



## Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

### Promoting Positive Self-Identity in Aboriginal Students: Case Studies of Clontarf Academy Youth Living A Rural Community

Rhonda Oliver and Mike Exell

*Curtin University*

#### Abstract

Aboriginal school students, especially those living in rural and remote areas, achieve below the national standard in oral language, literacy and numeracy. On leaving school their unemployment rate is three times that of non-Aboriginal people. At the same time academic and career success is closely tied to one's self-identity. The aim of the research reported here, is twofold: firstly, within the context of living in a Western Australian rural community, to explore which factors contribute to a positive self-identity amongst Aboriginal youth; and secondly, to examine how this relates to their educational experience and particularly their transition into the workplace. The participants were five Aboriginal males aged between 16 and 18 years at the commencement of the study who attended the local high school and were supported by Clontarf Academy staff located at this school. Data were collected over an 18 month period using observation, informal and formal interviews. This was done from an 'inside' perspective as all the participants were well-known to the researchers, with one having a long term mentoring relationship with them. This rich and thick data was used to formulate in-depth, ethnographic case studies which were further interrogated to identify themes to address the research aims. The findings show that 'family' plays a key role in the maintenance of both language and culture, that style of communication continues to be a strong marker of Aboriginality, and being located in the rural area and particularly as part of the Academy served to support and sustain strong Aboriginal self-identities.

**Key words:** Aboriginal self-identity; Aboriginal education; Transition to the workplace; Clontarf Academy

#### Introduction

Aboriginal people in Australia have one of the world's longest and most continuous civilizations. Although there is considerable diversity, many share strong cultural ties embedded in and passed on through oral traditions. In addition, a high proportion of individuals are multilingual and speak a range of languages, creoles and/or dialects (Eades, 2013). Despite all this, as a cultural group they are also one of the most disadvantaged people in the world (Warburton & Chambers, 2007). In general they have a low socio-economic status, with their unemployment rate three times that of non-Aboriginal people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Also when compared to non-

Aboriginal people on average they die younger and suffer higher levels of ill health (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

From an educational perspective, Aboriginal school students, especially those living in rural and remote areas, achieve below the national standard in oral language, literacy and numeracy (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012). A variety of reasons have been proffered for this situation including a lack of culturally appropriate curricula, and teaching practices and assessment protocols that do not take account of Aboriginal ways of learning nor their linguistic diversity (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015; Hall, 2018; Hardy, 2013; Maxwell, Lowe & Slater, 2018; Pirbhai-Illlich, 2010; Shay & Wickes, 2017; Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011). For instance, Oliver, Rochecouste, Vanderford and Grote (2011) reported on teachers' lack of awareness about the language background of Aboriginal students, especially those educators who have not received appropriate professional development, and the consequence this has for their students in terms of how they are taught and then assessed. Malcolm (2001) describes how deficit linguistic views are pervasive not only in schools, but in society more generally and he goes on to describe how this has an ongoing negative impact on Aboriginal students.

The lower levels of achievement of Aboriginal students may well be a consequence of the issues described above. This is further complicated by the variety of health problems experienced by Aboriginal students (especially high rates of otitis media), language and speech development difficulties, and a cultural mismatch between the expectations of schools and home (e.g., family members, including children, are expected to attend funerals meaning that students may be away from school sometimes for long periods of time). Not surprisingly these factors not only affect educational outcomes, but the general wellbeing of Aboriginal students.

An important component of wellbeing is an individual's self-esteem and crucial to this is self-identity (Umana-Taylor & Fine, 2004). Furthermore, and of particular relevance to the current study, self-identity is closely tied to both academic and career success (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011; Purdie et al, 2000; Shay & Wickes, 2017). Developing positive self-identity as a means for promoting wellbeing amongst Aboriginal students is part of the mission of the Clontarf Academy – a program that supported all the participants in the current study when they attended high school.

There is a small, but growing body of research on Australian Aboriginal peoples' self-identity, but as Kickett-Tucker (2009) notes, most of the studies have focused on adults and fewer studies have been conducted with children and youth. Some exceptions exist, including those studies by Purdie and her colleagues (e.g., Purdie et al, 2000; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004) that explored the relationship between self-identity and success at schools. Kickett-Tucker (2009) also undertook research about young Aboriginal students' perception of self-identity, specifically in relation to sport. Using interviews, both individual (n=35) and focus group (120) she then analysed the resultant transcripts and identified common themes. According to information from her participants self-identity is about '*knowledge of who you are, your background, family and friends*' (Kickett-Tucker, 2009, p.129).

It is the purpose of the study reported here, to explore, in-depth, those factors that contribute to self-identity formation in Aboriginal youth and to examine how this can contribute their educational experience and especially to their transition into the workplace. This is done within the context of living in a Western Australian rural community. Rural experience is a particular focus because, although research has shown that those Aboriginal children and youth living outside urban areas do less well academically, they are less at risk in terms of their wellbeing (Zubrick et al, 2004). As a socio-cultural phenomenon and one that is both diverse and rapidly

changing (Liepins, 2000) rurality may potentially be a significant factor for sustaining Aboriginal language and culture and thus for positively impacting upon self-identity formation.

Therefore this research addresses the following two research questions:

- 1) Within the context of living in a rural community, which factors contribute to self-identity formation in Aboriginal youth?
- 2) How does Aboriginal self-identity contribute to successful transition into the workplace?

## **Method**

This research is undertaken within an interpretive paradigm, is qualitative in design and uses ethnographic case studies as the primary methodology and source of data. The details of how this was achieved are described next.

### **Participants**

The participants were five Aboriginal males who had attended a local high school in a large rural town located several hundred kilometres from the capital city. To maintain the anonymity of the participants we use the name *Eastland Town* for this town and similar directional pseudonyms for other towns and regions mentioned by the participants. All the participants had also been part of a Clontarf Academy program that existed within, but had some level of autonomy from this school. They were aged between 16 and 17 years at the commencement of the study and all were 18 years old and no longer at the school by the time the case studies were compiled. All had successfully graduated from high school and had gone on to employment, making them a unique cohort amongst young Aboriginal adults (as noted previously *few graduate from high school* [Pilbhai- Illich, 2010,p. 260] and, in comparison to non-Aboriginal people, many more are unemployed after leaving school).

All five participants lived in Eastland Town for the entire duration of the project and continued to live and work in that town post high school graduation. However, not all originated from there. Only two were born in or near Eastland Town and the other three came from elsewhere and had moved there to be with immediate or extended family.

The participants were well known to both authors, particularly the second author because of his role as mentor and operations officer with the Clontarf Academy and he frequently shared information about the participants with the first author. She had also met and talked to each at length on a number of occasions during her regular visits to Eastland Town.

As members of the Academy the participants represent a unique Aboriginal cohort because it is a program that requires students to 'opt in'. By signing up to be part of this program they had agreed to engage and behave well in school, maintain an 80% attendance rate, and to participate fully in those activities organized by staff from the Academy – requirements all the participants fulfilled throughout the duration of the project. As is the usual practice, the extracurricular activities provided by the Academy staff for the participants included such things as sporting events, off campus leadership and skill development camps, and workplace experiences (e.g., visits with potential employers, making presentations to various organizations, developing their curriculum vitae and undertaking training such as first aid courses). These activities reflect the five pillars of the Clontarf Academy's mission statement, namely promoting education, employment, leadership, wellbeing and sport amongst Aboriginal youth so that they may participate meaningfully in society. Note: Clontarf supports mostly male youth – there are fewer

female programs within the academy. This is an issue that has received scrutiny from the media in recent times.

### **Procedure**

As a first step ethical permission was sought and gained from both Curtin University and from the relevant Director and Regional Manager of the particular Clontarf Academy from where the participants had been drawn. Then, following appropriate ethical procedures, first permission was sought and gained from each of the participants (and appropriate family members) who were clearly informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The data were collected in ways conforming to the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) statements about undertaking Indigenous research. This occurred over an 18 month period using observation and ongoing and informal (i.e., yarning) interviews. This was done from an 'inside' perspective because of the long term relationship between the participants and the second author which allowed him access to ongoing narrative sources (Warburton & Chambers, 2007). As part of this process he kept brief anecdotal records of his interactions and observations. In the final stage more formal and individual interviews were conducted to clarify final details for the development of the case studies. These interviews were transcribed and then member checked by the individuals concerned to ensure the veracity of their content.

Together this rich and thick data was used to formulate in-depth, ethnographic case studies. These case studies were provided to each of the participants and were used with their informed consent. Finally, these case studies were further interrogated to address our research aims. Although we use the words 'case studies', like Kickett (in Forrest & Johnston, 2017, p.23) we were really focused on *tell(ing) their story* because it is each participant's story rather than ours to tell. We also did this acknowledging that only Aboriginal people should be entitled to define (their) Aboriginal identity (Langford, 1983). It is also why we used the participants' voices wherever possible in our findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis undertaken in this study was qualitative in nature (Clark, 2007). Following Kickett-Tucker (2008) the transcripts (and in this case, also our field notes) were read multiple times and reflected upon by both researchers independently and together. There were ongoing discussions about the data and annotations were made about these reflections from which *common themes were extracted* which were then re-examined through the process of re-reading and reflection (Kickett-Tucker, 2008, p.123). Thus the emerging themes were examined by both researchers in an iterative process through a method of constant comparison (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001).

## **Findings**

The findings show that all the participants strongly identified as Aboriginal. Their self-identity appears to have been constructed based on input from their families and *their mob*, because of a strong connection to where their families come from, the language they speak at home and through the enactment of cultural practices. The type of communication they use, especially what the participants called *language* or *lingo* (i.e., traditional language and also their use of Aboriginal English [AE]), was a particularly strong marker of their Aboriginality. It also seemed to heighten their language awareness, supporting their ability to code-switch as required by the

situation. For these participants it also appears that the development of their positive Aboriginal self-identities were strongly supported by their participation in the Clontarf Academy program. In terms of their location in a large but quite isolated rural town, this presented something of a double edged sword – on the one hand it appears to have sustained their strong Aboriginal identities because of increased opportunities for cultural activities, however, it also meant that any racism directed towards them was more overt and less anonymous. To survive and prosper at school and then to make a successful transition to the workplace, the participants developed a level of resilience and also drew upon the skills they developed as part of the Clontarf program. The results are presented and discussed, in turn, and in relation to the relevant literature.

### **Identifying as an Aboriginal Person**

Having a strong identity as an Aboriginal person can, potentially, contribute to an overall positive self-identity. However, discussions about Aboriginal identity in Australia are often tentative, particularly when undertaken by non-Aboriginal people (as is the case in the current study) and with acknowledgement of the considerable contextual fluidity and individual diversity that exists (Paradies, 2006). In previous research some individuals even expressed doubts about being *real* Aboriginal people (Purdie et al 2000). Yet, there was nothing tentative about the sentiments expressed by our participants. All consistently, clearly, and often with pride self-identified as being Aboriginal. As one participant described it: *I'm proud to be a black fella*. However, another was more pragmatic. *You're always going to be able to say you're Indigenous, you don't have a choice. It's what you're born with*. Similar to Kickett-Tucker (2008, p. 131) who found for her participants being Aboriginal meant a connection to *something bigger than themselves*, the participants in this study intimated the sense of security they felt being able to identify as Aboriginal, *I'm really proud to be a black fella, because it's a unique culture, there's a really strong connection with our land and our beliefs*.

Previous research has indicated that Aboriginal identity is situated around skin colour and physicality (Boladeras, 2002 in Paradies; Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011). One participant in the current study described how it was easier to fit into school and to Eastland Town more generally *if you are light skinned like I am*. It was also clear from how they described themselves that the colour of their skin was a strong part of their identity. For instance, when yarning to Author 2 all commonly referred to themselves colloquially as *black fellas* even *blackies*, rather than using the more formal terms of being an Aboriginal person or being Indigenous. During their informal yarning with Author 2 they also often made comment about their own or another person's skin colour (e.g., *I'm Aboriginal but I look white*).

At the same time, for the participants their Aboriginality was more than just about their physical appearance and the colour of their skin. Who they are culturally was strongly associated with where they came from. To illustrate this, one of the first things the participants told Author 2 as they established their different relationships with him was about where they were born. For the two local Eastland Town participants they said such things as: *I'm from Eastland Town, born and bred; I grew up in Eastland Town. Dad was born here as well*. More tellingly, and reflecting Aboriginal spiritual connection to land another described it this way: *I'm a strong believer this is my country*. For those not born in the town they would say things such as *Mum was born in Central Town – that's my country too sort of thing; I grew up in Northland Town, but my parents aren't from there. My mum was born in a town about two hours out of the Perth. And they are Noongars and Dad was born in the north region and they are Yamatji. So there's that way and then through my mum's dad, they're up next to the far north region, which is where he says we come from, and that's another area*.



In addition, the construction of their Aboriginal identity was consolidated through their close ties with particular Aboriginal cultural groups, or as they described it - *who their mob are*. This was expressed using labels reflecting different geographic homelands (e.g., Wongi, Noongar, Yamitji) which, as one participant indicated, represents the *different cultures I could identify myself as*. As shown above he described himself as being Noongar/Yamitji, whereas other participants identified themselves as combinations of Wongi, Ngadju, Noongar and Yamatji. As Clark (2007) explains, these labels provide strong affirmation of Aboriginality and helps them to create and to maintain their self-identity. Furthermore, belonging to an identified Aboriginal group or being *around my mob* gives individuals the type of security previously described (as per Kickett-Tucker, 2009), or as another participant suggested it meant he didn't *feel like an outcast*.

Whilst they all closely identified as belonging to particular mobs (based on homelands), it was also apparent during the data collection that regardless of who their mob were and whether or not they were born in Eastland Town, they also all showed strong alignment to the town, for instance saying: *I always felt connected to Eastland Town; I identify myself (as being) from Eastland Town*. Each participant provided information about how they had family in the town, had gone to school in the town, played sport and got to know people who lived there: *It was fun growing up near the bush, thinking back on it. Eastland Town was good, had footy and going out so that was good*. They expressed these sentiments in spite of the fact that most had spent time living elsewhere, sometimes for extended periods of time: *I did year 5 and year 6 in Far East Town (where mum was from). Moving there was nothing new because mum was constantly going there and I already had met half my family there because it is a small town*. For another participant, living elsewhere had occurred because he had *got caught by the cops few times for breaking and entering, smoking dope and that sort of thing*, so his family had sent him to stay with a relative in the southwest region to *keep out of trouble... was my choice*. Others described how they had spent extended time visiting other towns where family live, especially their grandparents. One participant contrasted this with his current circumstances - *I would not go back (to those towns) that much because Nan and Pop passed away... when they were still alive I went back a lot*.

For the participants in this study their Aboriginality was most often described in positive ways and appeared to make an important and affirming contribution to their overall self-identity. This may reflect their sense of belonging to a particular cultural group and to certain locations. It also appeared to be linked to what they *could do* and also what they *can achieve*. In fact, one participant indicated how he thought it was important to take advantage of the support that was available, such as through the opportunities provided by Clontarf, to *show white fellas what we can do*. Furthermore, he was quite clear that there was a lot of support available to Aboriginal people in Eastland Town, and through the Academy in particular - *they are throwing it (support) out there, we had heaps of support around school, so you can't say you don't have support*.

### **Cultural Alignment and the Development of a Positive Aboriginal Self-Identity**

From the participants' comments it was apparent that not only did they have a strong alignment with their Aboriginal culture, but also through their words and actions, such as taking Author 2 and his family *out bush* and by demonstrating and talking about different cultural practices to him, they felt considerable pride in it. When reflecting on what culture meant to him, one participant described it in the following way: *Being able to have a background that's very old and ancient but is still, in some parts, lived today. I feel connected to that in a sense*. Further, for the participants in this study it appeared that their cultural background contributed in important ways to who they are and to their positive construction of self-identity. As one participant said: *Makes me really proud to still learn that stuff, it's fun. It's something I want to teach my kids one day. It's part of my culture and I want to keep that alive*. One of the greatest benefits of this

cultural alignment, as Forrest and Johnson (2017) indicate, is the contribution it makes to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

When talking about cultural practices nearly all the participants connected them to traditional activities such as *going out bush; learning cultural stuff; going to the different cultural places; and learning how to hunt emu, go out to the spinifex area out that way (gestured east with his hands), learn to track them*. When demonstrating cultural practices to Author 2 it also involved such things as showing him how to throw a spear and a boomerang, how to do dot paintings and showing him the proper way to eat kangaroo. Yet there were also times when he engaged with them in more contemporary cultural activities, such as doing braiding (albeit in traditional Aboriginal colours), and participating in Indigenous football carnivals. One of the participants reflected on the changes that have occurred to Aboriginal culture:

*I used to be scared when mum used to tell us stories, it was pretty much lore business... and I was like – nah stuff that. That (lore) is still living strong on mum's side, but on dad's side, the great grandfather put a stop to it saying no more.*

Another talked about how things have changed as different mobs have come together: *There are people who are born here, who have parents who are Noongar and Yamatji, but when they come together and have a kid, then that kid has all that culture in them and they take on that heritage.*

Regardless of how the participants portrayed their culture, one finding to emerge was that being part of the Clontarf Academy supported the participants' positive attributions about being Aboriginal. This may have occurred because the program provides a safe place at school where Aboriginal culture is explicitly supported (e.g., the dedicated Academy room for members of the program and positive Indigenous imagery displayed in the room). The participants' descriptions of the program suggested that they found it to be something within their education that accepted (and even promoted) *their lived experiences... inviting their funds of knowledge* (Pirbhai-Illlich, 2010, p.264). That is, the Academy provided a degree of security for the participants because as a collective group they were able to share cultural participation. Some of the cultural activities organized through the Academy are similar to those described by the participants in Kickett-Tucker's (2009) study– including going bush, hunting, preparing and consuming traditional foods such as kangaroo meat, goanna, emu and damper, listening to traditional music and stories, doing traditional art and dance. The Academy also provided opportunities for the participants to demonstrate and to celebrate the culture and their educational outcomes to the wider school community, further reinforcing the positive development of their self-identity (Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011). In addition, and possibly through these experiences and support, all seemed to have acquired a high level of personal resilience. For instance, when one participant reflected on there being an element of racism at the local high school describing how some boys ... *say racist stuff, call you black this, black that*, he went on to say: *It didn't matter to me, like it's good to be a black fella*. It is possible that the 'opt in' rule of the Academy meant that as self-selecting group, one with members wanting to *show what they can do*, they were already inclined in this way. Even so, it did seem that the Academy was highly valued – as one of the participants indicated, *they understand black fellas*.

### **Communication, Self-identity and Language Awareness**

The participants in this study mostly spoke Aboriginal English (AE) - a particular dialect of English widely spoken by Australian Aboriginal people as their lingua franca (Eades, 2013; Malcolm, 2001; Oliver et al, 2011), especially to each other, such as during the Academy activities, and to Author 2. Although AE varies in systematic ways from Standard Australian English (SAE) (Malcolm, 2001), the participants could also all speak SAE when required – such as when addressing someone in

the workplace, when doing a formal presentation as part of a Clontarf event and when interacting with unfamiliar non-Aboriginal people.

While only one of the participants was able to speak a traditional language quite well, the remaining four others had sufficient familiarity to use some words and phrases and to understand their family's traditional language when spoken. As one participant indicated: *They speak a lot of language up in north-east region. I learned it. There's three languages up there, but they mainly only speak one. I know how to speak it, but don't speak it too much.* Another described how he learnt his traditional language: *Nanna mostly taught me, just by being around her while she was talking it got me to catch on.*

What was very clear from the long term observation of the interactions between and with these participants was that they used AE and traditional languages – what the participants described as *language* or *lingo* - to mark their Aboriginal identity (Eades, 2013; Kickett-Tucker, 2009). This is not unusual amongst Aboriginal people because as previous research has shown the use AE and traditional language allows the speaker to connect language with culture. Furthermore, the use of *language* is associated with positive wellbeing of those who speak it (Zubrick et al., 2004) and of relevance to the research objectives in this study, supports the creation of a positive self-identity (Eades, 2013). As one participant put it: *I'm proud knowing it.* Another participant described it this way: *I think it's important to keep the language alive because it's our language, if you grow up and don't know it, then that's a part of your culture you can't have.* This was also illustrated by another participant who told Author 2 how *the black fellas that grew up (only) in Eastland Town don't have a close connection (to culture) because they don't speak language. They speak more English.*

Whether it was because of their language background or the demands placed on them to present in SAE, especially as part of the Clontarf program, each participant seemed to possess a heightened level of language awareness. They were able to reflect on language (e.g., *Talking to white fellas you have to talk proper English to them, otherwise they don't understand you*) and in doing so demonstrated a considerable level of metalinguistic awareness (i.e., thinking and talking about language at a metacognitive level). For example, one participant explained different language varieties as follows:

*when I would use the [far east region] slang here, the blackies [here] would be like "what does that mean?" and it is the exact same when I go back over [there]. ... You got yorgas here, but over there they've got weeners. They say corkas, which means cute, that's just weird. As soon as they say that I'm just thinking of the little cork in the wine bottle. The Eastland Town equivalent would be lovely I guess, like lovely thing (often said as lubbly sing). We say nyorn or nardoo, they say nanka.*

This language awareness was also demonstrated in the way the participants could codeswitch (Malcolm, 2001), that is move between their different dialects and languages according to their audience and situation (e.g., *I speak to my family a lot different to my mates... when I go home I talk how I wanna talk. I mix language in when I talk to my family*). Even as part of this project the participants demonstrated their ability to adapt for audience: when meeting Author 1 for the first time one of the participants formally introduced himself *Hello, my name is X, it's nice to meet you.* He then turned to Author 2 and asked a question in AE. Another participant, provided an explanation as to how he developed his communicative ability:

*I reckon it's from moving from school to school... you have to learn how to speak to people and I developed it without realising. Being exposed to different environments helped me do that... it's unconscious. It was something I had to learn, how to communicate.*



Another described how members of his family helped him to develop his communication skills: *It's just my family, they know how to speak to people, it's just a skill I grew up around... You have to learn to speak to people.*

In the formal interviews two of the participants explicitly linked the development of their communicative ability, such as being able to codeswitch as required and to talk to unfamiliar people, to the experiences they had as members of the Clontarf Academy:

*In primary school it would take me a while to get chatty to people I didn't know. But now I'm one of those blokes who will just be like "how's it going?" It doesn't really matter who, if they look at me, it'd be rude not to talk. I think that's where Clontarf really helped me, with that exposure to different environments and constantly putting me on the spot.*

And

*The most terrifying speech I ever did (with Clontarf) was in Melbourne, I was only in Year 10. It was the biggest speech I ever did to the biggest crowd. I didn't want to look or count how many people, but there was rows, think there was about four rows. It was a big room. All they (the Clontarf staff) said was if I did the speech they would buy me Maccas, and when I got up in front I started to regret it thinking "oh Maccas isn't worth it" and then I just held myself together, taking deep breaths and that, reading the palm cards. And after that I felt wicked, it feels good to do it... I could do anything after that hey?*

As well as recognizing the need for codeswitching, the participants also reflected on the reasons why some other Aboriginal people do not have this skill and the consequences of this. One explained it this way:

*Some black fellas... (in the workplace) they don't know how to talk to their supervisors, they're too shame. If they end up sick or something and they don't go to work for a week... (they don't call and tell their boss because of this feeling of shame)... but they think 'do I still have a job.'*

In AE the word shame has a particular meaning, one that is broader and more encompassing than the SAE use of this word. It denotes the feeling of embarrassment and can extend to be a feeling that is quite overwhelming and disempowering (Leitner & Malcolm, 2007, p.169). Feeling shame, particularly with respect to language use in school has been found to have profound negative consequences (Purdie, Oliver, Collard & Rochecouste, 2002) and yet for the participants in this study, possibly because of their ongoing success, it was not a term they used often about themselves. One participant actually stated *I never had any shame about having to ask what words meant, I never really minded it.*

### **Importance of Family**

As Eades (1988) indicates, family is central to the lives of Aboriginal people. This was evident in the current study with the participants describing to Author 2, on a regular basis, the things they had done with their family: *I went out bush with pop, dad, mum, my brother, just my whole family; I kind of go out bush more with dad's side than mum's side; we go shooting, we go out at night, come back with a few kangaroos. We talk to my other pop, my pop's sister's husband.* Thus it was clear that the participants' families contributed in ongoing ways to their cultural and language development, and to the construction of their positive self-identity. As two of the participants put it: *Family taught me all that (cultural) stuff and family and cultural respect is a big thing here, always has (been).* These findings support those of Kickett-Tucker (2009) and Kickett-Tucker & Coffin (2011) where she describes how family is an important contributor to the formation of self-identity in Aboriginal children.

Family relationships were often discussed with Author 2 with the participants providing complex, but also explicit descriptions about who were members of their family (and who were not). As with Eades (1988) these are often linguistically determined particularly in relation to cousins. For example, one participant talked about his family members in this way: *He's my cousin through my pop's brother's kids, but he's just cuz to me.* In many ways these important family social networks parallel the sense of belonging as described previously in relation to *their mob*. Further, as reported in other studies (e.g., Warburton & Chambers, 2007) this family membership appeared crucial to the development of the participants' Aboriginal identity and, more generally, to a positive self-identity.

Grandparents seemed to be particularly important within this dynamic, and as in the research by Eades (1988) and the reflections of Clarke and also Pryor (both in Warburton & Chambers, 2007), the participants in this study showed considerable respect for these older members of their family - *there's a lot of elders that you pay respect to.* They also described them as people who passed on cultural knowledge, including language: *My pop, he's the only living person to speak language (the traditional language of the people from Eastland). I'm proud of that.*

Additionally, in their interactions the participants demonstrated a high level of understanding about the social relationships and mutual responsibility that comes with being part of an Aboriginal family. Similar to the way Eades (1988) and Warburton and Chambers (2007) characterize it, this includes considerable family commitments. For example, one participant described the personal consequences that occurred in his family when members of his extended family did not meet their obligations:

*We always went ... for funerals. When mum's mum passed away, there were a fair amount of people at the funeral, but not everyone showed up. So mum only has time for those who showed up to the funeral, cos that's the way blackies are.*

In this way, this sense of responsibility to family served to reinforce the participants' Aboriginal self-identity.

### **Rurality, Racism and Aboriginal Self-Identity**

Participants in this study proudly acknowledged their Aboriginality and also professed close alignment to Eastland Town. For this cohort it seemed that one of the great advantages of the town is its close proximity to the bush and as previously described the cultural activity of *going out bush* was one that all participants enthusiastically embraced. *I've been going out bush from even before I remember, since I was a little kid; kicking back out bush, go shooting; I love going out bush.* In fact, when another described returning to Eastland Town after residing elsewhere for some period of time his pleasure on returning was directly linked to coming back to the bush: *but I was more comfortable back bush, felt more at home.* For another, he described how by living in the town he was able to get a job that involved *going bush* - *when I was working at (timber company), it was good because it felt like I was doing the same old thing (going bush) but getting paid for it.* In these ways, the notion of the *bush* was closely associated with living in their particular town. In addition, because *going bush* is an integral part of their culture, their rural location was closely tied to their Aboriginality.

The town, however, was not without its problems as one participant described it, it is *an old racist town*. The problem with living in a small community is that negative aspects, such as racism, are more overt because *everyone knows everyone*. Even so, this was balanced with reflections such as: *Being Indigenous there's always racism no matter where you go and it's only a small group, they think black fellas are (all) the same.* For some the racism was directly related to their school

experiences, particularly in primary school: *In school there was a fair bit of racism... when I was real young I got picked on a lot. I hated a few boys at Eastland Town Primary School who did racist talk. Yet, in contrast, another was quite philosophical about this: There's racism here and there because the kids don't know any better. He then went on to say: As you get into high school, they sort of start to realize, but it's mainly the adults where they actually believe it. Another talked about how the community of Eastland Town provided positive experiences because being a country town meant that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are more likely to interact:*

*The ones that you grow up with and go to school with are pretty good. I got lots of white mates through footy and they're really friendly. They'll always have a yarn and a joke with you. Talk about footy. It's all good. There's lots of good white fellas.*

What was particularly interesting amongst these participants was not (sadly) that they had experienced racism, but rather how they appeared to develop resilience to rise above it.

*For the first two weeks of my work, every Saturday morning after Friday drinks, I would go into (well known shop in Eastland Town), grab a Powerade and a pie and go home to have a feed... The first week when I was there I can see a woman out of the corner of my eye watching me selecting my Powerade and I'm like alright. So I grabbed the Powerade and walked in her direction. And as I do that, I see her pull back and pretend to work on the shelves. When you're in that situation, you don't want to spend your money there and just walk out... I had that happen for two Saturdays and I just don't go there no more, just avoid it. If you don't trust me, you're not gonna get my money.*

The same participant went on to contrast his reaction to racism to that of other Aboriginal people he knew: *I found that people are really weak minded ... lets it bother them a lot easier. And for another he talked about how some people he knew just got that shame factor still as a direct consequence of the racism they had experienced.*

### **Experiences at School and Developing Skills for the Workplace**

Two of the participants seemed to have had a chequered history in terms of their schooling: *I never felt comfortable at school, not in primary school anyway; I felt as if the teachers were against me*, however, this was not the case for others. One participant in particular not only expressed great enthusiasm for the support provided at school (as described above), but he had also experienced considerable success in terms of leadership. For example, he was the school athletic captain and won a prestigious community leadership award, while another participant earned school colours for his community work. In this way, for some of the participants at least, their attitude is contrary to the common held view that Aboriginal students are resistant to education (Pubhai-Illlich, 2010). Once more, Clontarf appeared to play a role in engendering this positive attitude (e.g. *Having the Clontarf workers give you feedback of what your teachers think, so they're able to explain what you need to do in a more understanding way*). Families were also instrumental in the development of this attitude: *School was a top priority for me growing up... my parents enforced (it); Mum and dad were heavily school focused, so it helped me get that long term view of things.*

In their reflections in the formal interviews, nearly all the participants had implied that because of their experiences at school, and through the activities organized by Clontarf in particular, they had successfully acquired skills that enabled their transition into the workplace. For example, one told of the skills he had developed with his Clontarf mentor that enabled him to *sell [him]self* in a job interview. Another talked about how *sometimes you got to talk yourself right up in interviews.*

Overall, and as indicated previously, the participants had not only appeared to develop a positive Aboriginal self-identity, but also a considerable level of resilience, confidence and a degree of independence that held them in good stead in the workplace. One simply stated in response to being asked what advice he would give other Aboriginal youth about working: *Being confident to be yourself*, another indicated the key was *being able to build relationships and have respect for one another*, whilst a third described it this way:

*You start to become more independent and care less about people and start worrying about yourself. And when you get like that, you start to love it because you don't have to rely on anyone. I wanted to move to Perth, but I didn't want to rely on anyone to take me to work or anything.*

## Conclusion

Positive self-identity is associated with strong academic and career success (Purdie et al, 2000) and this appears to be the case for the participants in this study. All participants clearly, consistently and often with pride, self-identified as being an Aboriginal person. In turn, this supported the development of their positive self-identity, contributing to their successful transition into the workplace. Their self-identity formation came primarily through their strong connection to their culture and language, which was built within their families, sustained from living in a rural location and by being a member of the Clontarf Academy. However, not everything about their rurality was positive and the insights offered by the participants provide some salutary lessons for education (e.g., the need to address racism, to provide cultural and linguistic support to Aboriginal students, and, to work with them to develop their confidence and skills).

All the participants in this study spoke of the importance of spending time with family, particularly their elders, and how *going out bush, hunting* and so on were key to their cultural development and positive formation of self-identity. Their experiences with culture and language made the participants *proud to be a black fella* and all described how they wanted to pass on these traditions, including the use of traditional language, regional *lingo* and AE to their own children in the future.

Being members of the Clontarf Academy appeared to contribute in positive ways to their self-identity, Aboriginal identity, resilience and confidence. While some participants reported negative experiences in primary school, due to racism and shame, all credited their positive high school experience to being part of the Clontarf Academy. Obviously there is still much to be done within schools, especially in the younger years, to overcome the continuing racism that exists. The Academy, which is part of a national network run by the Clontarf Foundation, is based at partner schools and promotes education, employment, leadership, wellbeing and sport as a way to engage young Indigenous (mostly males) in school. Due to this focus, the participants felt the Academy was a *safe space* to celebrate their Indigenous culture, which further contributed to their positive self-identity. This is certainly something the broader educational community could enact to better support Aboriginal students (i.e., providing safe educational environments where Aboriginality is embraced and celebrated).

The lessons learned and experiences gained through Clontarf were consistently referenced as contributing to the participants' success post-school. Specific acknowledgement was given to the opportunities it provided for practicing code-switching between AE and SAE. Despite considerable efforts over a long period of time, this is not something that is universally supported within Australian schools (see Oliver et al, 2011). The participants also described

numerous other benefits of the various and targeted Clontarf activities. They especially seemed to have acquired high levels of personal resilience which also contributed to their successful transition to the workplace. Whilst it might not be possible for schools to emulate the program offered through the Clontarf Academy, working to develop resilience amongst Aboriginal students through a range of positive, linguistic and culturally supportive, yet challenging experiences could be incorporated more widely in school programs.

Although one participant described Eastland Town as *an old racist town*, all held strong connections to it. By living in a rural community they felt there were more opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to interact. Even so, perhaps because of the isolated and transient nature of the town, the participants had all been the target of racism which they attributed to ignorance. Fortunately their level of resilience and strong cultural and family ties, ironically fostered by their rural location, enabled them to rise above this negative aspect of the town.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that this is case study research and as such it is not appropriate to generalise the findings derived from these five participants and apply to other Aboriginal cohorts. Certainly differences will exist between the participants in this study and those living in other places, particularly remote locations where access to resources (e.g., support from Clontarf staff) may be restricted and where exposure to Standard Australian English may be limited. Further, we acknowledge that there is no generic Aboriginal student experience and caution must be exercised when considering the implications of this research for education. Clearly there is a need for much further research examining the experiences of Aboriginal students in diverse contexts.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Labour Force Outcomes: Social Trends. Released November, 2013. Retrieved 4 October, 2017, from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0>
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2017). NAPLAN Achievement in Reading, Persuasive Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2017 Retrieved 16 August, 2018, from [https://www.nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/naplan-national-report-2017\\_final\\_04dec2017](https://www.nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/naplan-national-report-2017_final_04dec2017)
- Clark., Y. (2007). The construction of aboriginal identity in people separated from their families, community, and culture: Pieces of a jigsaw. *Australian Psychologist*, 150-157.
- Eades, D. (1988). They don't speak an Aboriginal language, or do they?, In I. Keen (ed.), *Being Black: Aboriginal cultures in 'settled' Australia*, (pp 97-115). Aboriginal studies press, Canberra.
- Eades, D. (2013). *Aboriginal ways of using English*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Forrest, S & Johnson, M. (2017). Koolark koort k and koorliny: reconciliation, art and storytelling in an Australian Aboriginal community. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1, 14-27.



- Gorringe, S. (2015). Aboriginal culture is not a problem. The way we talk about it is. *The Guardian*, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/15/aboriginal-culture-is-not-a-problem-the-way-we-talk-about-it-is](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/15/aboriginal-culture-is-not-a-problem-the-way-we-talk-about-it-is) Retrieved June 2016
- Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015). Building on "Red Dirt" Perspectives: What Counts as Important for Remote Education? *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(2), 194-206.
- Hall, L. (2018). "Not looking at us level": Systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal teachers in remote communities in Central Australia. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, 5(1), 74-101.
- Hardy, I. (2013). Testing that counts: contesting national literacy assessment policy in complex schooling settings. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 36(2), 67-77.
- Hewitt-Taylor, J. (2001). Use of constant comparative analysis in qualitative research. *Nursing Standard*, 15(42), 39-42.
- Kickett-Tucker, C. (2008). Exploring the racial identity of Australian Aboriginal children and youth. *Health Sociology Review*, 18(1), 119-136.
- Kickett-Tucker, C., & Coffin, J. (2011). Aboriginal self-concept and racial identity: Practical solutions for teachers. In N. Purdie, G. Milgate & H. Bell (Eds.), *Two Way Teaching and Learning: Toward culturally reflective and relevant education*. Camberwell: ACER Press.
- Langford, R. F. (1983) Our heritage – your playground. *Australian Archaeology*, 16, 1-6.
- Leitner, G. & Malcolm, I. G. (2007). *The habitat of Australia's aboriginal languages: past, present, and future*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Malcolm, I., (2001). Aboriginal English: Adopted code of a surviving culture. In D. Blair and P. Collins (Ed.) *English in Australia*, (pp 201-222). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Maxwell, J., Lowe, K., & Salter, P. (2018). The re-creation and resolution of the 'problem' of Indigenous education in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 45(2), 161-177. doi: 10.1007/s13384-017-0254-7
- Oliver, R., Rochecouste, J. Vanderford, S, & Grote, E. (2011). Teacher awareness and understandings about Aboriginal English in Western Australia. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34(1), 60-74. Retrieved from <http://www.nla.gov.au/ojs/index.php/ara/article/viewFile/2117/2510>
- Paradies, Y.C. (2006). Beyond black and white. Essentialism, hybridity and indigeneity. *Journal of Sociology*, 42(4), 355-367.
- Pirbhai-Illich, F. (2010). Aboriginal Students engaging and struggling with critical literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(4), 257-266.
- Purdie, N. & McCrindle, A. (2004) Measurement of self-concept among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian students. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 56, 50-62.

- Purdie, N. & Oliver, R., Collard, G. & Rochecouste, J. (2002). Attitudes of Primary School Australian Aboriginal Children to their Linguistic Codes. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 21(4), 410-421.
- Purdie, N., Tripcony, P., Boulton-Lewis, G., Gunstone, A. & Fanshawe, J. (2000). Positive self-identity for Indigenous students and its relationship to school outcomes. Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs: Canberra.
- Shay, M., & Wickes, J. (2017). Aboriginal identity in education settings: privileging our stories as a way of deconstructing the past and re-imagining the future. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44(1), 107-122. doi: 10.1007/s13384-017-0232-0
- Umaña-Taylor, A.J., & Fine, M.A., (2004). Examining a model of ethnic identity development among Mexican-origin adolescents living in the US. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioural Review*, 26, 36-59.
- Warburton, J. & Chambers, B. (2007). Review. Older Indigenous Australians: their role in culture and community. *Australasian Journal of Ageing*, 26, 3-7.
- Wigglesworth, G., Simpson, J., & Loakes, D. (2011). NAPLAN language assessments for Indigenous children in remote communities: Issues and problems. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34(3), 320-343.
- Zubrick, S. R., Lawrence, D. M., Silburn, S. R., Blair, E., Milroy, H., Wilkes, T., Eades, S., D'Antoine, H., Read, A., Ishiguchi, P., & Doyle, S. (2004). *The Western Australian Aboriginal child health survey: The health of Aboriginal children and young people*. Perth: Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.