

The fourth edition of our IPS Jilya magazine takes us into an area which, whilst not purely mental health in its focus is nonetheless inextricably linked with health and mental health outcome for our people. We know for example that purely by completing Year 12, an Aboriginal young person's employment opportunities increase by 40%, however, with only 10% of Aboriginal children graduating from Year 12, we clearly have a long way to go in the creation of equal opportunities for our current generation.

Our third edition of Jilya extensively discussed racism, hopelessness and helplessness, remoteness and low socio economic status as key predictors of suicide and of course has also been implicated in mental health outcome. Education appears to offer a buffer to the development of mental ill health through the creation of more opportunities; however, the issues that create risk for suicide and mental ill health appear to mirror the barriers that exist for Aboriginal people to attaining quality education. These include a lack of cultural competence of teachers, limited Aboriginal teachers in the workplace, school curriculum that fails to incorporate Indigenous pedagogy, the failure to develop evidence based, Indigenous-specific teaching methodologies and a failure to incorporate community within service delivery. Of course there are some exceptions to this rule which have been highlighted in this edition of Jilya.

Of course, we cannot feature Aboriginal education without visiting the controversy surrounding the best teaching methods for Aboriginal kids. Jilya of course always applies best practice in the search for answers to these questions. In this edition our feature article

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has been 'handed' over to the large number of experts in Aboriginal education to attempt to find some answers. In addition we have attempted to identify those schools and programs who are doing great things in the desire to see educational outcomes improve. To this end, we have featured a number of schools and programs including the Stronger Smarter Institute which has a clear philosophy of the promotion of strong cultural identity as a core focus of its programs. The institute was developed by Professor Chris Sarra who first came to national acclaim as the first Aboriginal principal of Cherbourg State School. At Cherbourg Professor Sarra made such significant changes to the philosophy of teaching Aboriginal children that the Stronger Smarter Institute now assists other schools to implement. We so very pleased to have Professor Sarra provide our Opinion Piece and the Webinar for our IPS Members.

My personal interest in exploring education as a topic for the IPS membership was primarily due to my extensive background as a child/adolescent psychologist and having to have a fair bit to do with Aboriginal kids who were being failed by education systems. At an academic level I was also intrigued by the issues around the assessment of Intelligence in Aboriginal people and the consistent mismatch between test outcomes and the level of ability that was being demonstrated every day. As a university student I was inspired by the work of Judith Kearins who was the first cognitive psychologist to provide

evidence that Aboriginal people have 'different intelligences' in the form of learning styles or as they now refer to them, learning preferences. She noted that whilst Aboriginal Australians as a population seemed to have lower scores on standard IQ tests this was not indicative of what was known as the 'deficit view' – that being, that Aboriginal people 'lack intelligence'. Her 'difference debate' changed the face of how intelligence is viewed cross culturally. The strategy that Kearins discussed and which I have adopted consistently is in the qualitative interpretation of problem solving strategies and in test administration. Kearins found that Aboriginal Australians have a high degree of preference for information that is presented visual-spatially which has enormous implications for how Aboriginal people learn best. Discussion of the implications of this is beyond the scope of this paper, however, her work has significant implications for Aboriginal education that should be the focus of determining culturally specific teaching modalities. Of course there are a number of programs and research which have started this 'conversation' which are detailed in this edition of Jilya.

My second reason for wanting to explore education as a theme in our IPS Membership is that I have often been asked over the course of my career about the factors that resulted in attaining the education that I have. This is particularly given that I fall very clearly into the category of those who should not have achieved a lot in the education space. As the higher education statistics demonstrate, Indigenous Australians comprise just over 1% of the half a million university students enrolled across 38 Australian higher education institutions. On average, Indigenous students were half as likely to complete their course compared to their non-Indigenous peers. The Indigenous completion rate was 28% while the completion rate for the mainstream student body was 59%. I have therefore often given this a lot of thought. What is the difference in people who get through barriers and those who do not? It was clear for me. I had a lot of luck. First, I was born with a resilient personality that enabled me to push through barriers. I remember doing my Year 12 exams predominantly by 'school of the air' or distance education. That is a tough deal, but I didn't see it that way. I just pushed through it and loved to learn. I also had an environment in which my

parents modelled an insane amount of work ethic. In that regard, we were already 'ahead' given that for a lot of Aboriginal people, workforce participation may have only started in this generation for them and so did not have the models that I did. In addition, my parents also had characteristics which nurtured the 'nature' of my personality. That was, they were both robust individuals, who also should not have been as successful in life as they both were. Truth is both of them came from very humble beginnings and my mum and dad dragged us out of poverty in one generation. Both did not go further than year four education, however, they were both incredibly intellectually curious human beings. Interested in life and never accepted the most 'obvious' or easy answer. This is also what I inherited from them and that is luck.

The barriers that I overcame I hope stand as something that most Aboriginal people can relate to and I hope that this provides inspiration for those Aboriginal people who have perhaps been told that they are 'not smart enough' or cannot do achieve in some way. I have lost count of the number of times that I was told such things. I learnt to block out the naysayers and listen to those who would tell me that anything is possible if you believe in yourself.

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