

# Indigenous Education UPDATE

Edition 4 September 2015

## Learning together

Welcome to ACER's *Indigenous Education Update* – a window into the work that we undertake in research and development in Indigenous education.

In this issue we share the highlights from a panel discussion of educators about improving Indigenous learning assessment, held in May in our Melbourne office.

We also celebrate ACER's inaugural Indigenous Visiting Fellows Program. As part of the program, participants came together for two days in May to learn about ACER's work in Indigenous educational research and development, and to develop their own research methodologies. The Indigenous Visiting Fellows Program is already providing opportunities for Indigenous educational researchers in Australia, with one Visiting Fellow, Alison Quin, already having presented at ACER's annual Research Conference.

This edition also reflects on the journey of the School Readiness Initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and the research related to using television as a learning tool. We continue to promote and enhance Learning Ground, a portal of evidence-based articles about Indigenous education, and share ACER's reconciliation journey.

On page 8 you can read about Troy Meston, one of our new Indigenous Graduate Research Fellows, recently appointed by ACER and located in our Brisbane office. I'm sure you'll agree that Troy's story is inspirational.

We look forward to keeping you up to date with our work to improve Indigenous learning and research.

**Gina Milgate**  
Research Fellow, Indigenous Education

To learn more about ACER's Indigenous Education services, visit [www.acer.edu.au/indigenous](http://www.acer.edu.au/indigenous)

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## Indigenous research: learning together

*A new program to develop Indigenous educational research capacity is supporting research being undertaken about, with and by Indigenous education researchers.*

Eleven Indigenous early career researchers met with researchers at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in Melbourne in April for two days of intensive face-to-face workshops about educational research.

The workshop component of the ACER Indigenous Visiting Fellows program, focused on consolidating and developing the educational research skills of Indigenous early career researchers, as well as teachers and community leaders. The workshops also enabled participants to network with fellow researchers.

The Indigenous Visiting Fellows program, an initiative of the ACER Foundation, aims to develop Indigenous educational research capacity, with a view to increasing the participation of Indigenous researchers in local and national research projects as opportunities arise.

Participants at the two-day workshop investigated research techniques used in educational research, including quantitative data, qualitative research, interviewing, ethics, literature reviews, and research and community engagement methods to source sound evidence in Indigenous education.

Participants in the Indigenous Visiting Fellows program will be matched with senior ACER research staff

as the first step in a mentoring program to foster long-term research capabilities and networks for Indigenous education research.

Melissa Kirby, a Senior Education Officer in the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities who descends from the Ngemba people of New South Wales, said the program provides increased opportunities to identify and design research that informs strategies for improved outcomes for Indigenous students.

'The benefit of bringing together a group of Indigenous educators with current research interests and capabilities is vital for research to begin from the centre, the needs of Indigenous people, which involves identifying the research questions that are critical to us, and the research methods that will enable us to obtain data that really informs improvement,' Ms Kirby said.

'It is also a great step in building a network of Indigenous researchers, not just locally, but globally.'

According to Alisha Britten, a Senior Mentor and Support Worker at JobCo who descends from the Yorta Yorta people of Victoria, the work of Indigenous educators with students and adults in itself generates numerous research questions.

'The Indigenous Visiting Fellows program is a good fit for me in my work as a way to build skills and networks to pursue research questions in Indigenous education and training, and educational transitions,' Ms Britten said. 'In building research capacity, it also has the potential to inform and influence educational policies and strategies.'

According to ACER Foundation Director Deirdre Jackson, one of the key goals of the ACER Indigenous Visiting Fellows program is to bring together Indigenous early career researchers in a network with fellow educational researchers and mentors.

*'It is also a great step in building a network of Indigenous researchers, not just locally, but globally.'*

'As Indigenous early career researchers further develop their educational research skills, we think they will be better placed to participate in local and national research projects,' Ms Jackson said.

Tony Dreise, a Principal Research Fellow at ACER who descends from the Guumilroi people of north-west New South Wales and south-west Queensland, said the fundamental purpose of the program was to grow capacity in Indigenous educational research through collaboration.

'Indigenous researchers have a wealth of knowledge to share with ACER about the key challenges and opportunities in Indigenous education and research. And ACER has a wealth of knowledge to share with them about educational research in general and Indigenous educational research in particular,' Mr Dreise said.

## Latest research

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'By providing ongoing mentor support we also aim to engage early career researchers themselves to grow into the mentor role as they develop their research experience, networks and capabilities.'

George Hayden, an Associate Lecturer at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University who descends from the Njaki Njaki people of Western Australia, said mentoring was a significant attraction of the program.

'Mentoring is an important way to sustain research capacity as a two-way process that enables dialogue and support between Indigenous and non-

Indigenous researchers,' Mr Hayden said. 'Having worked in education for 10 years with five years of involvement in educational research, it is crucial that we obtain strong evidence about the effectiveness of programs that really make a difference.'

Mr Dreise, who facilitated the two-day intensive face-to-face workshop, said ongoing mentoring was crucial in sustaining research capacity.

'The aim is to bring researchers together in order to learn with and from each other and grow the capabilities of Indigenous educational research in Australia.'

The Indigenous Visiting Fellows program initiative is funded by an Innovation Grant from the ACER Foundation <http://www.acer.edu.au/foundation/innovation-grants>

Pictured from left, Mary McMurtrie, Danielle Armour and George Hayden at the ACER Indigenous Visiting Fellows program two-day workshop in April. Image © ACER.



# Latest research

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Pictured from left, Professor Mark Rose, Jenny Herbst, David Tout, Gina Milgate and Tony Dreise at the panel event. Image © ACER.

## Assessment for Indigenous learners

*ACER recently gathered a panel of educators to discuss improving Indigenous learning assessment.*

ACER Principal Research Fellow in Indigenous Education Tony Dreise outlined some of the challenges faced in providing suitable assessment for Indigenous students.

Mr Dreise said we are good at measuring the size of the gap, but need to know more about how to close it. There is insufficient attention to 'strengths based' teaching and learning, where the assessment informs where the student is at, in order to then focus on continual improvement from that point.

'At a micro level, it's about more than a fail or pass. At a macro level, it's about more than closing the gap,' Mr Dreise said.

According to Mr Dreise, more could be done to include Indigenous perspectives in all assessment material, for example with culturally relevant material or customised resources.

'Let's not forget the enormous diversity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. The stereotypical Indigenous learner is nonsense,' Mr Dreise said. 'The first language of an Indigenous student might be Standard Australian English, Indigenous English or another Indigenous language.'

Assessment needs to be organically based, not event based, according to Mr Dreise. This formative assessment begins with testing what a student knows. The teacher can then teach based on this information, with data and growth at the heart of what they do.

Mr Dreise said we need to be thinking more broadly about assessment for all students. This would include being more committed to the notion of personalised learning, working with a growth mindset. This may include strategies such as Indigenous learning plans, clear goal setting and instruction, mixed pedagogy and building confidence.

Professor Mark Rose, Director of Indigenous Strategy at La Trobe University in Melbourne, prompted a discussion about how Aboriginal students learn best through relationship. He cited the example of a Deakin University online student advice system that uses a personalised dashboard to aggregate essential information for students in response to their queries, providing answers in natural language. Professor Rose said similar interactive principles could be translated into assessments.

Mr David Tout, ACER Manager of Vocational, Adult and Workplace Education Services, said technology was one way forward, and discussed ACER's success with targeted, online, computer-based assessments, especially utilising interactive styles of responses. Students have responded well to the tactile, flexible and more relational format available on tablets. This format can benefit both Indigenous learners and other groups.

'The more we can build in visual and oral components, listening, watching and responding on computer, the better,' Mr Tout said.

'There is an enormous challenge of how to assess appropriate to each cohort, whatever that cohort is. Teachers need to learn to use lots of different ways of assessing. The assessment system has to change from traditional paper-based tests.'

Jenny Herbst, Head of Careers and Indigenous Support Coordinator at Trinity Grammar School in Melbourne, said assessment for Indigenous students is not one size fits all. Participants in Indigenous programs at Trinity Grammar are on a range of pathways – VCE to university, external programs, individual learning plans and AFL traineeships.

Ms Herbst also shared information about the newly established Melbourne Indigenous Transitions School and outlined how the school aims to help remote and rural students transition to take up scholarships at one of more than 20 city partner schools.

# Revisiting the research

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## Television to support school readiness

*A new television show is set to support a successful transition from home to school for young Indigenous children and their families, and improve long-term outcomes for Indigenous students.*

Some Indigenous children beginning school face many unique challenges, which put them at a disadvantage that they may never recover from. This is particularly true for children who do not speak English as a first language or who live in low socioeconomic communities and remote locations.

According to a 2010 ACER report, Year 3 Indigenous children have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than their non-Indigenous peers and this gap only becomes wider as children move through formal schooling.

These findings are supported by 2008 and 2009 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data, which show that Indigenous student achievement is significantly lower than non-Indigenous students in all areas and year levels.

An ACER research report in 2012 confirmed that family support, strong cultural identity, good health, positive self-identity and engaging in shared activities such as storytelling are likely to lead to resilience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Resilience was seen as a key factor in supporting a successful transition to school.

### The importance of the early years

Evidently, there is still a significant educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

In terms of how to close the gap, ACER's 2010 report *Using television to improve learning opportunities for Indigenous children*, by Dr Michele Lonsdale, noted that while extensive research shows the critical importance of early childhood in children's learning and development and subsequent educational and life outcomes, participation rates in early childhood programs are lower for Indigenous children than for their non-Indigenous peers.

Dr Lonsdale's research supports a proposal to develop a high-quality educational television program aimed primarily at Indigenous children aged three to six years.

'Studies show that television viewing is a popular activity for preschool-aged children and that educational television programs can help improve children's school readiness by building literacy and numeracy skills, cultural awareness, self-esteem and appropriate behaviours,' Dr Lonsdale writes.

'Such educational benefits can last into secondary school.'

International studies in countries such as Canada and New Zealand suggest that television is playing a critical role in revitalising Indigenous languages and encouraging a sense of pride among Indigenous viewers.

Television series such as these not only help Indigenous children to learn and strengthen their sense of connectedness to culture and to other Indigenous communities, but also improve the cultural understanding of non-Indigenous children.

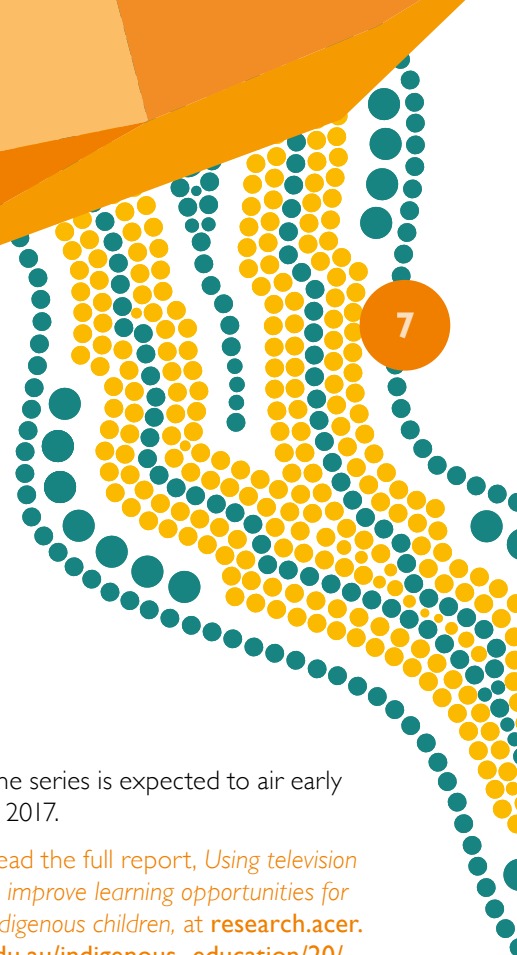
'Given that co-viewing television programs can potentially enrich a child's experience, and that a high percentage of Indigenous children already co-view with their parents or carers, then the proposed television program for Indigenous children would, ideally, appeal to Indigenous parents or carers,' Dr Lonsdale writes.

'Quality programs that promote engagement with learning at an early age, support home-to school transition, and recognise the importance of cultural awareness are needed to maximise learning opportunities for Indigenous young people.'

### Introducing *Little J and Big Cuz*

ACER has been planning the School Readiness Initiative: *Little J and Big Cuz* for some time. As part of this initiative a television series has been developed and is now being realised by Ned Lander Media with partners NITV, Screen Australia, Film Victoria, Screen Tasmania, ACER and the Australian Children's Television Foundation. In addition to the series, Lotterywest, the Dusseldorp Forum and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) are working with ACER to develop innovative educator resources to support the series and bring this shared vision to life.

# Revisiting the research



The primary objective is to improve school readiness for Indigenous preschool-aged children by providing a window into the world of school.

School readiness includes the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills, engagement in learning, and positive attitudes towards education and school.

The concept is not just a focus on the child being ready for school, but the school also being ready for the child. 'Ready schools' value the skills that Indigenous children bring and recognise the role that families and communities play in supporting a child's development.

The television series, *Little J and Big Cuz*, follows two Aboriginal children who explore the world through the gaps in the back fence.

The show itself is fun, with the animated series constructed as a narrative and the educational foundations being implicit rather than explicit. Episodes include school and activities that occur in this space – such as show-and-tell, lunchtime, school performances and so on – as the viewing audience follows the lead character, Little J, on his adventures as he comes to understand and enjoy the sometimes unfamiliar environment that can be school, and the greater world around him.

The animated nature of the series allows re-voicing in Indigenous languages. A small number of major languages will be re-voiced in the first year and further language versions produced in association with the communities interested in doing this.

A range of materials is also being developed that integrate with the series around episode themes and stories, and can be used by educators

within and outside of the classroom. The resources will be tailored to work within preschools and schools and will have a foundation in the Early Years Learning Framework and the national curriculum.

In the home and education environments, the television series will be supported by web- and print-based resources to encourage children to carry on learning outside of the series. These will be provided via a web portal and interactive applications to allow viewing flexibility and provide exciting and fun activities.

The series is expected to air early in 2017.

Read the full report, *Using television to improve learning opportunities for Indigenous children*, at [research.acer.edu.au/indigenous\\_education/20/](http://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous_education/20/)

For further information about the School Readiness Initiative visit [acer.edu.au/foundation/school-readiness-television-initiative](http://acer.edu.au/foundation/school-readiness-television-initiative)



Image © ACER.

## Troy Meston

*Indigenous Graduate Research Fellow*

*Troy Meston, who hails from the Gamilleroi/Yuwaalaraay people of north-western New South Wales, contributes to the research and development activities of ACER as an Indigenous Graduate Research Fellow.*

Troy, who has lived in Melbourne, Launceston, Perth and now south-east Queensland, is also a doctoral candidate, currently writing a thesis exploring the Aboriginal meaning of water and Indigenous research methodology.

After completing a Bachelor of Education, Troy was recruited by the Indigenous Sport Unit of the Australian Sports Commission to consult with Indigenous groups across Australia and help develop the Yulunga Indigenous games resource.

Nearly 10 years on, this resource is now used in 10 000 schools as well as in pre-service physical education programs. Troy was also engaged by the Disability Support Unit of the Australian Institute of Sport to develop an Indigenous version of the Sports Ability initiative, interweaving Indigenous games into the school-based Paralympic program designed for children of all abilities.

Troy recently joined ACER's Indigenous Graduate Program, where he is using his experience in Indigenous education to help design and construct survey and assessment instruments, implement data collection and analysis, and contribute to reports.

Despite his achievements, Troy's path to a career in education has been tumultuous, although he describes his experiences as 'no different to those of many Indigenous kids'.

'While growing up, school, homework and the benefits and outcomes of education were not known to me or to those in my family,' Troy says.

'My mum had me at 17 years old and knew little about raising a child, therefore much of my development happened autonomously and at a very young age I was the man of the house.'

By his early teens, Troy was dealing with the impact of his family's struggles with disability, alcohol and drug abuse, violence and depression.

Troy spent the majority of his adolescence outside the house and became embroiled with gang associations, which involved territorial fighting, police harassment and a drug-based culture. Consequently, Troy had little tolerance for the discipline-based mandates offered by authoritarian teachers, which led to clashes, truancy and disengagement from the schooling process.

'The dichotomy between home and school was hard to rationalise in terms of the discipline, teacher attitudes and a curriculum that had no relevance to my life at that time. None of my teachers linked classroom-based knowledge to my future and I could see no relevance in what I was learning and where my life was heading,' Troy says.

Troy admits that he stayed on at school for the security of his peer group who, at that time, substituted for family. The group passed school by stealing exams from teachers and working with the dux of school to generate answers.

After graduating, Troy was accepted into Justice Studies at Queensland University of Technology but dropped out in the first week after being asked to write an annotated biography – a task he fundamentally didn't understand.

*'It was at this point that the gaps in my knowledge became apparent to me, so I quit and became heavily involved in my life outside of education,' Troy says.*

The last lines of Malcolm X's autobiography came to hold personal relevance for me, where he states, "only the mistakes have been mine", Troy says.

'I pondered this for hours and knew that only I could change my life, so I reasoned to go back to university. Two of my school friends had enrolled in physical education degrees, so based on that I chose the education path and re-enrolled.'



The other incident that forced a change in Troy's life was losing one of his school friends to a heroin overdose.

'As a 20-year-old standing beside my friend's grave, my own mortality came crashing into my consciousness for the first time,' Troy says.

'This new-found awareness projected me upon a path of searching and investigation and, as a result, a few years later I accepted the Islamic faith and completed my pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina and came back a new man, with a new-found structure and capacity to build instead of destroy.'

This capacity allowed Troy to progress in higher education, and be able to give back to the community through both teaching and research.

'I have seen the difference education can make to a life, as I am the first person in my immediate family to complete my junior and senior levels of schooling, the first to attend university, complete a bachelor degree, a masters and now undertake a PhD,' Troy says.

'My education has also allowed me the tools to be able to get married, build a family, and to be a husband and a father. I can now offer the stability that wasn't present when I was growing up.'

Troy says that the ACER Indigenous Graduate Program offers him a unique opportunity as an early career Indigenous researcher to work on innovative projects that seek to address longstanding and underlying

issues through creative and evidence-based means.

'How I implement this professional development into the future ties in with the cultural imperative of allowing our kids to travel further than we have, building upon the pathways that have been established for us by Elders and those who have gone before us,' Troy says.

'It is important that Indigenous children gain an education that does not limit or negate what it means to be Indigenous, but rather dovetails with a culturally safe space, all the while facilitating the means to access the mainstream system in order to build personal and community based infrastructure that eventually allows us to move into any space we choose.'

'Indigenous students should be able to engage in and complete milestones of education without prejudice – an education that leads to sustainable employment, allowing stability and quality of life to be achieved upon Indigenous terms.'



# Reconciliation at ACER

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ACER continues to implement and enhance activities and processes that contribute toward the efforts of reconciliation, including making improvements to our Reconciliation Action Plan. Over the past 12 months there has been a strong focus on increasing the employment of Indigenous staff at ACER. The organisation has also hosted a group of Indigenous Visiting Fellows to participate in a workshop about educational research and its implications in Indigenous education.

## Reconciliation Week

On Friday 29 May 2015, ACER celebrated Reconciliation Week with a morning tea.

The event highlighted the relationship between ACER staff and reconciliation, and was a valuable opportunity to celebrate Indigenous history and culture in Australia.



## Reconciliation Action Plan

ACER is preparing its second Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) which will build upon the first RAP of 2012 and include enhancements of current actions and the development of new actions. A core focus of this RAP will be strengthening ACER's journey of cultural competency over the next three years.

# Reconciliation at ACER

## Indigenous Fellows welcomed

Two Graduate Research Fellows have been appointed as part of ACER's new Indigenous Graduate Program. In May this year Jacynta Krakouer, who descends from the Noongar people of south-western Australia, commenced in ACER's Melbourne office and Troy Meston, who descends from the Gamilleroi/Yuwaalaraay people of north-western New South Wales, joined ACER's Brisbane office.

The structure of the graduate program involves three placements for four months at a time, centred on projects within ACER's Assessment and Psychometric Research, Educational

Monitoring and Research, and Professional Resources Divisions. At the end of their placement the graduates will then select a research division in which to work for the remainder of the program. See page 8 for a profile on Troy Meston in this issue of *Indigenous Education Update*.

On 27 and 28 April 2015, a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participated in ACER's Indigenous Visiting Fellow Development Program in Melbourne. Participants had an opportunity to learn about

ACER and our work in Indigenous educational research and development, and identify research questions and appropriate methodologies in pursuit of their own research projects. An online space for the Visiting Fellows to stay connected with ACER and each other is in development. Visiting Fellow Alison Quin, who descends from the Tagalak people of the Gulf country in north-western Queensland, also presented at ACER's annual Research Conference, which this year addressed the theme, 'Learning assessments: Designing the future.'



The Indigenous Education team: Tony Dreise, Principal Research Fellow, Troy Meston, Graduate Research Fellow, Jacynta Krakouer, Graduate Research Fellow, Gina Milgate, Research Fellow, and Bill Perrett, Senior Research Fellow.

## Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is an independent not-for-profit organisation. ACER's mission is to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning across the life span.

ACER is involved in the collection, analysis, interpretation and use of reliable information to assist educational decision makers – from individual teachers to system leaders and policy makers – in two ways: to help them help learners by identifying educational progress and challenges, and to help them identify and implement effective policies and practices on the basis of good evidence.

ACER was established in 1930 and has since built a strong reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policy makers and professional practitioners. As an independent organisation, ACER receives no direct financial support and generates its entire income through contracted research and development projects and through products and services that it develops and distributes.

As an international leader in educational research, ACER is committed to improving learning through the Centre for Global Education Monitoring, Centre for Assessment Reform and Innovation, Centre for Education Policy and Practice, and Centre for Science of Learning @ ACER.

ACER has experienced significant growth in recent years and now has more than 380 staff located in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Dubai, Jakarta, London, New Delhi, Perth and Sydney. In 2012, 122 of ACER's staff held Masters Degrees, 63 held Doctorates, and 120 held a teaching qualification.

*ACER is committed to improving learning across the life span and has identified the improvement of outcomes for Indigenous learners as an organisational priority. ACER recognises the importance of respecting Indigenous peoples and their cultures in its work in Indigenous education. ACER understands that this is an important part of developing a culturally conscious workplace for its employees.*

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