

ADE08382

Indigenous youth reaching their potential: Making the connection between anxiety  
and school attendance and retention rates

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## Abstract

Indigenous youth have been recognised as the most educationally disadvantaged group in the Australian community. One of the key factors to be addressed in overcoming this disadvantage is school attendance and retention. There are a multitude of reasons that result in Indigenous young people not attending school regularly and leaving formal education settings prematurely. However, the potential impact of social and emotional wellbeing, particularly anxiety, on Indigenous youth in regard to poor attendance and non-completion of school has not been thoroughly examined.

Anxiety is the most prevalent psychopathology for young people in the general population, with up to 18% suffering from one or more anxiety disorders. While it is easy to hypothesise that Australian Indigenous youth may suffer high levels of anxiety, there is as yet little data to support this hypothesis. Although researchers are now beginning to track the emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people in Australia there are no prevalence data of anxiety disorders specific to this population. However, it seems likely that the incidence of anxiety disorders would be, at the very least, comparable to their non-Indigenous counterparts, especially given the many stress provoking issues, such as exposure to violence and social and economic disadvantage that are present in their lives. It has been shown that anxiety disorders, in the general population, have negative consequences for academic, social and individual outcomes, and can be a precursor to depression, suicide and substance abuse. Excessive anxiety and worry can prevent young people from participating fully in school and life opportunities. While coping with multiple life stressors many Indigenous young people are then expected to successfully engage in formal education settings that are sometimes culturally unfamiliar and stressful. This paper will discuss the proposed link between anxiety and school participation for Indigenous youth and some interventions strategies which could assist in increased school attendance and retention.

Keywords; Indigenous education; anxiety disorders; school retention; school participation

## Introduction

This paper examines the incidence and consequences of anxiety in young people with a particular focus on Indigenous youth and how it may relate to interrupted school attendance and poor school completion rates. This is of specific concern due to the importance of education for life success, the development of social capital and community capacity building (Schwab & Sutherland, 2001). It is becoming clearer that, school success for all youth, is dependent upon wellbeing (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2007). School attendance, regardless of academic performance, is seen as being an indication of well-being in children and a primary predictor of future mental health (Ravichandran, 2008).

School retention rates are much lower for Indigenous young people than non-Indigenous young people. In 1970 there was below 10% of Indigenous students attending secondary school. In 2004 this rate had risen to approximately 40% (McRae et al., 2005). However, of the Indigenous students who attended secondary school in 2004, 30% left between Year 10 and Year 11 compared to 10 % of non-Indigenous students. In addition, only 39.5 % of Indigenous students progressed to Year 12 in 2004 compared to 76.8 % of other students (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, MCEETYA, 2006). Alarming, Schwab (1999) cautions that retention rate data does not reflect completion rates which are usually lower than retention rates.

While the close relationship between low levels of Indigenous educational outcomes and health has sometimes been acknowledged in policy, there has been an emphasis predominantly on physical health issues such as otitis media (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, DETYA, 2000). The Aboriginal Health Strategy defines health as the 'physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing of the individual and of the wellbeing of the whole community' (Anderson, 1997, p. 198). Given the disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, 2002; Dusseldorf Skills Forum, 2003) and emotional well-being issues experienced by many Indigenous young people (Mission Australia, 2006; Zubrick et al., 2005), it is of some concern that this wider interpretation of health has not warranted greater attention. Encouragingly though, the South Australian Government Social Inclusion Board (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2007) has stated recently that a young person's schooling success is dependent upon their well-being and further, that some school non-attendance may be due to mental health issues, including severe anxiety.

This paper will argue for the need for more explicit inclusion of social and emotional well-being support statements in education policy documents. Furthermore, implementation of preventative and supportive mental health programs in schools, in conjunction with community strategies, as a complementary approach should be implemented in efforts to overcome poor school attendance and school completion issues for Indigenous youth.

### Incidence of anxiety in Indigenous youth

The distinction between what is 'normal' anxiety and what constitutes a more serious problem is important. An anxiety disorder is distinguishable from 'normal'

anxiety by its continued duration over what would reasonably be expected and the severity of the anxiety in relation to the situation. When young people are no longer able to participate fully in usual activities due to excessive or persistent anxiety, there is cause for concern. While the last 15 years has seen research into childhood anxiety increase significantly, there has been little research on minority groups in this important area, especially in Australian Indigenous youth.

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey showed that Indigenous youth have a higher overall incidence of general mental health problems than non-Indigenous young people in (Zubrick et al., 2005). Twenty-six percent of Indigenous young people compared to 17% of non-Indigenous children in the 4–11-year age group were shown to be at high risk of suffering mental health difficulties. Of even greater concern, 21% of Indigenous 12–17-year-olds were likely to be at risk of mental health difficulties compared with 13% of non-Indigenous youth. The exact prevalence of anxiety disorders was not reported separately in this West Australian Survey or in the recent National Survey of Young Australians (Mission Australia, 2006). However, up to 18% of young people suffer from one or more anxiety disorders (Costello et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2003) and while it is acknowledged that Indigenous youth have many strengths, there is no evidence to suggest that this group would suffer less anxiety than their non-Indigenous counterparts, especially given the many stress provoking issues in their lives.

### Life stressors for Indigenous youth and anxiety

Indigenous young people are exposed to many anxiety-provoking stressors. The *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, HREOC, 1997) showed that forced separation and institutionalisation of Indigenous people resulted in health problems and a range of emotional distress, including anxiety in adults. Further, children of depressed parents were more likely to show higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Generational poverty (Payne, 1996; Siggers & Gray, 1991) also contributes to psychosocial stress. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2005) stated that social and economic disadvantage placed Indigenous youth at greater risk of behavioural and environmental health risks, affecting physical and mental health, and encouraged self destructive tendencies. In addition, the World Health Organisation (2002) included anxiety as one of the many psychological problems linked to exposure to violence.

The *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Survey* (Zubrick et al., 2005) indicated that 26% of Aboriginal children aged 4 to 17-years are at a high risk of suffering clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. Factors linked to this were the number of major life stress events experienced in the previous 12 months; family and household factors, specifically, dysfunctional families and poor quality parenting; being in the care of a sole parent or people other than their original parents and having lived in five or more homes; being subjected to racism in the past six months; physical health of the child and carers; speech impairment; severe otitis media; vision problems; carer access to mental health services; and smoking and marijuana use.

## Consequences of anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders in the general youth population have been shown to reduce academic achievement (Ialongo et al., 1995), contribute to peer relationship problems (Strauss et al., 1987) and to impairments in general social competence (Messer & Beidel, 1994). An anxious child within an educational setting, may experience difficulties in remaining on-task, have problems interacting with peers and forming and maintaining friendships, or may avoid school or classes that are anxiety provoking. Consequently, children with anxiety often experience difficulties in responding appropriately to normal developmental challenges and many underachieve in school (Woodward & Ferguson, 2001). Excessive school absenteeism and impaired peer relationships associated with anxiety can also lead to poor vocational adjustment (Hibbert et al., 1990) and self concept problems (Asher & Coie, 1990), as well as psychiatric disorders later in life (Kovacs & Devlin, 1998). In addition, anxious children do not necessarily grow out of their discomfort (Kendall & Ollendick, 2004; Pine et al., 1998) with many becoming anxiety-disordered adults (Ollendick & King, 1994).

There is also preliminary evidence to suggest that anxiety disorders may predispose adolescents to developing substance use disorders (Burke et al., 1994; Deas-Nesmith et al., 1998; Rodhe et al., 1996). Furthermore, research has shown that anxiety is linked to depression (Costello & Angold, 1995; Manassis & Menna, 1999) and in some cases can lead to suicide (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 1997). This is significant for Indigenous youth, as suicide rates in this group are disproportionately higher than for non-Indigenous youth.

## Cultural differences in concepts of emotional wellbeing and anxiety

It is acknowledged that while anxiety is a universal human condition and there will be similarities across cultures, differing constructs of mental health and emotional wellness may also result in differences in presentation of some symptoms, importance placed on symptoms and the meaning attached to symptoms. It is, therefore, essential to appreciate that there are likely to be both differing constructs of anxiety from Western held beliefs and differing opinions due to the complexity and diversity of Indigenous groups. Reflecting the holistic nature of Indigenous views of health, however, social and emotional wellbeing is often defined as ‘not just the physical wellbeing of the individual, but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community’ (National Aboriginal Health Strategic Working Party, NAHSWP, 1989). It reflects belief systems that are based on complex social relationships between people, land and all living creatures and the “interconnectedness of relationships between spiritual, emotional, ideological, political, social, economic, mental, cultural and physical factors on health outcomes for individuals, communities and populations” (Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, AUSINET, 2008, p. 22)

## Research into Indigenous youth and educational participation

Concerns regarding educational participation for Indigenous young people have figured largely in Australian Government policy for almost two decades, from the National Aboriginal and *Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 1989) to the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*, (MCEETYA, 2006). In 1997, MCEETYA discussed cultural and family obligations, mobility, poverty, poor health and student and parent choices as possible explanations for lower attendance rates. Research into issues influencing Indigenous student school retention was commissioned in 1999 by the Office of Indigenous Policy in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Schwab (1999) subsequently presented an overview and analysis of the factors associated with low Indigenous retention rates to the Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA). The resulting monograph (Schwab, 1999) was published for use by policy makers and Commonwealth, State and Territory education department officers. Several interrelated factors were identified.

As with the general population, low socio-economic background correlated with early school leaving, as did level of parent education and parent occupation. Males were less likely to complete formal schooling. As seen in other groups overseas and in Australia, attendance rates and school retention were linked. Low literacy and numeracy achievement was associated with poor academic performance and early school leaving. Non-government schools recorded higher retention rates and associations were clear between rural or remote residency and lower school retention levels. These latter two issues are significant for indigenous students as this group is more likely to attend Government schools and significant numbers of Indigenous students live outside urban areas.

Other factors identified were associated more specifically with being Indigenous. Hunter and Schwab (1998) identified several family and household structure issues that were influential in school participation. Young people in married or de facto relationships or being a sole parent were more likely to be attending school. This was also the case for youth living in mixed, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, families. Other household members being arrested was linked to reduced school attendance for males, while living with others who were attending school or had educational qualifications increased the likelihood of attendance. Where Indigenous youth had been arrested themselves, this had a significant negative effect on returning to school (Blagg & Wilkie, 1995). Absenteeism has been related, in some degree, to the autonomy that is encouraged by parents of Indigenous children (Schwab, 1998). However, parental and student doubts about school success and the reality of education being linked to better jobs also could contribute to poorer participation (Marks & Fleming, 1999). Additionally, discomfort with formal education settings, including the fear of failure and shame has a significant impact. Finally, feelings of being victimised due to being Indigenous contribute to school withdrawal (Howard, 1998).

## Links between Indigenous youth, anxiety and school participation

While there are no studies that specifically address links between Indigenous youth, anxiety and school participation, given the potential life stressors and factors

identified as impacting upon school attendance and completion, it is likely that significant numbers of Indigenous young people are suffering levels of anxiety severe enough to impede their involvement in school. Absenteeism has been recognised as a protective mechanism which allows students to avoid the aspects of school they find undesirable, frustrating, and a cause of shame or possibly, anxiety-provoking (Davies et al., 1997; HRSCEET, 1996; Lowell & Garrutju, 1997; Petrie, 1982).

Social exclusion, economic hardship and marginalisation resulting from colonisation, has been closely linked to health (Devitt et al. 2001: Raphael & Swan, 1997; Rollock & Gordon, 2000) as it limits access to resources, networks and support and increases stress (Malin, 2002). The alienation felt by some Indigenous students and their families towards schools is associated with less consistent school attendance and high drop out rates for Indigenous young people (DETYA, 2000; Malin, 1990; Schwab, 1998). Formal education systems make cultural assumptions that many Indigenous families and students find perplexing or stressful. For example, while child autonomy may be highly valued as a child rearing practice in Indigenous families, being autonomous does not necessarily 'fit' with behavioural expectations at school (Malin, Campbell, & Agius, 1996). While many Indigenous children bring a rich cultural competence to school they find that it often has little value in mainstream systems of education (MCEETYA, 2000) and it could be expected that, for some children, anxiety would be connected to the discomfort and lack of connection that they feel for school. Furthermore, parental anxiety, linked to concerns about mainstream institutions and negative personal experiences, has been suggested to partially account for the low levels of preschool enrolment and attendance of very young Indigenous children (EQ, 2000a).

One of the many interlinking factors for lower Indigenous retention rates identified by Schwab (1999) is fear of failure, embarrassment and shame. Many Indigenous children experience learning delays linked to poor readiness for school (EQ, 2000a; Zubrick et al., 2006) or physical health related issues, such as speech and language development, impaired as a result of sensory deprivation from otitis media (MCEETYA, 2000). Students who do not speak Standard Australian English fluently may feel alienated. Low achievement levels have been attributed to absenteeism (Bourke et al., 2000) and low literacy and numeracy levels are associated with increased rates of early school leaving (Schwab, 1999). It is significant, then, that Indigenous national benchmark results in literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5 and 7 are generally about 20 percent below the national average (MCEETYA, 2006) and that gaps in knowledge, as a result of absenteeism are likely to add further stress and anxiety. While it is unknown to what extent anxiety is a factor, emotional difficulties have been linked to low academic performance and poor attendance of Indigenous youth (Zubrick et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the transition from primary to secondary school can be stressful for Indigenous youth, particularly for those who are forced to leave their communities to continue their formal education. Cultural, social and language differences (EQ, 2000a), being inadequately prepared, away from familiar support and feeling shame at not having higher achievement levels may lead to anxiety and school leaving. Finally, Indigenous youth share the universal development tasks of their age group with their non-Indigenous peers. These include the need to develop a strong sense of personal identity and self esteem. Indigenous youth, however, have a distinctive sense of

identity as Indigenous people and in early adolescence it may be a source of confusion and embarrassment (MCEETYA, 2001)), This is not made easier by racism, discrimination and harassment often experienced by Indigenous youth which can further result in marginalisation and low self esteem (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Malin & Maidment, 2003). Studies examining the impact of racism have shown that attack on sense of self can lead to mental health problems including anxiety and depression (Malin, 2002).

## Possible approaches to supporting anxious Indigenous students at school

When planning support for Indigenous youth, an understanding of the various levels of influence on their social and emotional wellbeing is essential (AUSINET, 2008), including individual, community and structural levels. Such an approach acknowledges the holistic constructs of Indigenous wellbeing and, therefore, is likely to have greater success. At an individual level, self esteem, resilience, emotional and cognitive development of individuals can be supported by schools. Focussing on different needs, preventative intervention designed to reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety (Ginsburg, 2004) can be provided at universal, selected and indicated levels (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Universal prevention targets an entire population or group; selective prevention strategies are offered to people at risk of suffering from a disorder; and indicated interventions target those who exhibit early symptoms that suggest a predisposition towards developing a disorder. Additionally, data shows that there are significant junctures in which school participation drops, such as the transitions from primary to secondary and from Year 10 to 11 (DETA, 2005). Therefore students at these junctures can be specifically targeted for support.

One model that may have wide application in schools for developing support programs is the *Holistic Planning and Teaching Framework* developed for use by teachers with Indigenous students (Grant, 1998; Indigenous Schooling Support Unit, 2007). The framework links land, language and culture to time, place and relationships, to organise and present information holistically and reflects Aboriginal worldviews. This gives students the opportunity to learn about the importance of the interconnectedness of all aspects of their lives and emotional difficulties, including anxiety, may be meaningfully addressed, allowing students to better participate in life and school.

At a community level, many opportunities can be created for participation, social support and development of connectedness and a sense of belonging to the school (AUSINET, 2008). The importance of this in terms of both emotional wellbeing and school participation has been emphasised in the literature (DEST, 2003; EQ, 2000; Hunter & Schwab, 2003; Pittman et al, 2003). Malin and Maidment (2003) reported that Indigenous parents wanted to know more about school processes, curriculum, financial issues related to schooling, however, many Indigenous parents and caregivers find schools alienating and far removed from the experience of their everyday lives (MCEETYA, 2001). Parent interest is increased along with greater numbers of Indigenous people working in schools through establishment of school and community networks and community liaison improves home and school communication (EQ, 2000)

The Department of Education, Training and the Arts (2007) *Linking Families and School Initiative*, in Queensland, has been developed specifically to promote and support positive relationships between Indigenous communities, students and school staff and aims to nurture partnerships, thereby improving attendance, retention and learning outcomes for Indigenous students. The value of healthy relationships between teachers, Indigenous families and students is recognised for student success. One example of how this initiative has been successfully put into practice is in Weipa, North Queensland where a modified 'Parents as First Teachers' program is running at the Western Cape College. Now in the second year of a two year trial, anecdotal evidence indicates decreased school-related stress and anxiety and increased engagement between Indigenous families and students and the school.

Policies and practices underpinned by values of equity, anti-discrimination and access ensure support at a structural level (AUSINET, 2008). From a Queensland perspective, Education Queensland's *2010 Strategy* (2000) recognises both the changing roles of schools and the need to provide high levels of social support for students from diverse and complex backgrounds. One of the four key questions identified for monitoring success relates to student participation and Year 12 completion. Changing social patterns are also recognised. In regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples specifically, the strategy calls for negotiated agreements between different communities recognising the need for regional approaches. Since 2000, the *2010 Strategy* has provided the broad context for the implementation for the *Partners for Success Policy* (EQ, 2000) and the *Bound for Success Policies* (DETA, 2005a; 2005b; 2006) acknowledging the significant and persistent gap between educational outcomes for Indigenous students compared to the wider community. A major focus is on improving school attendance, reducing drop out rates in the transition from primary to secondary and in the early secondary years and increased school completion rates.

## Conclusion

Poor attendance rates and low retention of Indigenous students have long been recognised in Australia as a significant problem, with profound impact on post-school options and life choices, and perpetuation of intergenerational cycles of social and economic disadvantage. In addition to the many factors attributed to poor participation, it is likely that social and emotional issues, particularly anxiety, may be influencing the school attendance and retention rates of Indigenous young people. It is unrealistic to expect that while coping with multiple life stressors many Indigenous young people will successfully engage in formal education settings that are sometimes culturally unfamiliar and stressful in themselves (MCEETYA, 2000). While the reasons are varied and complex for the lack of attendance and retention of Indigenous students, it is necessary that Government policies and strategic school planning documents recognise that emotional wellbeing is potentially a major contributing factor in their disengagement from school. Education systems and schools, in particular, have an increasing, but shared, role to play in supporting young Indigenous people to develop and maintain well balanced social and emotional health.

According to Schwab (1999), improved school attendance and retention is likely to emerge from a mix of appropriate educational opportunities, individual confidence, community commitment, family support, social and economic stability,

appropriate curriculum and the professional skills of educators and administrators. The most effective approach will likely be an integrated one that shares responsibility and appreciates individual, community and structural levels of influence.

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