
Prodigy or Problem Child? Challenges with Identifying Aboriginal Giftedness

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I spent a lot of my academic and professional life working with gifted people, gifted educators, and I'll trace some of that history to see how a cognitive psychologist ended up in a gifted education space. But first, as protocol would demand, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on traditional Aboriginal land. I'd like to acknowledge that we are on the land of the Cadigal people of the Eora nation and many other language groups that sit in this beautiful city area. I am from Cadigal land, although it is a suburb that people know as Maroubra, which is about five kilometres east of here.

People always wonder what acknowledgements are and what welcomes are to country and I really think that it is problematic that they have lost their value in modern life. But it is very important that when Aboriginal people were moving from country to country — and remember, Australia was made up of hundreds of countries and thousands of language groups — part of the protocol that was always exchanged was that when you walked onto new land you announced yourself as being there, as arrived. And an elder from the nation on which you had just arrived would come along and welcome you to their land and ask you to abide by the laws of the land and respect the laws of that country. And I think that is going to be woven in the theme today, about the respect of Aboriginal knowledges and respect of Aboriginal perspectives. So, that is what an acknowledgement is and I acknowledge and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Regarding the title “Prodigy or Problem Child”, people might wonder where that came from. My first non-Aboriginal mentor was somebody called Miraca Gross, the founder of GERRIC¹. When I first met Miraca at the School of Education at the University of NSW as a PhD student, she indicated to me that she felt that I was a child prodigy, that I was a gifted child who was never identified at school. I indicated to her that I was more like a problem child and, as evidence, showed her all my school reports. Those indicated that Paul was making good progress towards entering Long Bay Juniors², up the road in Malabar. Two very different perspectives.

¹ The Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre located at the University of New South Wales

² A reference to Long Bay Correctional Centre, located in Malabar, NSW.

How could somebody who was the first person in their family to finish primary school end up being one of Australia's ten top researchers? Miraca said that it was because I was gifted. I said I worked hard. And that rigorous and academic debate went back many years. In fact it was a very vibrant place to work, UNSW, in the late eighties and early nineties when we exchanged some very great discussion in gifted education. I have seen it evolve from its genesis to the place it is today and I have come across some outstanding people along the way: Karen Rogers, Wilma Vialle, Catherine Wormald, Jennifer Rowley, Katherine Hoekman, and many more.

We face a real challenge in this country. Gifted children, Miraca used to say this to me all the time and Wilma always insists (Wilma is now my mentor at the University of Wollongong), "Gifted children are some of the most disadvantaged and disengaged people on this planet." It was said to me in the late eighties, "Oh this is utter nonsense. A pack of middle-class kids, overachieving, in their classrooms, this is absurd." But over the decades, I've come to truly believe that our most gifted and talented people *are* unrepresented in our society, chronically unrepresented. And particularly in Australian society that puts a very high value on sporting prowess. If you ask people in schools to name their role models, very rarely will you get anybody who has reached the heights of academic or educational achievement. It is a very sad picture. It is a lot better than it was a couple of decades before you [audience members] started getting in the space, identifying this group of people and putting in curricula that would challenge and enhance their abilities, and truly take them to the next level. Without that, I think we'd be even in further disarray. So it is great what is happening.

The biggest challenge of all is that not all cultural groups or racial groups have the same opportunities to fulfil their real potential. The oldest living civilisations on this planet are Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people lie behind non-Aboriginal people in this country by a massive amount. With all the good work and all good intentions that have been put in the space of Aboriginal education, we are no better than we were decades ago. In fact I had the pleasure of sitting through a plenary talk yesterday, and I just want to acknowledge that person, Melinda Webber. She was speaking on Maori initiatives and Maori techniques for identifying gifted indigenous people, and I only realised then how many decades we still lie behind our friends across the creek³, that we really have a long way to go. That is the real reality for many Aboriginal children.

[Shows photo of a group of Aboriginal children] The grim reality is if I had a hundred of those beautiful Aboriginal kids up there, at best, on the current averages, only one, one, will make it university. One out of a hundred of those people, of our people, of Australian people, no matter if they're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, one out of a hundred of a group of those people make it to university. Until this situation is rectified, that is unfinished business for Australia and it is unfinished business for gifted education. It is unfinished business for gifted education because part of your important, underlying philosophy is that giftedness and talent knows no boundaries. Giftedness is a condition that can 'afflict' anyone. Is that not the philosophy? So, by

³ The 'creek' is a colloquial reference to the Tasman Sea, which separates Australia and New Zealand.

definition, it must afflict all racial groups, all cultural groups, all socio-economic groups. If that is the case, then we are under-identifying Aboriginal people.

What is giftedness from an Aboriginal perspective? Of course there is no such thing as an Aboriginal perspective because of the numerous nations and language groups. We are not one people, we are many, and there is a lot of rivalry between us. Especially at State of Origin⁴ time. But, what is valued as giftedness in Aboriginal culture is a little different to what is known as giftedness in Australian non-Aboriginal culture. But first, I want to give you a test. I've got my own little gifted program running and I want to ask you all a couple of items. First question is, and I'll exclude our international audience because I won't expect you to answer this one, but you can try if you like, no iPhones allowed! Okay, question one, what is mutton fish and where would I find one? Hands up, does anybody know? Yes? [Audience member answers] No. Yes? [Audience member answers] Yes, it is abalone. A mutton fish is abalone. Where do you find it? Along the east coast of Australia, and all parts of Australia actually, but every one of those kids [pointing to photo of Aboriginal children] not only knows what a mutton fish is, they know how to get them. From an Aboriginal perspective, this person [who correctly answered the question] can join my talented group. I've got another question. How many second cousins do you have and can you name them? [Audience member answers] You can? Okay. How many have you got? [Audience member answers, "I've got 18"]. And can you quickly give their first names? [Audience member begins to list names. Names a few and then stops. "Oh no! Can I be half-gifted?"] I'll tell you what, I'll put you on the reserve list because you show potential for giftedness.

Now I hope I'm not being trivial, because I'm not meaning to be, and I'm not trying to belittle anybody or any system. Those kids know who their second cousins are, every single one of them, and third cousins; they know them by name, know their genealogy, know every single relationship with each of their cousins. In fact, if you're ever in a class with Aboriginal kids and they're doing circles with connection lines to them, they're not doing art. They're connecting up their kin. That is an extremely important part of being an Aboriginal person, knowing your kin. Kinship is one of the predictors, one of the variables that is seen as gifted in an Aboriginal community, knowing who your family is. In an Aboriginal structure, of course, they're not really regarded as second cousins, they're regarded as brothers and sisters. There we are, we have one person, I won't go any further, we have one person for our program, we'll do some intensive work later on. I will have a couple more down the track but I just wanted to make the point that from an Aboriginal perspective, giftedness is a measure of your knowledge of your ancestry, your land, your kin, and your respect for your community and elders. That is what giftedness is. And with being identified as a leader or a gifted person of any kind, comes an enormous responsibility. You are expected to care for certain family groups, you're expected to care for certain totems, and for your natural environment. This is a big weight on anyone's shoulders. Certainly I'm glad that I was a problem child. It is an enormous responsibility.

⁴ State of Origin is a series of rugby matches played between the states of new South Wales and Queensland.

You already know all this. What is regarded as giftedness from a western knowledge system and an Aboriginal knowledge system are quite different. The reality is, we are working in one Australia, and the best way to work together is to respect each other's knowledge systems and schooling systems. From that, a couple of things follow. Misconception number one: Aboriginal people do not value school or academic achievement – wrong! Aboriginal children respect and value mainstream non-Aboriginal education and schooling as much as their own, in general. This is a common misconception and it is one that is not based on evidence. Young Aboriginal children do value teaching, they value learning, and they value what's available in a non-Aboriginal framework. The other side of the coin is whether what they bring to the task is valued equally.

I started a learning centre called Myimbarr Learning Centre at Wollongong, about two or three years ago. Included were some high-potential Aboriginal young people and also Aboriginal young people who were struggling at school. I was told that I was mad, that I would not have these young people turn up after school to do more school work. But they travelled for up to an hour in a bus to come to the culture centre – we didn't bring them into a university, we brought them to the culture centre at Wollongong, which is an Aboriginal space – we brought them there to do a combination of two things. One: we did some extended curricula following the school, basically worked in with the schools with what they were doing, but more challenging activities. We used university mentors to do that, but intertwined within the two hours, we had one hour of school-based work and we had an hour of Aboriginal knowledges, Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal activities, conducted by recognised elders and recognised significant people in the community. When I drove the bus around – well I didn't drive the bus but I was on the bus – I was getting very nervous because my Vice-Chancellor invested money in this and all the education experts were telling me that it was going to fail, I still remember the day we drove around Barrack Point, down nearly Berkely in the south parts of Wollongong, and I looked up and I saw kids and their families all the way down the street. And I said to myself, our biggest problem now is getting more buses. Aboriginal kids want to learn just as much as any other kid. What we need to do, however, is respect their knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledges are now taking a very high prominence in educational systems. In fact Charles Darwin University has just had forty-five million dollars to build and create an indigenous knowledges centre. Indigenous knowledges are part of respecting and acknowledging what Aboriginal kids bring to the classroom, their knowledge of their natural environment, their knowledge of their family, their knowledge of their culture, their knowledge of language, their approaches to learning. These all need to be valued if we want to really, seriously narrow the gap.

Prodigy or problem child? Our young people need to be our first, they are our first nation people, they need to be given our attention so they can realise their talents and their gifts like all children. This society [Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented] is clearly one of the groups that do that, we only have to look at yesterday's conference program to see that that is part of the space. What are we doing about it in universities that you may or may not wish to tap into? Well, the first program is one you may have heard a bit about and it is called the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, I have to declare a conflict of interest here, I am a

board director. The greatest resource our young people have, the greatest resource that our university has, is also our cheapest resource (don't tell them I said that). Our greatest resource is our students. One of the best ways that we can capacity build Aboriginal young people is to pair them up with a mentor, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, we are in this journey together. This is not new, mentoring schemes are certainly not new and it needs to be over a sustained period of time. Not this one-off of football players going into schools, kicking a ball around, signing it and then darting off; they have no penetration into their educational lives. For many years in schools you'd have Aboriginal role models come in — generally from sporting backgrounds — kick a ball around, tell the kids good stuff such as “stay in school, eat well, see you later, I'm off to the match”. No effect. Absolutely no effect.

Within our programs we've actually got what we call the Dragons⁵ in the Classrooms, a program where they have actually their role models sitting in the class reading books with them. In fact I told them if I see a football anywhere near any of my schools, I'll kick it out of the paddock. In fact the first time I did and I kicked it straight into the wall and nearly broke the window at Jervis Bay School, so sporting prowess is probably not my forte. The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience partners Aboriginal children from low socio-economic, high population Aboriginal schools with university mentors over an entire year. Students come into campus, are transported into campus during the week and throughout that one hour per week they build up a rapport and an understanding with those mentors and the mentees. It becomes a very strong bond. In fact many of the mentors who have been in the program tell me that they've learned more than the mentee. They've learned that some people mightn't have breakfast until four in the afternoon, they've learned that their books that were there at night mightn't be there in the morning, they also have learned how we engage Aboriginal kids in their community and have become a part of that community. In fact, some of the mentors have done their year and I still see them back years later. I say, “What are you still doing here?” I didn't mean it like that, of course, but they're still at the homework centres, they're still in the learning communities, you still see them at events, and they say, “Oh I'm working for this smaller firm, I'm helping doing some pro bono work for your organisation.” So, the long-lived effects of that mentorship are outstanding. The mentee builds a sense of worth, builds a sense of capacity and builds a sense that this is not somewhere that I can't go. Universities, opportunity, gifted and talented programs are very foreign to some groups of people, and particularly intimidating to Aboriginal kids and a lot of other kids too, especially from low socio-economic groups who haven't had the family history, family genealogy, of lots of people going to university; it can be a very intimidating place. This program is designed to break that down. All those kids of course won't end up in gifted and talented programs, but as Wilma always says to me, “A rising tide carries the most ships.” There's no point looking for ships in an empty harbour. If you create capacity in an entire community, you are lifting all ships and allowing the ones with the most potential and the gifts that you want to excite in this world to be able to be achieved. I believe this is one of the programs. It operates from seven universities in Australia and will probably take on more next year, which will be part of the strategy – it's not the answer – it is part of the holistic strategy we need to work with. So, that is an example of a program that capacity builds Aboriginal

⁵ The Dragons are a Rugby League team.

students to then be able to identify those and be able to work with those groups to identify the most talented and gifted in all communities.

The other initiatives I want to very quickly talk about while I've still got time are the Myimbarr Learning Centre, which is a cluster of fourteen schools that comes together and provides a blend of extended school-based learning and emphasis on indigenous knowledge systems. There is research that has shown (see the work of Caroline Jones and Jenny Munro) that just the teaching of traditional languages in schools has a pronounced impact in terms of English acquisition and encoding and engagement and academic performance. And, when compared to high population Aboriginal schools that don't have the program, there are clear differences. In fact the whole language program actually showed clear acceleration of non-Aboriginal students, as well, who've learnt the traditional languages; so it's best for everybody in that program.

The other example is the University of Wollongong, which is the first university in the world to have a presence on a naval site, to actually be part of a naval community. I won't tell you the story of how that came about. Does anybody know where Jervis Bay is? [*Audience say yes. Audience member talks.*] We have a representative from the Jervis Bay community here, Allyson Whiteoak, she actually works in the school that I'm talking about, what they have done to engage Aboriginal students and make them realise their true potential, along with non-Aboriginal students. It is a very unique school, Jervis Bay school. It has the most diverse student body I've ever seen. It sits on ACT (Australian Capital Territory) land which is strange because it's in the middle of NSW (New South Wales), and it's a closed military site. The new principal of the school invited me down to visit the school there. He said, "Paul you've never seen such a unique group of students." And I said, "I've seen them all, I tell you." And he said, "Come down here." On the way [to the school] I noticed that these houses were sitting there, not being used. I said [to the navy personnel], "What are these houses for?" And they responded, "They're for the navy officers and the navy personnel's families, their children and families." And I said, "Oh yes, well why aren't they being used?" They said, "Some of the families like to live off site so they don't have to live and breathe the same thing." So I said, "Oh, can I have one of them?" "What do you want?" And I said, "Can we have a couple of them for our interns coming down and living here in the community? Our fourth year students who have been on three or four professional experiences, who are going to be teachers, ones that can make a real impact, can they come and live down here?"

Fortunately we have a new commander named Fiona McNaught who, being female and in the navy was a great feat to get to that height, would've had to deal with a lot of nay-sayers, and she and the whole school made it happen. In this school that has some of the most disadvantaged people in this country. The navy community, in many ways they are far more disadvantaged than Aboriginal people in that community. If you've had to move three, four or five times before you are ten years old, you've had such a sense of disengagement, and such social interaction issues — they bring one culture, the navy personnel's kids; then, the kids from the Wreck Bay community. They come to school and they all follow the ACT curriculum and we have some NSW kids thrown in just to make it nice and diverse. So in that school, one of the programs that has excited Aboriginal kids and released their talents is the Booderee Junior Ranger project, which puts an emphasis and respect on indigenous knowledge

systems but all its outcomes are expected to be educational outcomes, traditional western outcomes. They are expected to excel in literacy and numeracy and they are expected to excel in all aspects of school education. And they have.

Also, to return to the Myimbarr Learning Centre in Wollongong, three of those students from that homework centre who were not identified before have now been identified as gifted and talented students. "A rising tide lifts all ships." The best way that we can engage indigenous young people is to invest in them through structured mentoring programs, through school-based extension programs that respect and bring to the table their community and their knowledge systems and celebrate what is beautiful about learning in everybody's culture. The outcomes, of course, need to be school based and school focussed and that is all I've got to say on that matter. Thank you.

Chair: I'm not letting him get away that easily. Once again I would just like to acknowledge that the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations sponsored the Indigenous Strand as well as the Dual Exceptionality Strand in this conference and so they were responsible for Paul's presentation this morning. So I do want to thank you Paul, for your presentation, I'm aware that we have a little bit of time so I'd like to throw it open to the floor if anybody has any questions or comments that they'd like to make.

Audience member: *Urban aboriginal children are often absent from school because they go home to be with the mob when there is a problem, when there's been a death, or something of a catastrophic nature to the group. I don't think that we know what to do with those absences and I don't think we know what to do and I think there might be a little bit, or a lot of, misunderstanding by our schools as to how to manage that in a positive manner. What do you think we should do?*

Paul Chandler: With even the best intentions, absenteeism from school is a real problem. It is a problem and it's sort of an eggshell. Generally it can be a community responsibility to be around deaths and funerals and stuff like that or domestic issues that are going on. And there is a degree of cultural sensitivity where the teachers feel that they can't tread, an eggshell. Walking through those cultural eggshells is hard work, my way of doing it is just walk straight through it. I'd say, "Is there anything the school can do to support you?" I would try, the best outcome is to try and communicate with the family, emphasise the importance of the young person being at school and working on those issues. They shouldn't need to take on the massive responsibilities that are often placed on young people, but I think, it's about working, the conference theme, the reason why I've picked the programs that I've picked, is because the theme of the conference says "effective partnerships". And that's why I picked the AIME, the Booderee and the Myimbarr Learning Centre. It's about partnerships. It's about the school getting in a partnership with the family. What happens at Jervis Bay, if one of the kids don't show up because of a domestic issue, he's down there banging on their doors, "K, come on, what's for breakfast, let's get on with it." Of course, in some schools you can't go round banging on people's doors, but you don't know Bob who's about six foot eight tall, so he goes banging on any door he wants. But I think the answer to your question is, it's an effective partnership. And having a conversation with the family, early intervention is always the best. Get the

family in early and say, “Look, I know that there’s a lot of family issues going on but I’m worried that little Mary’s learning is going to be affected by this.”

Audience member: I think it’s an urban problem.

Paul Chandler: I think it’s a problem. Often the common myth is that people like to have this romantic notion that Aboriginals exist only in remote, rural communities and that we’re still running around with loin cloths on and hunting at night. The fact of the matter is the majority of Aboriginal people are in urban areas. The most, the largest population of Aboriginal peoples sit in the south-west of Sydney, the north coast of NSW and the south east of Qld, but of course they’re quite diverse and all over the country but when people think of engaging Aboriginal children...what was the first picture that came into your head? Did you have a picture of a kid, you tend to think of Aboriginal as remote but it’s actually, it is also, an urban issue. And in urban issues there are problems with absenteeism. Also you have to hold people accountable, because you have to ensure that you don’t lower the standards in terms of using the absenteeism not for just not showing up at all. Just like lots of kids do, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Audience member posed question about scholarships.

Paul Chandler: First point is I would go to your local AECG and start there. AECG is your Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. You can check to see if you’ve got one in your region, that is the first protocol step. If you get nothing back, you get nothing back, but that’s the first protocol step and then they will communicate through their regional networks. The bush telegraph is also a very, once you tell them, some of the members tell the others and it really happens quickly. The old bush telegraph is a lot faster than email I’ll tell you.

Audience member: I’ve come from experiencing more boys, indigenous boys in boarding school. Is there much research about engaging those kids who do come from those very rural communities?

Paul Chandler: The closest I think I’ve seen is the remote community of Jervis Bay, because that is still counted as an isolated, rural community. I think there’s similarities in the research that what inspires Aboriginal people in one place inspires them elsewhere. In an all-boys school? I think a program that would look at their knowledge systems and their links to the natural environment would probably be one that would be successful. An outdoor program, something of a junior ranger program background, I’m expecting to also have some challenges in an all boys, rural Aboriginal school.

Audience member: Lots of different communities, so lots of language groups. Lots of different boys from lots of different islands, including Palm Island. Certainly a diverse group of indigenous kids plus other kids.

Paul Chandler: What was the common theme of engagement where the young people from different language groups, where do they like to intersect?

Audience member: Football.

Paul Chandler: I'd put them in the natural environment, where the owners of the land, the young people of the land show off their land and talk about their land, their totems, their knowledge systems, and use that as a benchmark to engage all the students.

Audience member: I'm just wondering what's happening here, in support of what's happening up north? The fact that indigenous languages have been told that they cannot be used as language of instruction in schools, it's meaning the people who have trained as teachers are not being felt to have an importance in the schools and I'm just wondering what's happening down here, in terms of support for the people up there?

Paul Chandler: Well politically Aboriginal groups are supporting the notion of bilingual and trilingual education. It's interesting what's happening up north, the reverse is happening down south. They're trying to implement more, in NSW for instance they're trying to put in more traditional languages into the curriculum and up north they're taking them away.

Audience member: I'm saying there isn't support, in terms of funding, for these programs and I'm wondering what people down here are doing to help those programs that exist for people that do have their own language, who have had this culture to have it continue within a process, it's great what's happening as far as things being built up, I'm just wondering what's happening down here.

Paul Chandler: The place we go for that is Canberra. It's basically DEEWR are the people.

Audience member: I just mean indigenous groups.

Paul Chandler: Most of the lands councils in this state and many other states support the north in the use of traditional languages in classrooms, but they provide their political support but it's a change of government policy which is required, which is outside our jurisdiction.

Chair: Paul, thank you for sharing your passion for indigenous education with us and for creating a space within your passion for our passion, gifted education, I think the way you spoke with such passion certainly touched the hearts of many people here.