

## Confidence, community, culture:

### Supporting resilience through the Aboriginal Girls' Circle

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which we stand today, the Darug people.

I want to thank the Elders for their support of the work of UWS as well as many other institutions in Greater Western Sydney.

The Aboriginal Girls' Circle pilot project took place in Dubbo, on Wiradjuri country. I would like to also extend my respects to the traditional Wiradjuri custodians of Central Western New South Wales.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks must go to the Dubbo Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) for their consistent encouragement and valuable advice and to the Western region AECG for their participation in the community focus groups.

Finally, on behalf of both NAPCAN and UWS I take this opportunity to offer heartfelt thanks to the Elders, in particular Auntie Pat, Auntie Nita, Uncle Ray and Auntie Rachel, as well as to the students, families and staff of Dubbo College, and local community members, who so generously supported this pilot project with their time and immense goodwill.

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*An initiative of NAPCAN designed to increase social connection, participation and self-confidence among young Aboriginal women attending secondary schools.*

**NAPCAN**  
PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE

## AGC Aims

- to empower young Aboriginal women to discover and use their own strengths
- to identify, develop and take pride in themselves and their community
- to help them learn how to make positive decisions take action together to create change where they see a need
- to help girls find a sense of healthy belonging within their own community and with the wider Australian society.

## Circle solutions

Core principles

- inclusion
- democracy
- safety
- respect
- fun

3 fundamental protocols

- 1) *when one person is speaking everyone else listens;*
- 2) *no one has to speak if they choose not to;*
- 3) *no put-downs.*

(Roffey, 2014; Roffey & McCarthy, 2013)

[www.sueroffey.com](http://www.sueroffey.com)

[www.circlesolutionsnetwork.com](http://www.circlesolutionsnetwork.com)

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## AGC components

- Residential camp
- Aboriginal AGC Coordinator
- Weekly circles at school
- Involvement of Elders
- Community projects
  - cultural awareness
  - anti-racism
  - friendship and fighting
  - community health issues

## Research objectives

1. To determine the effects of the AGC for participants' resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity;
2. To investigate and track the development of culturally appropriate tools and methods for measuring these constructs; and
3. To evaluate the relative effectiveness of various components of the program and implementation processes.

## Research design

- Consultation with community
- Field observations of the AGC in action
- Interviews & focus groups *N = 46*
  - participants
  - group leaders
  - community Elders
  - school staff
  - parents

### Student survey *N= 41*

- Resilience
- Connectedness
- Cultural Identity
- Self-Concept



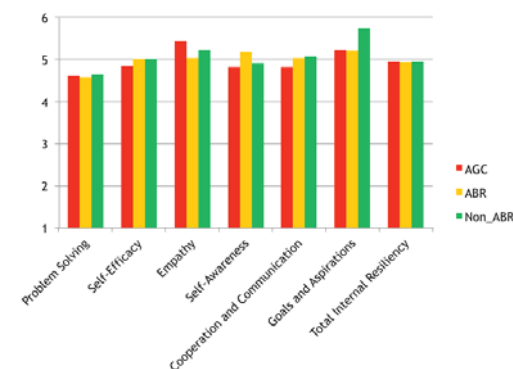
## Findings

- Evidence of enhanced resilience, connectedness, self-concept and cultural identity for the majority of girls.
- Social skills improved.
- Higher empathy scores suggest that emphasis on emotional literacy provided valuable personal and relationship skills.
- All staff and community reported improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem and leadership ability.

## Best features

- Camps
- Time with Elders
- Meeting new people
- Circle activities
- Connecting to culture
- Connecting with other Aboriginal girls
- Facilitators
- Circles process
- School-based AGC Coordinator
- Positive engagement of Aboriginal staff
- Circle Solutions framework and training

## Internal resilience scores



## Resilience...

*emotion regulation & communication skills*

*“You can go to AGC sad and you’ll leave it like really happy.”*

*“You can talk to, like, [facilitators] about your problems and stuff and they’ll help you with it”.*

*“You can share stuff that you can’t share really with anyone else and they’ll like help you with it. I would say not even a best friend - I wouldn’t be able to share.”*

## Resilience...

### Standing up

*“I’m hearing positive things. I’m seeing positive things, and just seeing the growth in those kids too because I’ve watched them grow up and I’m just really excited that they’re taking their place and standing up. I think that’s really positive.” (Elder)*

## Resilience...

### Turning around

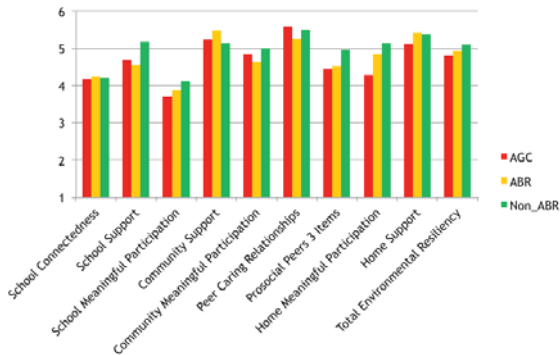
*“Some of the girls have got different perceptions of themselves. They’ve learnt to think of themselves differently, because part of what we do in Circles is reflect on you and yourself and your community, and who you want to be. For some of those individuals, that’s turned them around.” (AGC Coordinator)*

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## Environmental resilience



## Connectedness...

*“Being around not just any girls, like girls that mean a lot to you and you can share everything with them and **you can be yourself around them** instead of, like, other girls where you have to, like, be another person”.*

*“I feel connected in some way - that you’ve built a friendship with that person. It doesn’t get awkward or anything”.*

## Connectedness...

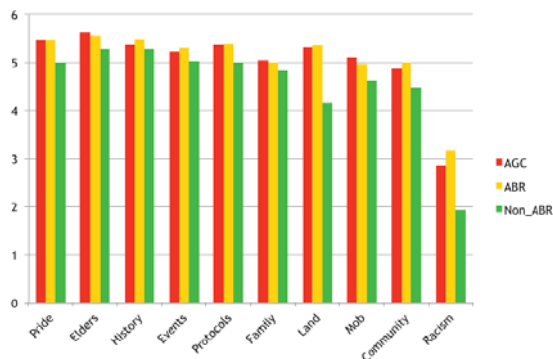
*“I think a lot of these girls walk around feeling like they’re not connected to anyone or anything ... So for them to come to the circle and feel – and you can just see it – **their eyes light up**. They feel like a family and they know that they’re allowed to say – it’s not wrong, whatever they say. Just having that connection that they, I don’t think they’ve ever had with anyone else. Same with myself. **It’s a good feeling.**” (AGC Coordinator)*

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## Cultural identity



## Negotiating two worlds

*"Some of them are successful across the two worlds. Some of them not so. They're fighting that inner battle all of the time of I've got to do this, but that's not really valued as much in my culture as in the other culture. You know? If I follow their ways, or whatever, then I'm going to - not cop it, but I'm going to be teased or whatever about it at home, or if I follow the home ways then I'm going to be teased about it at school."* (Aboriginal teacher)

## Learning about culture

*"If I tell them some of the great things that I've learnt about Aboriginal culture, women's role and that I just think that the girls here, it'll encourage them more to be - because they don't know much about it either and of course, what they're learning is not really all that encouraging. Because the teachers don't know and the parents aren't telling them."* (Elder)

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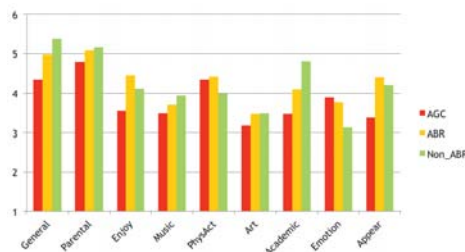
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## Facing racism...

*"You'll be out in the big wide world where you'll face racism still even though you don't - people tell you that there's no racism in Australia. You'll experience it, you'll have to be fighting for everything you get and you'll be expecting your parents to support you. ... I think that it's just that we need to talk more to young people about these things."* (Elder)

## Self-concept



Aboriginal students' self-esteem was related to their social relationships within the community, at home and with peers and not with school

⇒ Self-concept based more on social role than individual traits

## Promoting resilience

- Cultural identity, resilience and wellbeing are strongly related for Aboriginal youth
- Peer relationships and community contributed most to Aboriginal students' resilience, with home also important and school less so
- Trauma, racism, social disadvantage are major risk factors

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## Implications

- ‘Evidence-based’ programs focus on teaching social and emotional competencies from an individualistic perspective
- ‘Two-way’ approaches are sorely needed
- Cultural competence of the facilitator/educator is paramount

## Where to from here?

- Strengthened implementation model based on establishing partnerships between local Aboriginal communities and schools
- Steering group includes community Elder/s, school-based champion/s (senior staff member), AGC coordinator, AGC co-facilitator, Aboriginal education officer/s
- Circle Solutions training for all staff involved in AGC
- Cultural competence requirements for non-Aboriginal staff
- Cultural identity component developed by local community with support of AGC coordinator
- Girls’ community projects accrue to service learning certificates
- Implementation support provided by NAPCAN and research team.

## Further info

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<http://napcan.org.au/our-programs/#a43>

AGC photofilm 

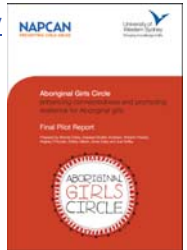
[www.sueroffey.com/aboriginal-girls-circle-new-photo-film/](http://www.sueroffey.com/aboriginal-girls-circle-new-photo-film/)

Full research report

<http://handle.uws.edu.au:8081/1959.7/540709>

Brief report

[www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/aboriginal\\_girls\\_circle\\_37492.html?issueID=12921](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/aboriginal_girls_circle_37492.html?issueID=12921)



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