

Evaluation of Red Dust Role Models

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Evolution

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Assessing the performance of Red Dust Role Models in their work with young people and their communities on remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

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Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the performance of Red Dust Role Models against extant best practice principles for work with young people and their communities on remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Red Dust Role Models Ltd is a not-for-profit organisation; harnessing the profile and influence of positive role models to deliver health and community safety messages and inspire healthy lifestyle decisions among remote, indigenous youth. Role Models also promote education as a pathway to increased opportunities for personal development, employment and preparedness for community leadership.

Red Dust's Approach to Working with Communities

This report argues that, because of its unique cluster of skills, and its approach to work in Aboriginal communities, Red Dust Role Models provides a valuable service to remote communities: it matches, and in a number of respects surpasses, best practice standards for work with remote Aboriginal communities, in terms of:

- working in close partnership with communities, agencies and young people;
- involving young people in the creation of activities;
- nurturing long term relationships, with communities rather than 'one off' programs and visits;
- framing the content of programs through dialogue with communities - rather than on a 'one fits all' basis;
- focusing on sustainability and enhancing the quantum of community skills;
- encouraging Indigenous leadership through mentoring and community ambassador initiatives;
- working with children in the school setting and at risk groups disengaged from the school system;
- employing Aboriginal people as role models to work closely with Aboriginal youth;
- building on inherent cultural strengths rather than playing on perceived weaknesses.

Intensive Community Visits

Red Dust's work is based on intensive community visits for a minimum of four days (sixteen will have been conducted by the end of 2008). Communities receive at least two visits each year, demonstrating the program's commitment and positively reinforcing health messages.

A strengths based approach

Observations of Red Dust at work, and witnessing the ways Red Dust organised and managed visits to communities, revealed a commitment to what has increasingly been called a 'strengths based' approach to work with marginalised communities. Strengths based approaches focus on building resilience and reducing the suite of risk factors in communities: setting out from the position that clients and communities have strengths as well as weaknesses.

The research methodology

In keeping with the strengths based approach the methodology employed for this evaluation is based on the *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI). This methodological was chosen to counter the tendency, often a feature of research in the Indigenous context, to employ *vocabularies of deficit* and ignore extant sources of strength and resilience. *AI* sets out to be 'fair and inclusive' (Liebling, Elliot and Arnold, 2001) .

The researcher accompanied Red Dust on its tours to Wadeye, Naiyu and Mutijulu in 2008. The research process involved interviews with:

- key stakeholders, including: respected community leaders, elders council members and workers from Aboriginal community owned organisations (health, legal services; cultural, youth, sport and recreation, night patrols services, safe houses, community coordinators).
- representatives of key agencies, such as justice, family services, health, police (including Aboriginal community police officers), justice, government business managers and related services, drug and alcohol, education; ranger and environmental services;
- a number of 'key respondents' chosen for their knowledge of remote communities and youth related issues,
- Red Dust workers and role models involved in remote community visits - including Aboriginal role models- as well as a feedback workshop conducted in Melbourne.

These interviews were backed up with observation - and some participant observation - of Red Dust role models at work on communities and in classrooms.

Review of relevant literature

To establish the context for this report a brief review of relevant research and policy literature was undertaken. This tended to support the following observations regarding work with Aboriginal youths and their communities.

- work should focus on building the capacities of communities to develop their own local solutions;
- it must be holistic and integrated and prepared to engage in 'joined up' initiatives and partnerships;
- family violence, understood in its broad sense, is a community issue, and represents a linked constellation of structural, cultural and individual problems.

In their report on sexual abuse of children in the remote Aboriginal communities, Wild and Anderson emphasise the importance of education and the school itself as an important site for violence prevention: observing that schools offer a secure environment for educating children about child sexual abuse and developing protective behaviours. Education also provides 'opportunity, empowerment and achievement and offers a way to overcome the social and economic problems which contribute to violence', as well as 'fostering healthy life-styles, confidence (and) communication skills' (Wild and Anderson, 2007). In emphasising the importance of school-based initiatives with a broad social and personal development focus Wild and Anderson align themselves with a body of work encouraging agencies to:

- work through the school system as means of engaging with the broad mass of children at a

- developmentally important phase;
- embed messages about appropriate behaviour in positive activities (rather than passive programs) that encourage children and young people to play an active part;
- foster and nurture in children and young people self-confidence, self-esteem and a healthy self image of themselves and their culture (hence arresting the tendency for Aboriginal youths to internalise, and act on, negative stereotypes of themselves and each other);
- encourage a broad range of skills and skill development and offer children a choice of activities, from sport through to art, culturally based activities, music, dance and drama.

The work of Red Dust corresponds closely with the principles set out in Wild and Anderson's work.

Aboriginal Family Violence and Crime Prevention

Best practice in crime prevention with young people suggests that simply focusing on 'crime' can have negative, if unintended, consequences and that the best programs are broadly targeted on:

- social integration and inclusion;
- building a stake in conformity;
- encouraging positive leisure activities;
- nurturing skills and strengths (rather than exposing weaknesses);
- fostering healthy choices (young people who care about what goes into their bodies may be less likely to sniff petrol, take drugs, binge drink);
- encouraging school retention; and,
- building community involvement and ownership.

The role of outsiders has shifted from all knowing experts to facilitators and helpers; good practice principles encourages professionals to:

- enable and motivate;
- provide and transfer specialist skills;
- mentor youth and (crucially) facilitate mentoring in the community;
- build sustainable relationships (rather than conduct one off visits);
- link with other agencies and communities holistically (rather than offer an isolated, stand alone service)

The research process tested whether Red Dust's work in communities incorporated these principles and found significant evidence to suggest that it is doing so. Red Dust's engagement with children on remote communities clearly:

- motivated and encouraged young people to develop a diversity of skills;
- encouraged resilience, self-esteem and awareness of healthy life choices;
- built relationships that are sustainable over time;
- employed a mentoring approach;
- was concerned with working holistically through alliances with local agencies.

Concluding Comments

Red Dust Role Models provides a valuable service to remote communities by utilising the skills and profiles of established role models to stimulate the imaginations and ambition of Aboriginal youths. The use of Aboriginal role models is particularly effective in engaging with Aboriginal youths, but across the board the role models have a commitment to relationship building rather than simply showcasing their skills.

The model deserves support and should be explored further for lessons about working effectively with communities over the long terms and for ways of engaging with Aboriginal youths and families in a culturally secure fashion.

Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the performance of Red Dust Role Models against extant best practice principles for work with young people and their communities on remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Red Dust Role Models Ltd is a not-for-profit organisation; harnessing the profile and influence of positive role models to deliver health and community safety messages and inspire healthy lifestyle decisions among remote, indigenous youth. Role Models also promote education as a pathway to increased opportunities for personal development, employment and preparedness for community leadership.

The problems besetting remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities have occupied centre stage in policy and political debates in recent years. Concerns about the abuse and neglect of children and young people have been particularly prominent, and led to an in-depth inquiry in 2006 (Wild and Anderson, 2006) followed by Federal government intervention in 2007.

A multi-dimensional approach

It is widely acknowledged that meaningful improvements in the life chances of Aboriginal youth requires a variegated and multi-pronged approach that combines the energies of a diverse range of agencies, organisations and individuals. The factors underpinning family violence and related issues are multiple, compounded and deeply entrenched. No single agency or organisation operating in isolation can hope to be effective in changing the systemic forces underpinning communal crisis. Rather, there needs to be a range of partnerships between Aboriginal communities and agencies and organisations, capable of working on the various causal factors that sustain the cycle of abuse, neglect and alienation and prevent many Aboriginal youth from going on to live fulfilling lives (Wild and Anderson, 2006; Gordon et al 2002; Memmott et al 2001).

Multiple and compound crisis

Aboriginal communities tend to adopt a broad definition of what constitutes family violence (far broader than the non-Aboriginal construct 'domestic violence') encompassing a diversity of problems that make family life difficult and the future dangerous and unpredictable for young people (Blagg, 2008). The solutions to family violence and related problems are to be found in combining initiatives in social and emotional health and well-being, housing, education and training, the building of social capital, and improvements in infrastructure and governance. Work with Aboriginal youth needs to build resilience, and nurture and encourage 'protective' behaviours to allow them to break out of the cycle of violence (Hommel, et al 1999). One of the dangerous, if unintended, consequences of the heavy focus on Aboriginal violence has been increased negative stereotyping of Aboriginal men as abusers and Aboriginal women as passive, docile victims.

Red Dust's Approach to Working with Communities

This report argues that, because of its unique cluster of skills, and its approach to work in Aboriginal communities, Red Dust Role Models provides a valuable service to remote communities and fulfils best practice standards for work with remote Aboriginal communities, in terms of:

- working in close partnership with communities, agencies and young people;
- involving young people in the creation of activities;
- nurturing long term relationships, rather than one off programs and visits;
- framing the content of programs through dialogue with communities - rather than on a “one fits all” basis: each community is unique and requires an approach developed in close collaboration with children, their communities of care, and the broader community structures;
- focusing on sustainability and enhancing the quantum of community skills;
- encouraging Indigenous leadership through mentoring and community ambassador initiatives;
- working with children in the school setting and at risk groups disengaged from the school system;
- employing Aboriginal people as role models to work closely with Aboriginal youth;
- building on inherent cultural strengths rather than playing on weaknesses.

Intensive Community Visits

Red Dust’s work is based on intensive community visits for a minimum of four days (sixteen will have been conducted by the end of 2008). Communities receive at least two visits each year, demonstrating the program’s commitment and positively reinforcing health messages and its understanding that, to be effective in the longer term, programs need to be sustainable, rather than “one off” initiatives. Furthermore, over the last twelve months, Red Dust has moved further in the direction of working intensively with a smaller number of remote communities on a sustained basis (rather than taking a scatter-gun approach) in partnership with communities and agencies, and aligning itself with developing initiatives on communities in the wake of the Wild and Anderson report and the subsequent intervention (this is well illustrated in the Naiyu case study below).

Community schools are the focal point of *Red Dust Role Models* activities. The schools provide the hub for work with children and the broader community.

A strengths based approach

Red Dust Role Models work is embedded in a respect for indigenous culture. It was clear when observing RDRM at work that they were not setting out from the premise that Aboriginal communities were wholly dysfunctional and needed to be worked *on* rather than worked *with*, or that Aboriginal law and culture were the ‘problem’ to be overcome and replaced with non-Aboriginal values.

Observations of Red Dust at work, and witnessing the ways Red Dust organised and managed visits to communities, revealed a commitment to what has increasingly been called a ‘strengths based’ approach to work with marginalised communities. Strengths based approaches focus on building resilience and reducing the suite of risk factors in communities: setting out from the position that clients and communities have strengths as well as weaknesses. The aim of intervention should be identify and build upon existing strengths rather than consistently highlighting weaknesses and deficits. Maruna and LeBel (2003, 1) see strengths based and restorative approaches asking “not what a person’s deficits are, but rather what positive contributions a person can make.”

If we ask people to look for deficits, they will usually find them, and their view of the situation will be coloured by this. If we ask people to look for successes, they will usually find it, and their view of the situation will be coloured by this. (Kral, 1989, 32).

Red Dusts work is, this report argues, consistent with best practice standards set out in the 'Pathways' models of child development. This suggests that deviant behaviour stems from a distinctive combination of individual characteristics and environmental factors, referred to as pathways. Pathways represent interconnecting cascades of events from early life. An accumulation of negative events from early childhood onwards heightens the risks of enmeshment in the criminal justice system, poor health, lack of education and unemployment. Some pathways will lead towards the development of resilience within children while others may lead to reduced capacity to respond to future life events. The 'pathway' is, according to some observers, a useful metaphor for assisting professionals working in the prevention area, to organize material about the social world of children into manageable chunks and creating conceptual coherence (Lawrence in France and Homel, 2007). One of the most widely known in Australia, is the *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia* report by National Crime Prevention in 1999. The report takes as its premise the view that 'the roots of criminal offending are complex and cumulative, and...embedded in social as well as personal histories' (Homel et al, 1999, 4). A fully rounded approach requires a 'life course' perspective that sees each individual walking along specific life paths in particular social settings.

The developmental pathways approach favours early intervention with continuous age appropriate strategies at key maturational points to build resilience and reduce the risk of disengaging from school, becoming involved with negative peers, and taking drugs and alcohol. A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of pathways to criminal careers and high risk life styles undertaken by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (2003) found risk to be 'cumulative' and a product of numerous interconnecting and mutually reinforcing factors, from early neurological development through parenting styles, exposure to violence, school environment, negative peer influences and unemployment (Telethon Institute of Child Health, 2003). The Telethon Institute also builds a model of pathways to resilience factoring in early life processes such as healthy pregnancy through to responsive parenting, academic success, positive interaction with peers, social connectedness, reduced contact with drugs and alcohol and meaningful employment.

Better than Best Practice

The evaluation suggests that Red Dust not only meets established criteria of Best Practice in work with Indigenous youth and communities but has raised the bar, due to the unique high levels and mix of skills (sport, drama, art, music etc) and its established and sustained contact with communities and the partnerships it is nurturing with relevant government and non-government organisations.

The research methodology

In keeping with the strengths based approach the methodology employed for this evaluation is based on the *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI). This methodological was chosen to counter the tendency, often a feature of research in the Indigenous context, to employ *vocabularies of deficit* and ignore extant sources of strength and resilience. *AI* sets out to be 'fair and inclusive' (Liebling, Elliot and Arnold, 2001) it is therefore a sound vehicle for elaborating best practice principles in an Indigenous context and is consistent with fundamental principles of research in Indigenous communities as set out in NH&MRC guidelines.

According to Liebling, Elliot and Arnold (2001) the *AI* methodology is intended:

to engage the research participants in meaningful, constructive and ethically relevant dialogue about their practices and experiences (Liebling, Elliot and Arnold 2001).

The *AI* approach helps us focus on what gives purpose and meaning to activities and takes narratives and stories seriously. *AI* takes seriously: achievements, assets, strengths, innovation, values and beliefs, culture, spirit, aspirations for a better future, as a basis for positive communal change.

This is important because Aboriginal people's vocabularies of motives tend to operate from within a cultural and spiritual world-view, rather than simply from within the rational/cognitive western paradigm. Many research methodologies, based on western positivist science, often fail to comprehend the meanings attached to activities from an Aboriginal perspective.

Inquiries and research reports on remote communities point to a dearth of reliable and consistent data on which to establish a base line for research across a range of fields (Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, 2006; Memmott et al 2001; Wild and Anderson 2007). This is a significant barrier to testing the effectiveness of interventions. We have to rely, instead, on the perceptions of key stakeholders and those involved in and the object of interventions.

The researcher accompanied Red Dust on its tours to Wadeye, Naiyu and Mutijulu in 2008. The research process involved:

- interviews with key stakeholders, including: respected community leaders, elders council members and workers from Aboriginal community owned organisations (health, legal services; cultural, youth, sport and recreation, night patrols services, safe houses, community coordinators). These interviews were supported by a number of spontaneous or 'opportunistic' discussions with community members (often involving the families of children participating in Red Dust activities) when at the community store or sitting on the oval;
- representatives of key agencies, such as justice, family services, health, police (including Aboriginal community police officers), justice, government business managers and related services, drug and alcohol, education; ranger and environmental services;
- a number of 'key respondents' chosen for their knowledge of remote communities and youth related issues, including Blair Macfarlane from Central Australia Youth Link Up Services (CAYLUS), Jennifer Walker formerly of Remote Area Night Patrol (RANP) (both organisations with Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs);
- Red Dust workers and role models involved in remote community visits - including Aboriginal role models- as well as a feedback workshop conducted in Melbourne.

These interviews were backed up with observation - and some participant observation - of Red Dust role models at work on communities and in classrooms.

Review of relevant literature

To establish the context for this report a brief review of relevant research and policy literature was undertaken. This tended to support the following observations regarding work with Aboriginal youths and their communities.

- work should focus on building the capacities of communities to develop their own local solutions. From an Aboriginal community perspective they imply processes of increasing empowerment and self-determination as communities become equal partners in integrated local strategies rather than passive recipients of government services;

- it must be holistic and integrated and prepared to engage in 'joined up' initiatives and partnerships;
- family violence, understood in its broad sense, is a community issue, and represents a linked constellation of structural, cultural and individual problems (Blagg 2008; Wild and Anderson, 2006; Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2006; Northern Territory Law Reform Commission, 2004, Memmott et al 2001; Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner 2006; Fitzgerald 2001; Keel 2004).

The term, family violence, is often used by Indigenous people in preference to the term domestic violence. The term, family violence, encapsulates a diverse array of violence related issues affecting communities. Usage of the term within Aboriginal communities remains diverse and localized. Aboriginal communities may see family violence encompassing a diversity of oppressive behaviours in their communities including: family feuding; gambling; jealous fights; the rape and the sexual abuse of children; the neglect of children; alcohol and drug fuelled violence; neglect of obligations around kin and country; men on women violence (and, less frequently women on men violence); the persistent 'humberging' of elderly relatives for food and money and other forms of aggressive 'demand sharing'; providing petrol to sniffers.

Atkinson and Atkinson in a report by the Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner describe family violence in broad terms:

Family violence...can be directed towards an individual, family, community or particular group. Family violence is not limited to physical forms of abuse, and also includes cultural and spiritual abuse. There are interconnecting and trans-generational experiences of violence within Indigenous families and communities (Atkinson and Atkinson, cited in Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, 2004).

Programs focused on reducing family violence, according to Memmott *et al*, (2001) should be broadly targeted and include: support, strengthening identity, behavioural reform, community policing and monitoring, shelter/protection, justice, mediation, education and composite programs (Memmott *et al*, 2001, 59-6). Practice may have to be developed on the basis of local definitions and plans and strategies targeted towards locally defined priorities, rather than centrally defined definitions and priorities simply being imposed from above (Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2001; Cunneen 2001; Capabianco and Shaw 2005; Hazelhurst 1995). Intervention should, as far as possible, work from community based structures and integrate with agencies that already have an established relationship with children and communities (Indermaur *et al*, 1998).

Red Dust adheres to this philosophy by using the community school as the focal point for work with children and communities. In their report on sexual abuse of children in the remote Aboriginal communities, Wild and Anderson emphasise the importance of education and the school itself as an important site for violence prevention: observing that schools offer a secure environment for educating children about child sexual abuse and developing protective behaviours. Education also provides 'opportunity, empowerment and achievement and offers a way to overcome the social and economic problems which contribute to violence', as well as 'fostering healthy life-styles, confidence (and) communication skills' (Wild and Anderson, 2007). In emphasising the importance of school-based initiatives with a broad social and personal development focus Wild and Anderson align themselves with a body of work encouraging agencies to:

- work through the school system as means of engaging with the broad mass of children at a developmentally important phase;
- embed messages about appropriate behaviour in positive activities (rather than passive programs)

- that encourage children and young people to play an active part;
- foster and nurture in children and young people self-confidence, self-esteem and a healthy self image of themselves and their culture (hence arresting the tendency for Aboriginal youths to internalise, and act on, negative stereotypes of themselves and each other);
- encourage a broad range of skills and skill development and offer children a choice of activities, from sport through to art, culturally based activities, music, dance, drama (see Overcoming Indigenous Advantage, Partnerships Against Domestic Violence

Aboriginal Family Violence and Crime Prevention

Working with children and young people to prevent domestic and family violence has been identified as a key instrument in the broader struggle to reduce domestic violence. Research suggested that adolescence is a pivotal stage in the creation of adult identities, they represent a unique window for intervention.

Moreover, at this juncture, young people who have been exposed to domestic violence as witnesses may be developing the values linked to becoming perpetrators of violence (Follett and Alexander, 1992; Tontodonato and Crew 1992, Crime Research Centre/Donovan Research, 2001; Bailey and Whittle 2004). Building on the social learning approach and the available literature on violence prevention programs, Indermaur et al (1997) and Blagg et al (1998) designed a number of model violence prevention programs that combined social learning theory with insights from the youth crime prevention literature. They recommended a generalist or universalistic approach to working with the mass of young people by building the anti-violence message into the school curriculum in combination with a specialist approach focused on vulnerable groups who may be disengaged from school - the latter was particularly important in the Aboriginal context. Initiatives in Aboriginal communities needed to be aware that Aboriginal youths were at greater risk of being both direct and indirect victims of violence and perpetrators of violence than mainstream youth: also that they were vulnerable to involvement in petrol-sniffing, alcohol and drug use, suicide and self-harm, early parenthood and enmeshment in the criminal justice system.

Best practice in crime prevention with young people suggests that simply focusing on 'crime' can have negative, if unintended, consequences and that the best programs are broadly targeted on:

- social integration and inclusion;
- building a stake in conformity;
- encouraging positive leisure activities;
- nurturing skills and strengths (rather than exposing weaknesses);
- fostering healthy choices (young people who care about what goes into their bodies may be less likely to sniff petrol, take drugs, binge drink);
- encouraging school retention; and,
- building community involvement and ownership.

The role of outsiders has shifted from all knowing experts to facilitators and helpers; good practice principles encourages professionals to:

- enable and motivate;
- provide and transfer specialist skills;
- mentor youth and (crucially) facilitate mentoring in the community;
- build sustainable relationships (rather than conduct one off visits);
- link with other agencies and communities holistically (rather than offer an isolated, stand alone service)

The research process tested whether Red Dust's work in communities incorporated these principles.

Key Research Questions

Participants in the research process were asked a range of relatively 'open ended' questions intended to spark discussion and allow scope for participants to raise issues they felt were important. Topics covered varied on context. They covered issues as diverse as:

- the general state of the community;
- the strength of local culture and law;
- governance issues and relationships with government agencies;
- law and order issues, juvenile crime, gangs and anti-social behaviour;
- at risk youth, youth suicide and para-suicide;
- levels of violence on the community;
- educational aspirations and barriers;
- what could be done to make the community a healthier place;
- relationships between the community and the school;
- employment, training and CDEP;
- what was available at the local store and what things cost;
- what kinds of youth activities communities wanted;
- what local 'community owned' initiatives existed (night patrol, safe house, men's place, community court, etc);
- what agency based initiatives existed (youth diversion programs, family violence prevention services, etc)

These were followed by discussions about the current work of Red Dust and how the role might develop over time.

To illustrate the ways Red Dust interacts with communities, the following section presents three brief case studies. These studies are in communities where Red Dust has developed a strong profile and is in dialogue with the communities on developing future programs. As noted in my introduction, Red Dust is increasingly focussing on a number of core communities for intensive work in coming years, and has been in dialogue with these communities concerning the specific focus of this work.

Case Study: Wadeye (Port Keats)

Wadeye community has been the subject of intense scrutiny due to the behaviour of a number of youth gangs. The community was intensely aware of community's reputation and felt that, while there had been a problem with a small core of offenders, the problems on the community had been unfairly amplified by the media and some politicians. The extent of community dysfunctionality was being exaggerated and the community portrayed in solely negative terms. Nevertheless, it was widely recognised that there were problems on the community. Many pointed to a lack of leadership within the community, a consequence, some believed, of mission paternalism and the decline of traditional law and culture. Whereas *Murinbata* still have language and moyete systems intact, important cultural rituals and patterns of initiation have fallen away. Some suggest that the decline in formal rites of passage of this kind has had disastrous consequences for social integration, particularly in relation to young men (discussed further below in relation to *Karnanyinpa*)

Red Dust has developed strong links with the school at Wadeye. While school attendance remains a cause for concern on the community, attendance is always high when Red Dust is working in the school, and remains so for some time after, before tailing off again (the important issue this raises, that of *sustainability*, is discussed further below).

I was able to observe Red Dust undertaking a range of activities with children. These included basketball and other sports based activities, drama and movement activities with groups of children, exercises on self awareness and respect for others, and nutritional and healthy choices. Red Dust demonstrated a high level of inter-personal skills when dealing with groups of male and female Aboriginal children. There was a high level of energy and commitment and the children were, after some initial shyness, soon actively participating in the activities. All of the activities were geared towards increasing the children's physical and motor skill levels, but were also focussed on building social skills and encouraging children to engage in cooperative behaviours. There was a strong focus on encouraging children to talk about feelings and express emotions, as well as defining the spectrum of acceptable forms of inter-personal behaviours. I was especially impressed by the use made of role playing and dramaturgical skills by two Red Dust workers from a drama background, who used the medium to explore relationships and what are positive and negative forms of behaviour. The children really opened up in these groups and relationships were formed between role models and the children. The involvement of teachers and Aboriginal aids, the latter also translated, created a loop back into the formal classroom situation.

Aside from observing in the school, I was able to talk to a diversity of groups on the community, including police, youth workers, justice workers, elders, rangers and council members. I found a significant respect for the work of Red Dust in the community. There was a view that:

- Red Dust comes back to the community and has built up relationships over time;
- Red Dust offers a range of activities and is not about sport and recreation, it helps young people think about themselves and how they effect other people, and about nutrition and health.
- Red Dust 'makes the children happy, some have blighted lives';
- Red Dust employs skill building activities as a mechanism for building relationships with young people and 'getting through to them'.

It was decided to after a number of meetings in the community to create a local reference group from agencies and the community council to liaise with Red Dust to uncover ways of engaging with some of the older 'at risk' groups of youths who are disengaged from community and educational structures. Red Dust have been invited to participate in the Wadeye cultural festival in late 2008. The community was particularly interested in Red Dust being involved in bringing in dancers and musicians into the community. There was a strong feeling within the community that too much culture has been lost already; and so they are particular anxious to enlist the support of Red Dust to help the community re-invigorate cultural activities as a means of reintegrating young people who may otherwise become involved in gang activities. Red Dust is planning to bring in some Aboriginal role models to lead this work.

Case Study: Naiyu

Red Dust works out of Woolianna community school located just outside of Naiyu. The school had a very high opinion of Red Dust. This was shared by most community members I spoke to over the course of the visit. Once again, Red Dust offered a diversity of activities, from sport through to work on nutrition and social skills. Aboriginal athlete Kyle Vander Kuyp worked with the young people on developing hurdling skills. The presence of Kyle with the young people was electric. They responded positively to Kyle in a way that would not have been possible with a non-Aboriginal athlete, however famous. He was

a magnet constantly attracting Aboriginal children's attention and able to use his status as a way of engaging with children about their lives and aspirations.

It is worth highlighting the music and video activities led by Red Dust musicians. This was simply the best thing of its type this researcher has seen in over 20 years of working on child and youth related intervention. On arrival in the community Aboriginal children who had been involved in the 2007 visit were still singing the song they wrote on that visit.

The musicians work with the children over a four day period to produce a DVD. Firstly the children are supported to produce their own lyrics which are then put to music. The children record the song and are videoed singing in the studio and out in the community. The end product is highly sophisticated and professional DVD, beautifully produced and recorded. Seeing the DVDs being shown in the schools was a highly rewarding and emotional experience for everyone involved. The children were extremely proud of making such a high quality product, which empowered and energised all of them. They expressed their feelings about the community and gave them a sense of achievement and self worth. The heads and teachers of both schools praised Red Dust for the quality of their input.

Naiyu community has had its share of tragedies where young people are concerned. There have been eleven youth suicides and a high number of para-suicides over recent years. There is a belief that some of the older youths are alienated and disengaged - there are instances of petrol sniffing and other related problems. Local research with a group of fifty 'at risk' youth confirmed the perception that these youths felt disengaged from the community and society generally. Many of the new multi-agency Youth Diversion Committee has been launched on the community led by Naiyu Clinic's Clinical Nursing Officer and the Government Business Manager to deal with this group of young people. The *Strong Spirit Strong Body Naiyu Youth Program* has been established to build strength and resilience in youth by creating 4 part time youth leadership positions in the community. Intended outcomes of the program include a leadership group facilitating a range of resilience activities and workshops, cultural and bush activities and the creation of multimedia products to build youth capacity in the community.

Red Dust is playing a vital role in the process. The highly successful music program is to be adapted to work with these designated young people who will be involved in creating their own DVD through which they can express their feelings and be involved in an activity that might realise their sense of self worth.

Here, Red Dust will be providing an important part of a holistic process, partnering with agencies and the community to make an impact on the lives of an acutely at risk and vulnerable group of young people. Red Dust's approach is flexible enough to accommodate a range of age groups and has the advantage of being able to pull in role models with an assortment of skills (arts, drama, sports, music etc).

Case Study: Mutitjulu

Mutitjulu community was under the spotlight in the months leading up to the Federal Government's emergency intervention in the Northern Territory. It is widely recognised on the community that it badly needs initiatives that build children's self esteem and build resilience. It was widely believed that the unintended consequence of the focus on problems in Mutitjulu had been for many to leave the community. Government representatives believed that the situation of the community was negative; people lacked energy and initiative and remained passive and fatalistic in the face of their problems. Few had the initiative to lift themselves from their situation. Moreover, the backlash by some powerful members of the community to claims of high rates of family violence (including paedophile rings, petrol barons, and

entrenched spouse abuse) had led to women's legal rights groups, such as NPY Women, being banned from the community. Leaving few avenues for women to articulate their concerns.

Both community members and agencies agreed that more needed to be done to break the cycle by working with young people. School attendance was patchy and inconsistent. There seemed little incentive for children to strive for achievement. Red Dust built bridges with the young people through work on the basket ball court, incorporating general health and fitness training. Once the initial engagement had been made there was a focus on cultural practices, through didgeridoo playing and Aboriginal art (both of these led by Aboriginal role models). Once again, young people responded very positively to having successful Aboriginal people leading the sessions.

Red Dust were able to build on the engagement created through sport, art, music and culture to talk to young people about healthy eating and creating healthy life-styles. Red Dust is in discussions with the community store about ways to deliver healthy messages at the point of sale, perhaps involving Red Dust role models.

The arts and painting segment of the program on Mutijulu was interesting from another perspective. Agencies were concerned about the difficulties they had connecting with women on the community. However, a group of eight Aboriginal women came to the school and sat down and painted with Red Dust artists quite spontaneously, and were there for several hours producing works based on local stories and dreaming. These women would not have attended a women's meeting organised by outside agencies but were happily engaged with the art process and talking about the school and their children and other community issues. This reveals both the success of Red Dust in creating a positive, healthy environment for these women and a vindication for the approach to community engagement which utilises positive experiences (such as art, culture, sports) to build trust and openness. Red Dust is in discussions to build this adult art into its program in the next visit to Mutijulu as a means of engaging with one of the most marginalised and powerless groups of Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory.

A Focus on Mentoring and Sustainability

As I have already suggested, there is an increasing focus in best practice literature on the need to develop programs that are sustainable and build community capacity to handle its own issues. Programs are increasingly being judged less on what they achieve in the short term but on what they leave behind them when they go, in terms of expanding the quantum of skills and knowledge on the community. Over the life-time of the research there was an increased focus on developing contacts with communities that are sustainable over time. Building social capital on the communities by engaging with other agencies to add value to their work - as we have seen in the Naiyu example where Red Dust is working with the Strong Spirit initiative - has become a key dimension of Red Dust's work. Red Dust has shown itself to be capable of working effectively in the new environment, it has the necessary flexibility and range of skills to fit into a variety of initiatives in Indigenous communities aimed at both the schools and with at risk groups disengaged with mainstream processes (and - as we saw with Mutijulu - some vulnerable adult groups).

Red Dust is building up the mentoring side of its work as a mean of creating a larger and more sustainable imprint on communities. In the last few decades, mentoring has become a recognised vehicle for empowering individuals in educational, corporate and a host of other environments. More recently mentoring approaches have been adapted to work with marginalised youth as a means of overcoming personal, structural and systemic barriers to positive development. Mentoring focuses on interpersonal support, coaching and role modelling. It can help mentees set goals and develop skills to reach these goals over time.

Mentoring in the Indigenous context poses some particular challenges. Experience from Canada suggests that successful mentoring programs should be developed in partnership with community members from the outset and built on existing strengths and programs within the community. Successful Aboriginal mentoring programs also include the mentee's family, traditional values and culture, and adequate resources for sustainability. Formation of a community advisory group for guidance and support is essential for success and sustainability, especially for programs involving outside organisations (Klink et al.)

The practice of mentoring has deep roots in traditional Aboriginal law and culture. Initiation into adulthood was, and remains in many instances, facilitated through relationships with older men or women who support and teach young people. The decline of traditional rites of passage has been blamed for increased alienation violence, petrol sniffing, over-representation in the criminal justice system and family violence. Anthropologist Dr Brian McCoy, an ex-Catholic priest with extensive experience in desert communities, talks of the important role initiation played in connecting and linking generations and creating strong bonds of mutual care and support. McCoy uses the desert concept of *Kanyirninpa* - translated as 'holding' - to describe the moment when older men accepted responsibility to care for younger men during initiation. The fracturing of the process of *Kanyirninpa* has had serious consequences.

Red Dust has begun discussions with a number of the communities it currently works with to enhance the mentoring side of its approach. It has been building the right community linkages and developing local reference groups (in the case of Wadeye) or is working with established reference groups (in the Naiyu case). It is in discussion with communities on the best way to develop mentoring schemes in keeping with the community's needs. For example, there are plans to identify a number of promising footballers in Wadeye who would be brought to Melbourne through Red Dust's networks in the AFL community and linked with a club. The aim is for these youths to act as community Ambassadors and take their new skills and experiences back to the community. Similar initiatives are being planned in relation to music, art and other creative media. Such initiatives will both broaden the horizons of the mentees but also make initiatives sustainable as these young people will carry on the work in their communities for a time.

Concluding Comments

Red Dust Role Models provides a valuable service to remote communities by utilising the skills and profiles of established role models to stimulate the imaginations and ambition of Aboriginal youths. The use of Aboriginal role models is particularly effective in engaging with Aboriginal youths, but across the board the role models have a commitment to relationship building rather than simply showcasing their skills. The model deserves support and should be explored further for lessons about working effectively with communities over the long terms and for ways of engaging with Aboriginal youths and families in a culturally secure fashion.

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Appendix 1. Dr Harry Blagg

Dr Harry Blagg was Director of Studies at the Crime Research Centre UWA until October 2008. He has a national and international reputation as a leading criminologist specialising in Indigenous people and criminal justice, policing and restorative justice. He has co-authored 3 books, contributed to many edited collections and published numerous articles in prestigious international peer reviewed journals. His latest book 'Crime, Aboriginality and the De-colonisation of Justice' (2008) was published by the Federation Press.

From 2001/2005 he was Research Director of the West Australian Law Reform Commission reference: *Aboriginal Customary Laws*.

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