children who feel good about themselves generally having positive interactions at school'<sup>14</sup>.

Pittman<sup>15</sup> describes desirable youth outcomes including a sense of confidence (self worth and future mastery) character (responsibility and spirituality) connection (membership and belonging to society) and competence (social, civic and cultural competence, physical and emotional health and

employability). However she stresses that these personal outcomes can only be achieved through youth development rather than a problem prevention approach. The majority of students stated that their self-confidence and self worth had improved. Comments such as ' I used to be the shyest person ever now I am different' and ' yes, I have more confidence in myself, I feel more in control of my life' attest to this. Also attitudes are changing with students taking more responsibility for how they think and respond.

Interviews with parents supported these results. 'It turned my son around, he was a really bad kid at school and the program really helped him. He even made a speech to the school in Year 12'. It was so good seeing all the teachers at school shaking his hand and congratulating him. He is now working in Sydney and it is hard for him being away from home, but he still has their support and is sticking it out'<sup>16</sup>.

Some parents spoke of their involvement and that they learned so much more about the school, the program and how to work more effectively with their child. They identified the program as being the link they needed to the school. 'It really helped to have someone to talk to. I spoke to the coordinator more than the teachers or anyone at the school'

Another parent discussed how they had little to do with the school but through the program 'I met the school principal and realised he was very supportive'.

Parents are also grateful for the opportunity their children have in gaining a real work experience. Work that is paid and has the same expectations attached to it that existing employees have. 'He does not really know what he wants to do yet but at least he is learning how to work'.

The success of the program can be determined by the choices that the young people are making and this becomes a measure of change. Many of the students admitted that they did not intend to stay in school beyond Year 10 however now they have a different attitude towards school and how education can help them to find meaningful work. The following statements came from students who changed their minds.

'I love being at school now. I never thought education was important but this program shows me I can go a lot further'. And 'I want on my resume that I finished what I started'.

### **Educational value—outcomes and results**

To establish the **real** educational value of the program, consideration needs to be given to far more than how many students stay on and complete Year 12. In all discussions, with students, parents, teaching staff and program co-ordinators there were expressions of confidence that the program in combination with existing Department of Education is supporting students to achieve better educational outcomes. Students spoke about the difference the program made in their ability and desire to stay at school and to completing Years 10 and 12. The work placements gave them a more definite idea of what they wanted to do or did not want to do when they completed school.

In 1996 the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training noted the long-term effects on young lives of educational disadvantage. In its report *Truancy and Exclusion from School*<sup>17</sup> the committee pointed to results that showed early school leavers were 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> more times likely to be unemployed, 2 to 4 times more likely to be in low-skilled or unskilled jobs, 5 to 6 times more likely to be in neither the labour force or undertaking study and twice as likely to come from a low socio-economic background. Students who regularly miss school are at greatest risk of dropping-out of school early, becoming long-term unemployed, being homeless, having a life of poverty, being welfare dependent and being involved with the justice system.

The ability for schools to offer an alternative to unemployment for many students at risk of disengaging is facilitated through the unique nature of the program which offers an alternative to 'dropping out' for students when faced with difficult situations either from within the school or in their personal lives. 'As a principal, I believe it is important that school can be a place to work things out, learn how to be more resilient and confident and have a positive experience'<sup>18</sup>.

### **Social value—community and business involvement**

The evaluation has established that the community and local business have responded positively by being involved with the program. One of the driving factors that extended the program was the collective efforts of the school, local government and the business community. Governance was provided through the establishment of an advisory board called the Dubbo Business Partnership and created direct employment opportunities for the students. Forging strong links between the schools and their communities is often a major goal for the Department of Education<sup>19</sup>. Collaborations and collective efforts such as these build social value. This social value is evidenced in improved employment opportunities for young people and expanding the potential workforce for businesses faced with staff and skill shortages. It also provides a forum to change perceptions, expectations and attitudes within the community and raising community consciousness and commitment.

'It takes a village to raise a child'. The program has to be driven by a community expectation that 'we can make a difference'. The opportunity to develop a work ethic before the cycle of unemployment begins can address many social issues according to the business people involved in the program. It is believed that businesses need to capture the concept that their efforts will increase a 'locally grown' workforce. There also appears to be a raised level of social conscious among the businesses that are taking part in the program, giving a sense that they wish to part of a solution not complaining about the problem. 'Everybody is blaming the kids we need to look at the role we, as a community, are playing. It is our responsibility'.

### **Health value—better health outcomes**

Recent studies indicate large sections of Australia's youth are hugely vulnerable to risks of premature morbidity and mortality<sup>20</sup>. Indeed the leading issues, tobacco, alcohol and drug use, obesity, unsafe sex, physical inactivity, inadequate diet and occupational risk are frequently cited as youth specific health concerns. There is also increasing evidence that hypertension and high cholesterol are prevalent in youth today<sup>21</sup>. Other issues include violence, communicable disease, welfare dependence, sensory deprivation, crime and homelessness<sup>22</sup>. These continually mitigate against successful educational and employment outcomes for disadvantaged youth creating the next generation of disadvantaged adults.

The program has a strong health focus underpinning what, at face value, is an education program. With Department of Health and Aging funds in 2007, came responsibility to identify and concentrate on precursor health issues affecting the students.

Each program coordinator routinely discusses diet, substance use and misuse, mental health and wellbeing, violence, safe sex, hygiene and physical activity and any other topic that is raised. All coordinators have developed a health referral system that links students to accessible health services and often provide transport and ensure treatments and/or appointments are followed up. Coordinators work in collaboration with family to ensure issues are understood and relevant permissions are obtained. Coordinators deal with issues as diverse as skin lesions, tooth decay, hearing impairment, broken limbs, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, convulsions, head injuries, sexual assault, cuts, abrasions and broken teeth, depression, and self harm.

In Wellington this has expanded to a unique collaboration with the local Aboriginal Health Service (WACHS) with weekly health checks and health talks as part of the overall program. WACHS staff undertake the screening and deliver the talks at the school. Chief findings of the health checks have been hearing impairment and dental caries. All coordinators report instances of “concealed homelessness”. This occurs when the student moves between households but does not have a permanent place of residence where they are cared for by a responsible adult. They often do not have their own bed, clothes storage or even clothing.

Since the inception of the program there have been solid indications of improved and changed health practices by individuals. The programs report reduced incidence of cigarette and alcohol consumption, unsafe sex practices, violence cessation and substance use. However, these are achieved on a case-by-case basis as a result of a trusting relationship between student and coordinator and the subtle use of opportunity and while they represent just 1% of students this is significant given that youth generally take up poor health choices at this stage.

### Financial value

The personal costs of educational and employment disenfranchisement include personal, social, economic and educational disadvantage leading to reduced fulfilment and quality of life. It is this background that the participant students and families of the program endure. Regardless of who or what agency eventually steps in to assist, we all pay the considerable costs—the burden of death and disability for victim, family and community; lost productivity, assistance from charities and the cyclic nature of welfarism, helplessness and dependence. However the financial costs are prohibitive.

It is the chronically under and unemployed who are most susceptible to the list of risk factors associated with the greatest burden of death and disability<sup>23</sup> and the most at risk of becoming welfare dependent and involved in criminal activity.

In 2006 the Minister for the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations declared that each individual who remains unemployed from the age of 15 to 55 years of age, taking into consideration all direct and indirect costs associated with unemployment and welfare benefits, \$4 million<sup>24</sup>.

Apps, Rees & Wood<sup>25</sup> contend that expenses for servicing chronic disease and disability are rising and will continue to do so regardless of technological advances. In 2004 the NSW Health Chief Officer’s report<sup>26</sup> determined the average financial cost of an intractable chronic illness to lie between \$3 and \$7 million dollars per case. Similar costs are calculated for chronic mental ill health,<sup>27</sup> with an estimate of \$5 million for the management of just one client.

The NSW Department of Correctional Services<sup>28</sup> estimates that servicing up to 3 repeated incarcerations of less than 6 months could reasonably cost between \$5 and \$7.5 million dollars. These estimates take into consideration police, court and legal, detention and parole costs.

Thus the cost in taxpayer dollars to sustain just one unemployed disaffected person, considering only the cost associated with health and legal issues, could be as much as \$19.5 to \$21.5 million dollars over 40 years and that does not take into consideration the loss to industry and national productivity that non-participation in the workforce entails.

The program has been reported by students and parents to be the deciding factor in changing the life trajectories of thirty nine young people. Thirty two of these have maintained their new found positive course for over 18 months. Using the calculations above the estimated costs of not rescuing these students could be estimated as a saving of \$640 million over the next forty years. With each school costing \$110,000 per year to operate, investing relatively modest amounts into keeping students at

school, making the educational experience relevant and valuable for them and assisting them to negotiate pathways into a sustainable workforce position, has to be a good investment; one that has the potential to save millions of dollars through preventing welfare cycles, chronic illness and disability, crime and premature death.

## Recommendations

- Funding is continued and increased to support further program expansion and that it remains under a separate independent auspicing body external from government departments and from individual schools.
- If the program is to be expanded to other schools that strong consideration be given to Coonamble, Brewarrina, Walgett and Broken Hill as these towns, like Wellington have been identified in the 10 most disadvantaged communities in NSW.
- That the program incorporates Years 8 and 9 where a high risk of disengagement is identified.
- Where possible expand Health Service involvement with the program to strengthen links between health and education.
- That a health screening program be conducted at least once during a student's secondary education.
- Explore ways to address the 'concealed' homelessness that is undermining student's progress in school.
- Undertake a national study to ascertain the exact costs of welfare dependence and associated dysfunction.

## Presenter

**Louise Lawler** is an academic nurse who for the past 30 years has worked to improve Indigenous health, education and welfare. Her most recent work is conducted in secondary schools where she and a group of dedicated professionals attempt to retain, motivate and engage disaffected students. She believes that through education and access to a sustainable future the health disparities of rural, remote and Indigenous Australia can be overcome.

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