

# Chapter 3

## Reducing Challenging Behaviour and Maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) and Non-ATSI Student Retention Through Food and Exercise in Primary and Secondary Schools in New South Wales, Australia



Gillian Stuart and Angela Turner

**Abstract** This chapter reflects on research projects and initiatives undertaken during my 40-year career as a classroom teacher, head teacher, regional educational consultant, teaching principal and principal. The work discussed in this chapter evolved through postgraduate research, in-school funded and unfunded projects and initiatives. Our combined analysis elicits an examination on pedagogy and the unique learning outcomes that emerged from these settings. The theoretical grounding for much of this work draws Maslow's hierarchy of needs. More recently we present our joint research collaborations undertaken through cross-cultural and multidisciplinary teaching and learning contexts. This chapter emphasises that enriched learning environments supported through physical activities and food applications are by far the most salient influences to improve intellectual learning outcomes, physical dexterity, emotional strength and resilience in students.

**Keywords** Health-based education programs · Food · Exercise

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## Introduction

My teaching passion is positioned in place-based learning experiences as a way to connect communities, with the goal to increase student engagement through authentic and meaningful project-based programs for students of all ages and backgrounds to improve student learning outcomes. Over the past 40 years, these have ranged from external initiatives run in the school such as the Live Life Well @ School program, Crunch and Sip®, Fruit & Veg Month, Nutrition Week and Walk to School Day. Funded research projects include The Coffee Den, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) and non-ATSI community engagement (Reaching On Reaching In) and understanding changing climates and food sustainability through science, technology, engineering and mathematics applications (STEM in the Garden). In addition, opportunities were offered as vocational experiences to technical and further education (TAFE) students in relation to building a Bush Tucker Track and associated learning spaces in the school that opened up an innovative avenue for ‘outdoor’ learning spaces.

The primary driving force of my teaching is positioned from my own life experience with developmental challenges in childhood, with difficulty sitting still and unable to organise my thoughts to express myself on paper. I was placed in remedial groups for mathematics and English, with trouble focusing on reading and great difficulty with comprehension *but* I was excellent in sport, oral expression and all the creative arts. As I grew up, it fascinated me that I could be at the top of the class in some subjects and in those that would influence ‘where I would end up’, at the lower end of the class. It was a time of great frustration and, in spite of this, eventually trained me as a teacher wanting to help people who had learning difficulties similar to me. After two attempts at the high school certificate, I progressed to Teachers’ College, majoring in physical education, graduating with a Diploma in Teaching (Primary Education) in 1982.

However, after 2 years in the classroom and encountering lots of children who had similar learning difficulties as me, I became overwhelmingly disheartened because I could not make a significant difference for these students. I left teaching to travel the world. It was during this period I was exposed to applied kinesiology in Los Angeles in 1986, and when on return 3 years later, I attended a weekend workshop on *Educational Kinesiology ‘E- K for kids’* which reignited my interest in helping children and young people who had learning difficulties. This inspired me to train further in educational kinesiology (Brain Gym®) to instructor level. Brain Gym® is a series of specific movements that activate the brain and body for particular skills of behaviour management and learning, i.e. focus (action), organisation (feeling) and communication (thinking). The program improves the physical skills, rather than focusing on just the mental skills involved in behaviour and learning (Dennison, 2006). Moreover, I completed a Masters (postgraduate degree) in Special Education: *Reducing Challenging behaviours in ‘at-risk’ Adolescents* in 2011 where I drew on kinesiology principles as the theoretical framing for the

research component. At the time, research suggested that a high proportion of adolescents 'at risk' cannot execute the task of cross crawling. Experts reported that an inability to cross crawl indicates a neurological dysfunction which limits the workings of the brain in undertaking basic learning tasks which could underpin learning difficulties and behaviour problems. Goodheart (1970), in his research from applied kinesiology, discovered a type of patterning he called 'homolateral' (same side arm and leg), where people were unable to cross pattern—in other words, had an inability to cross the midline of the body. Goodheart associated this with schizophrenia as 'every' person with this diagnosis had a homolateral pattern.

Needless to say, cross crawl was a major exercise implemented in the Brain Gym Program throughout the research, as out of the 145 adolescents, only 17 could successfully manage to cross their midline on enrolment.

## Teaching Philosophy

I have a firm belief that before learning can occur in a classroom, students need to have their basic needs met first. Like a seed that has the potential to grow through water and warmth that stimulate growth, a child has the potential for growth through food, water, warmth and love. Once these physiological needs are met, safety needs such as security and safety provide a fertile ground for personal development and learning. Maslow (1968, 1972) furthers that a child's need to 'belong' should initially be fulfilled through family, which in turn relates to self-esteem, and as a child grows, they ought to strive towards intellectual and spiritual growth (self-actualisation). However, schools in particular need to maximise a student's feeling of self-worth where a child may struggle to have these needs met in their home life (Fig. 3.1).

**Fig. 3.1** Maslow's motivational theory as a hierarchy of needs



Therefore, my teaching philosophy bases itself on Maslow's hierarchy of needs with the purpose of promoting health-based education programs that engage food and exercise as a social currency for improving student learning outcomes.

## Research Projects and Initiatives

### *Move to Learn Program (1999–2003)*

During 1999, I designed my first *Move to Learn* sensory motor program. This was implemented at a local NSW government school one day a week for one term. The school community was so impressed with the results in terms of children's achievements across the curriculum; it opened up the opportunity to work in other government schools. A report on the progress of the program has been well documented and some 5000 children across 24 schools participated in the program over a 5-year period. As a result, many principals were strong advocates of the program's effectiveness as is shown in the following excerpts from their testimonials:

Our students come to school happy, keen to learn, and able to reach their full potential. Through Edu-K, students have learnt ways to switch themselves on to learning, to assess their own performance as well as to enhance their learning style. All this makes for a happy, productive learning environment.

The difference in attitude and improvement in the children's behaviour is easily measured by the lack of entries in the behaviour book and my comparison between long-term students and new arrivals.

The program has been of particular benefit to the boys, in that it has really improved their participation and listening skills.

In 2003, results indicated that student engagement and achievement had improved significantly across a number of schools. It was reported by one school that classroom behavioural incidents had reduced from 60% to 5%. In 2004, ATSI data in another school indicated 88% K-2 students evidenced above the minimum standard, while 80% Years 3–6 students were grade appropriate:

Gillian delivered quality education through in-school training to staff and students by designing the innovative sensory/motor coordination program called 'Move to Learn', which was implemented across 35 schools over a five-year period. Gillian was recognised internationally as a recipient of the 'Teaching through Movement' Award in England in 2002, for facilitating professional growth in teachers and offering motor coordination solutions to enhance student outcomes in learning and behaviour. A number of schools received special awards and grants from the Department Education of Training (DET) for their improved numeracy and literacy outcomes, and all principals advocated that the program was a contributing factor to their success.

(Community Elder)

### ***The Adolescent Centre, Brain Gym and the Coffee Den (2004–2010)***

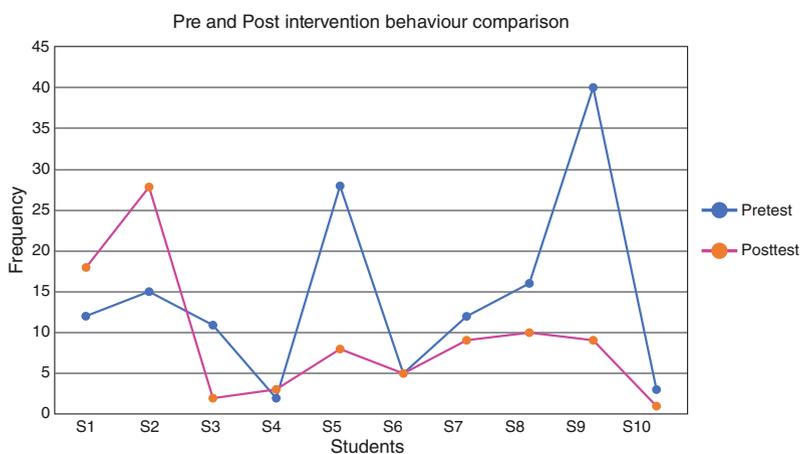
I relocated in 2004 from rural NSW to western Sydney where I was a teacher at an adolescent centre. This was a Department of Education specialist tutorial centre for Year 7–Year 10 students who demonstrated clinically diagnosed extremes in behaviour and learning-impaired disorders that ranged from emotional disturbance (ED), behaviour disorder (BD), ED/BD, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). At the centre there were three classes with seven students in each class. There was a mix of indigenous and non-indigenous students, although a higher proportion of indigenous students. However, the one thing that all had in common was that they were from low socio-economic backgrounds, and for many, family members are in jail.

All presented with mental health diagnoses at varying levels and all deemed unmanageable in the mainstream high school system. Students attending this school presented with extremes in life experiences: victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse or were experiencing symptoms of psychosis. Major depression to post-traumatic stress disorder was also a diagnosed condition. Many students had co-morbid conditions. Suspensions were common due to aggressive behaviour towards teaching staff and/or between students. A few quick rules given to me were to (1) never be by myself, (2) always have my face to the students, (3) check for radio contact, (4) never disclose any personal information (no first name or surname), so I was known as ‘Ms. G’. The brief rundown on each student’s profile that was provided to me when I started was staggering given the age of the students: arson, sex offender, self-harm, drug dealing, addict, vandalism, theft and assault including stabbings. To say classroom management was a challenge is indeed an understatement.

Not long after starting at the centre as a casual teacher, an event that happened 1 day when I was playing rugby with the boys revealed there was a caring nature and respect that these boys held within. Unfortunately, this was discovered when I ran into the goal post and knocked myself unconscious. Regaining consciousness, in a blinking haze, there were flickers of light stream through a ring of very concerned humans, looking down like angelic beings. *Are you Ok Miss? Wanna hand?* Picking Ms. G. up gently, the so called youth-at-risk criminals, kindly and with great care, helped me back to my office. The topic and laughter for the rest of the day was Ms. G. and the footy game. One boy asked as he was leaving, ‘Are you coming back tomorrow Miss?’ Nonetheless, day after day, attendance was poor, and there was no interest or change in any of the students’ behaviour in the classroom. Clearly, they were not excited about learning skills in English or geography, but there was an opportunity to utilise the Life Skills component of the syllabus as a way to engage students in English and geography. I just wasn’t sure how.

Midway while working at the centre, I commenced postgraduate study. My interest was to examine the effects of an exercise program called Brain Gym® on the frequency of challenging behaviours in adolescents and to investigate to what extent changes in social relations resulted a change in the school community, as a function of the exercise intervention. The research project component drew on an action research approach. Ten Year 8–10 students from the centre were involved in the research. The investigation employed surveys, exercise interventions, baseline data and professional development, linking case studies in an action research design. Although much more extensive research was recommended with regard to the benefits of *Brain Gym*®, the findings revealed that consistent daily practice of Brain Gym® improved students' self-esteem and well-being that flowed onto their social-psychological health. The results showed a reduction in challenging behaviours and assisted students to achieve better learning results. Figure 3.2 shows a significant decrease in the frequency on off-task behaviour when exercise was embedded into the teaching program. However, there was a significant rise post-test on off-task behaviour for student 1 and student 2 (post-test). This may have been due to a change in routine for these students given they were ASD students. Nonetheless, there was a decrease in off-task behaviour for eight students out the ten observed.

During this period, I noticed students did not appear to bring lunch to school and I often wondered if they ate breakfast (given very few students had families to rely on as their safety net), so I initiated a cooking class where specific recipes were chosen, which required limited cutting with plastic knives and minimal cooking equipment, due to the work, health and safety policies. I began using food as an incentive for the students to come to school to eat rather than stay at home where empty fridges and cupboards prevailed. This dramatically impacted on student outcomes on attendance and in both short and long suspensions. As one student commented in 2006, 'Before you came, Miss G not much happened'.



**Fig. 3.2** Changes on 'at-risk' adolescent behaviour

In the first term of 2007, I was appointed head teacher/principal and I wasted no time in introducing an incentive scheme:

- If the students turned up to school, they were fed a hearty breakfast;
- If they participated in the short exercise program which included Brain Gym® exercises, they gained access to the classroom;
- If they managed to stay in class for the combined literacy/cooking lessons, they received lunch;
- If they managed to stay in class for the Numeracy/Life Skills, they could access daily rewards after lunch that included ‘Sailability’ on Monday at the local lake, Police Citizens Youth Centre activities on Tuesday, Fitness Centre on Wednesday, cultural activities on Thursday and outdoor education on Friday.

I also invited local Elders frequently to the centre, to provide cultural activities as positive role models. As the student attendance improved, I set about fulfilling the school’s mandate to prepare young people for life in the community given they would not return to a mainstream educational setting. Fortunately, the centre contained a small hall and canteen and *The Coffee Den* project was launched. The students were given an opportunity to complete a National Training Package Certificate 1 in Hospitality (Food and Beverage).

This project gave students the opportunity for ‘hands-on learning’ and to gain relevant industry experience, communication and employability skills in a simulated small business setting.

Emotional skills were built through teamwork that fostered self-confidence, self-esteem and interdependence.

The Coffee Den operated between 8.30 and 12.30 pm that provided coffee and catering for the various professional learning events, which occurred during the week in the adjoining district office. The project was funded through a Lighthouse Grant (\$10,000), and the partnership was formalised into an ongoing Management Committee. Within 3 years of introducing food and exercise, Indigenous attendance increased by 90%. I received a Regional Director’s Award for School Achievement in 2009, for improved home/school partnerships, improvements in literacy and numeracy and raising school attendance. This award inspired me to work more closely with Indigenous students and their families, so when I returned back to my rural home it set the theme for my subsequent research projects in the school, where I currently lead as the school principal.

### ***Gumbaynggirr Pathways to Learning (2012–2013)***

The aim of this project was to collaborate with local Gumbaynggirr Elders and stakeholders on an educational walking trail within the school grounds. This involved restoring remnant bush habitat within the school grounds with the aim to promote biodiversity values through the ‘accessible’ concept of bush tucker and medicinal plants. Students became the tour guides, sharing Indigenous knowledge

at the cultural interface between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. The project strengthened local Aboriginal families with the school and education providers and also improved educational learning outcomes for their children. Principals and participants understood the benefits of Indigenous people as an important regional resource.

The project was supported through a PaCE grant funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). This grant was a significant win because it supported community-driven involvement for parents and careers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and young people up to the age of 19 years. Not only did this project connect communities, but also it offered vocational experiences for TAFE students on building the Bush Tucker Track and associated learning spaces throughout the bush habitat. This involved students, 80% of whom were Indigenous, to experience weekly skills training for their Certificate 2 in Construction. This was essentially a vocational pathways program where the students were able to design and construct a pathway through the habitat in a sustainable way. This project also informed a tertiary and further education (TAFE) teaching program that helped shape strategic thinking on employment, training, improved health and school attendance. This unique training program has been implemented across other schools and regions (Figs. 3.3 and 3.4).

Furthermore, I secured local, state and federal funding to ensure the success of this project as an ongoing enterprise. With our Deadly Aboriginal team, we managed

**Fig. 3.3** Outdoor  
'classroom'



**Fig. 3.4** Yarning circle



the consultancy and reviewed logistics and stakeholder feedback. As a result, the school was one of 15 schools in NSW in 2016 recognised by NSW Local School Local Decisions, for our successful and innovative community engagement partnerships. This widely available document affirms the value derived from Indigenous delivered environmental projects and the socio-economic benefits for Aboriginal people engaged in these activities.

### ***Reaching Out Reaching In (2014)***

Through the Gumbaynggirr Pathway to Learning project, the relationships that I forged fostered a greater understanding of local Indigenous culture, historical perspectives and Indigenous knowledge systems. Partnering with Southern Cross University resulted in \$4000.00 funding through the School of Education Grants program to facilitate diverse yet rigorous research activity within our school. This project was significant because it facilitated the embedding of Indigenous perspectives in a culturally responsive, integrated and cross curriculum manner—a key priority of the new Australian Curriculum K-6 Syllabus.

The project developed students' understanding and competences on rich learning through local Indigenous narratives. In addition, students designed 'garden rooms' and planting of bush tucker and medicinal plants along the track throughout the



Fig. 3.5 Habitat and walking tracks

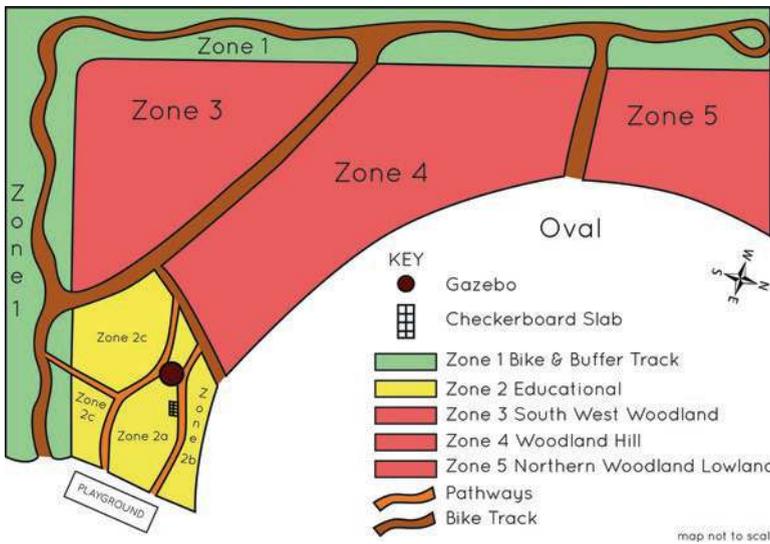
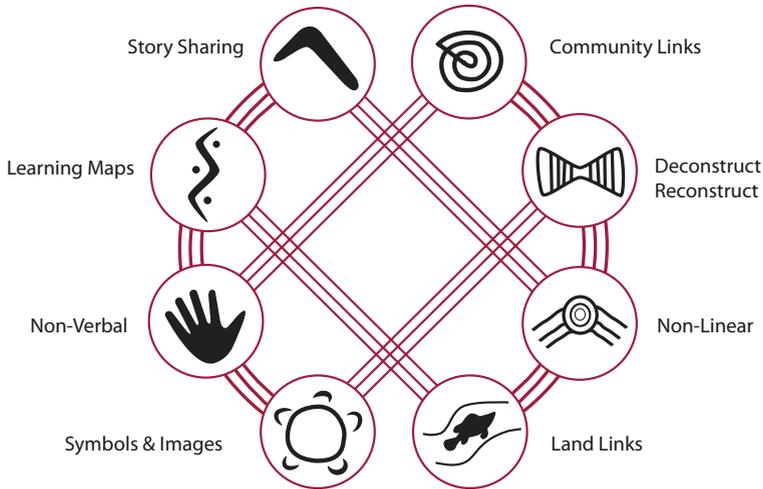


Fig. 3.6 Garden design rooms

habitat according to their assigned garden room area (Figs. 3.5 and 3.6). Nature journaling was used to document the native plants through fieldwork in the garden and learning about botanical science concepts (see Chap. 20 for more detail on the research project).



**Fig. 3.7** The eight aboriginal ways of learning

The integrated teaching program connected learning to local values, needs and knowledge through interactive learning and non-linear processes from kindergarten to Year 6. Non-linear processes drew on the eight ways of learning framework (Fig. 3.7) that illustrates in a localised context Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being and the relationships that sustain it (Department of Education and Communities, 2012; Yunkaporta, 2009).

Students learnt how to be ‘place-responsive’ and to respect the importance of sustainable environmental practice. A part of this learning included ‘Aboriginal Lore’ where certain protocols before entering the garden were followed that involved wearing red headbands, which signified ‘respect for yourself and your environment’ and connected the students as a cohesive group of learners. This project recognised an untapped opportunity for cultural learning about ancient plant types through and with local Elders and provided opportunities for students to learn the value of knowledge of such plants. Correspondingly, ‘Aboriginal social capital and protocol was significant to this research because their intrinsic link with “country” provided an insight into Aboriginal customs as knowledge holders’ (Turner, Wilson, & Wilks, 2018). As a result, we realised that explicit Aboriginal teaching by Elders improved outcomes for Indigenous learners and that there is common ground between Aboriginal education and the optimal teachings for all learners (Indigenous and non-Indigenous).

### ***STEM in the Garden (2017)***

This project was cross-cultural and multidiscipline in design that built capability in teaching and learning to create awareness on food sustainability in rural and remote school communities. Accordingly, the project drew on the Bush Tucker garden as a

vehicle for students to learn about science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and the knowledge, skills and technologies that are assigned to these learning areas. It was a collaborative project between a collegiate of two other primary schools and Southern Cross University. All schools were from different geographic regions across the mid north coast and north coast regions, NSW, Australia. The project aimed to increase children and young people's understanding of sustainable food systems in relation to grown food. Three varieties of Australian native plants (containing both edible and medicinal properties) were shared between the schools with the premise to understand how the same plants adapt to changing weather patterns and different geographies. This project was funded (\$19,000.00) through the Department of Education Rural and Remote Communities, one of the two successful applicants in the mid north coast cluster.

Students and teachers were actively engaged through working scientifically (inquiry-based hypothesis), technologically (digital microscopes and robotics), engineeringly (biotechnology) and mathematically (measurement, data collection and statistics). Communicating between the three schools occurred at the conclusion of the project through a connected classroom platform where students shared their findings and stories from the project.

The collaboration produced an environmental education program for Stage 3 primary school students with a focus on climate change issues. As a result, the project benefited the teachers as a platform to demonstrate particular stages for career advancement according to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017). Further to this teaching agenda, the Australian Curriculum's Sustainability Cross Cultural Priority advocates for students 'to develop knowledge, skills, values and world views necessary for them to act in ways that contribute to more sustainable patterns of living' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016). More specifically, the Australian curriculum advocates the need for children to learn about food and fibre principles and capacity building on food literacy connections between food and fibre, health and wellbeing.

### ***External Initiatives Regularly Run in the School (2012–2019)***

The following initiatives have been ongoing because they provide vital engaged learning that supports eating healthy and nutritious foods combined with regular exercise.

The Live Life Well @ School program is a collaborative initiative that is supported by the NSW Ministry of Health and schools from different sectors: the NSW Department of Education, the Association of Independent Schools of NSW and the Catholic Schools NSW. There are a variety of resources and professional learning opportunities for the teachers on ways to promote healthy eating and physical activity to students. 'The program aims to get more students, more active, more often and focus on healthy eating habits' (NSW Office of Preventive Health, 2019a).

Crunch & Sip® is a program offered by the NSW Healthy Kids Association that helps primary schools to set specific times for students to “refuel” on vegetables, salad and fruit and “rehydrate” with water’ (NSW Office of Preventive Health, 2019b). Teachers are also involved where they may have Crunch & Sip® time while students are working on activities or stop work and hold a specific activity inside or outside of the classroom.

Fruit and Veg Month is an event that promotes health in NSW primary schools, funded through NSW health. It specifically focuses on fruit and vegetables (Nutrition Australia, 2019a).

National *Nutrition Week* is an annual campaign designed by *Nutrition Australia*. The campaign aims to encourage Australians to increase their vegetable consumption to the recommended five serves per day, which also feeds into primary and secondary schools (Nutrition Australia, 2019b).

Walk to School Day is an annual and national initiative provided by the Pedestrian Council of Australia. The central tenet is to ensure primary school children are encouraged to walk or commute safely to school with either a parent, relative or carer (Pedestrian Council, 2019).

## Conclusion

With the escalation of mental health and behaviour disorders in Australian schools, there has been a loud call for school educators to combine physical education and nutritional learning perspectives in order to improve a student’s neurological capacities (Hardy, Mirhshahi, Drayton, & Bauman, 2015). When I reflect on my work undertaken over the years, one thing that is core to all of this is that the solution to unlocking a student’s greatest learning potential occurs when their curiosity is awakened through food and exercise. I have witnessed first hand how stress can destroy our capacity to awaken our mind (The Resilience Institute, 2019) compounded with a lack of exercise and a feeling of hopelessness when our needs are not met physiologically and emotionally. I have a passionate belief that linking physical movement with access to food and food activities increases student engagement, produces successful learning outcomes and creates pathways for students to overcome obstacles to excel to new levels. This approach has been key to my work in schools since 2004 culminating in 2018, being recognised by the NSW Primary Principals’ Association State Council (NSPPA). They unanimously endorsed that Scotts Head Public School Community is a worthy recipient of the NSWPPA Aboriginal Education Award:

Gillian Stuart has made a significant difference to the Aboriginal students and community at the local School, evidenced by the strong emphasis on Aboriginal culture and histories. Students are engaged in a variety of programs that focus on Aboriginal Education. In consultation with Elders and respected community members, various stations have been created in the playground which act as hubs for each aspect of the 8-Ways of Aboriginal Learning....Through programs which heavily involve the local community, students are very knowledgeable about each aspect and are regularly called upon to take guided tours

through their school with visiting teachers, principals and dignitaries. There are yarning circles, bush foods stops through their Bush Tucker Track and various interpretive spaces built in partnership with TAFE and at-risk Aboriginal High School Students. These projects have provided genuine pathways for young Aboriginal men to gain certified skills, which may lead to meaningful employment in the local area as well as provide visible positive role-models for the school's younger male students. Local Aboriginal artists have been engaged to work with all students in linking the seasonal knowledge and local cultural aspects with the school by creating colourful artworks which feature across the school's grounds. Gillian Stuart's work and enthusiasm have changed community attitudes and formed a cohesive school community.

My foresight, coupled with my leadership skills, has significantly contributed to increasing quality outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students under my wing over the years, and as such the investment in these projects has formed my life's work as ongoing well beyond the school gate.

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