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A STEP-UP Resilience Intervention for Supporting Indigenous Students Attending Boarding Schools: Its Development and Implementation

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Abstract

Developing and nurturing resilience is critical to the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of Indigenous Australian adolescents and their continuing life trajectories. The attendance of many Indigenous adolescents from remote communities at boarding schools creates a need to prioritise and proactively create opportunities that build and nurture student resilience. This requires sustainable and multi-dimensional school-wide approaches. Despite this need, there are no documented SEWB or resilience building approaches for Australian Indigenous students who attend boarding schools. We describe the use of participatory action research to develop and implement a two-year STEP-UP intervention with boarding schools, designed to create supportive environments for improving psychosocial resilience and wellbeing of remote-living Indigenous students. The intervention consisted of three components implemented annually across eight schools: a site-specific STEP-UP action plan; staff capacity development; and an annual Schools and Communities Conference. Thematic analysis of a systematic literature review, documented action planning, conference group processes, resilience theory and survey findings from the associated broader resilience study resulted in the identification of six resilience building domains: valuing culture and identity; developing cultural leadership; nurturing strong relationships; building social and emotional skills; creating safe, supportive environments; and building staff capacity. These domains became the resulting framework for STEP-UP planning and

enabled focused examination of practices and future planning. Learnings from the intervention process suggest principles to consider when designing interventions: utilising a strengths-based approach; design responsiveness; collaborative partnerships; institutional capacity; and sustainability. A resilience toolkit website was developed to enable knowledge translation and sustainability beyond the study.

Keywords: *Indigenous, resilience, social and emotional well-being, intervention, boarding schools, participatory action research.*

Introduction

Developing and nurturing resilience through the developmental adolescent years is critical to immediate and long-term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter respectfully referred to as Indigenous) social and emotional wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018; Blakemore, 2019). The attendance of many Indigenous students from remote communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) at secondary boarding schools and residential facilities during these important developmental years creates an increased need for schools to not only provide quality educational programs, but to prioritise and proactively nurture the holistic wellbeing of their students (Department of Education and Training, 2018). Building social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and resilience are particularly important for supporting these students to navigate life challenges, including the additional stressors of moving from their remote home communities to boarding schools that are often thousands of kilometres and culturally worlds away. Embedding school-wide practices that foster SEWB and build student resilience show great promise (see Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1990; Ungar, n.d.), however, there have been no documented SEWB or resilience building approaches for Indigenous Australian students who attend boarding schools. This creates the need to examine how boarding schools can promote and support the SEWB and resilience of their Indigenous students, determine what the key elements of such an approach are, and how practices and strategies can be implemented in sustainable ways. To address these key issues, this paper outlines how participatory action research (PAR) was utilised to develop a school-based STEP-UP intervention framework to support the SEWB and resilience of Indigenous boarding school students. The resultant framework is intended for use by boarding schools to inform the development of their own SEWB and resilience-based interventions.

Background

The increasing prevalence of adolescent suicide continues to be an issue of significant concern for Indigenous communities as well as health, education and other services (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013; Dudgeon et al., 2016). Suicide rates for Indigenous Australians aged 15–19 years are five times higher than for their non-Indigenous peers (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2015), and Indigenous youth residing in rural and remote communities are significantly overrepresented in these figures (Turner, 2018). To date, there is no literature pertaining to prevalence or correlation between boarding schools and suicide in Australian Indigenous populations. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Report (Dudgeon et al., 2016) highlights the need for three levels of interventions: universal (whole community); selective (high-risk groups) and indicated (individuals identified as high risk). Universal interventions are community-wide approaches aimed at mitigating against upstream risk factors and *“can involve promoting healing and strengthening resilience in individuals, families and communities by strengthening social and emotional wellbeing and culture”* (p.2). Selective interventions aim at engaging early with high-risk groups such as adolescents. Schools have an important role to play in supporting universal and selective approaches; however, the evidence also strongly promotes the need for community-led approaches that enable both contextually appropriate perspectives and culturally meaningful elements to be embedded (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013; Dudgeon et al., 2016; Turner, 2018).

While growing numbers of community-based initiatives are being developed and implemented to support Indigenous adolescents living in remote communities, a significant proportion of these adolescents are compelled to leave their home communities to access a comprehensive secondary education at boarding schools (Stewart & Lewthwaite, 2015). Spending up to 40 weeks a year away from their home communities and off Country greatly reduces their ability to participate in protective family and cultural practices or to engage with the specific SEWB services and initiatives targeted at a community level. This being the case, there is an imperative for staff at boarding schools and residential facilities to ‘step up’ in their practice to ensure that the SEWB needs of their Indigenous students are being met in culturally appropriate ways and that universal and selective strategies are nurtured through these important adolescent years. Included is the need to support students with mental health concerns and to mitigate against students’ self-harm, suicidal ideation and/or attempts. Studies suggest this is best achieved when schools engage in meaningful partnerships with their Indigenous students, families and communities and work together to identify and implement the supports required to meet student needs (Milgate, 2016). However, amongst other factors, the impact of distance between home communities and these boarding school contexts can present unique challenges and complexities.

In response to these circumstances, a five-year multicomponent mixed methods study was undertaken by Central Queensland University (CQU), in partnership with the Queensland Education Department’s Transition Support Services (TSS) (McCalman et al., 2016). A significant feature of the study was the development, implementation and evaluation of site-specific interventions designed to improve the psychosocial resilience of remote Cape York and Palm Island students attending boarding schools. Such resilience-focussed programs have been identified as one of the three types of suicide prevention programs globally (along with crisis intervention and post-vention programs) (Wilson & Gauvin, 2012) This paper focuses on the process of developing and implementing the two-year STEP-UP intervention at eight TSS supported boarding schools throughout Queensland. The acronym “STEP-UP” referred to a plan that was **S**trengths based, **T**uned-in to student and community voice, **E**vidence informed and focused, a **P**lan that was measurable and based on the principles of **U**nderstanding and **P**artnerships. The paper reports some preliminary findings and learnings that evolved through the intervention process. A companion paper (Benveniste, Van Beek, McCalman, Langham & Bainbridge, 2020) evaluates the appropriateness, feasibility and cost of implementing the intervention after the first year.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Underpinning the design of the STEP-UP intervention were three key theoretical concepts pertinent to the process of nurturing wellbeing, strengthening resilience and preventing against suicide in Indigenous adolescents: Indigenous concepts of SEWB; resilience theory; and a socio-ecological systems approach. A brief outline of each of these concepts will be provided below before proceeding to describe the intervention process.

From an Indigenous perspective, SEWB encompasses a holistic view of health and wellbeing. While there are nuanced views of what this specifically entails, there is consensus that this holistic view “*incorporates the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of individuals and their communities*” (Dudgeon, Milroy, & Walker, 2014 p.xxv). It is influenced by Indigenous peoples’ community relationships and power, their histories and their connections to land or ‘country’, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community (Bainbridge et al., 2018). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy strongly promotes the strengthening of “*social and emotional wellbeing competencies*” suggesting that they “*are the foundations of resilience throughout life*” (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013, p.6). Further, when designing and implementing SEWB interventions the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

2017-2023 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) recommends the use of strength-based approaches.

Theories of resilience (Theron, 2016; Ungar, n.d.; van Breda, 2018) as adopted in this study, are strength-based. These contemporary constructs of resilience have shifted away from the traditional belief that have defined resilience as an outcome, or simply a measure of an individual's ability to bounce back from adversity. Rather, they define resilience as a process (van Breda, 2018) and adopt a socio-ecological systems approach. Thus:

in the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar, n.d., para 2)

Drawing on this definition of resilience, the multiple socio-ecological systems (as originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that exist around an individual, play a significant role in supporting them to get their psychological, social, cultural, and physical needs met. In the boarding school context students are constantly impacted by the interactions between school policies, practices, physical resources, teachers, boarding staff, pastoral care, external service providers, peers, family, home community, and local community. While these are all potentially important resources for student wellbeing, they can either enable or hinder students' capacity to access the supports needed to keep them strong and resilient.

Study Context

Cape York and Palm Island

Each year more than 500 Indigenous adolescents from remote and very remote communities in Cape York and Palm Island leave their families and communities to access secondary education at boarding schools throughout Queensland (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Stewart & Lewthwaite, 2015). Cape York and Palm Island communities are culturally and linguistically diverse, and vary in geographical location, population, and access to services and employment opportunities (Figure 1). While motivations for attending boarding school vary, many students are precluded from accessing education in their home communities due to the absence or limited provision of secondary education in these communities. Take up of enrolment generally occurs at the commencement of grade seven (12 years old) and students can potentially spend up to six years attending boarding school if they remain until the completion of grade 12.



Figure 1: Map of Cape York and Palm Island Communities and TSS Partner Boarding Schools (Kelly, 2017)

Transition Support Services

All students included in this study were supported by the Queensland Department of Education's Transition Support Services (TSS). At the time of this study, TSS staff were situated in Far North Queensland, North Queensland and South East Queensland, conducting regular visits to boarding schools and residential facilities throughout Queensland providing mentorship and support to the students. In addition, they worked with school and boarding staff to provide professional development opportunities and recommend strategies to use when planning and implementing curriculum and activities to meet the educational and wellbeing needs of each student. Furthermore, TSS provided a strong link to families by connecting school staff and families and educating school and boarding staff about students' home communities and primary school experiences.

Educational sites

Eight boarding school sites were randomly selected from the 18 Queensland TSS partner boarding schools to take part in the first phase of the intervention with the other schools wait-listed until the following year. Schools were randomly clustered into these two groups to evaluate the effects of the resilience-based model of student support in modifying students' resilience, educational outcomes, and suicidal risk using an interrupted time series design (McCalman et al., 2016). Within cluster schools, differences included: student demographic; geographic location; staff experience; Indigenous specific programs; and educational experiences offered. Geographically, the sites were located in Far North Queensland (n=2), North Queensland (n = 2), CQ (n = 1) and South East Queensland (n=3). Seven of the cluster one sites were either Independent, Catholic or Lutheran secondary schools with residential facilities attached, while one site was an independent residential facility operating under the auspice of a sports club. Students from this site attended various secondary schools during the day and returned to the residential facility after school. Four sites offered co-education, the other four offered single-gender education (three male only, and one female only). In terms of the proportion of Indigenous enrolments, one site had 100% Indigenous enrolments, one site had greater than 75%, and the remaining six had less than 25% Indigenous enrolments.

Methods

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from James Cook University (JCU) Human Research Ethics Committee (H5964), CQU Research Ethics Committee (H16/01-008), and Department of Education, Queensland Government (File No. 50/27/1646). School principals were approached by TSS and/or CQU researchers, and all consented to the participation of their schools in the study. Parental consent for all students participating in the study was gained. Students gave their consent before they began participating in research activities.

The STEP-UP action plan was a two-year site-specific plan designed by school teams, TSS staff and the research team to find improved ways to support the psychosocial resilience and SEWB needs of remote Indigenous students. The intervention was implemented utilising a strength-based PAR approach. This approach is proven to be effective when working with Indigenous populations (Bainbridge, McCalman, Tsey, & Brown, 2011; McCalman, McEwan, & Tsey, 2009; McCalman et al., 2013). It fosters sustainability, builds mutual trust and respect in relationships, creates partnerships, encourages ownership and empowerment throughout the research reprocess (Israel, Schulz, Parker & Becker, 2008; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). PAR is a way of 'doing' rather than a set of rigid steps to follow, where researchers are facilitators that create an environment for all to better understand their own abilities and resources and together generate new information to create new real-world solutions (Dustman, Kohan & Stringer, 2014 & Stern, 2014). The research team not only conducts research but simultaneously enacts change in implementing an intervention. PAR is cyclic in nature where each cycle has elements of reflecting, planning, acting and observing (see Figure 2) (Stern, 2014). Cumulative learnings from each phase of the study inform and enhance the design and implementation of subsequent phases. Utilising the PAR cycles enabled stakeholders to actively engage in the design and implementation of site-specific STEP-UP action plans and influence intervention decisions. The STEP-UP intervention was implemented through two annual cycles of PAR consistent with the 2017 and 2018 academic years.

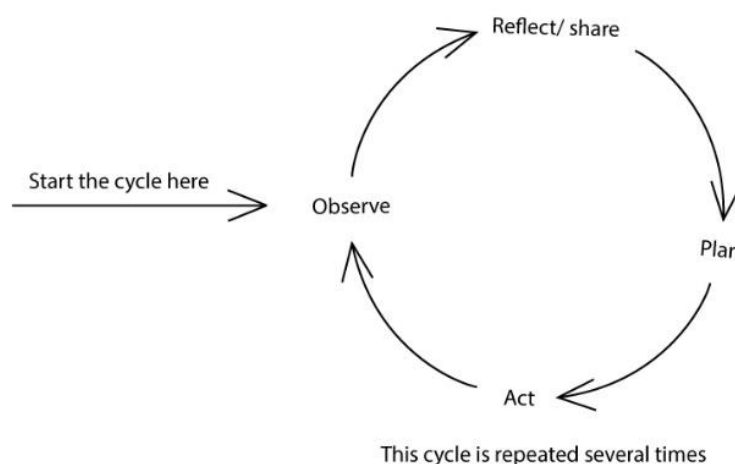


Figure 2: The Basic Action Research Cycle.

The Components of the STEP-UP Intervention

The STEP-UP intervention (See Figure 3) consisted of: 1) half-day workshops for presentation of theoretical, observational and survey data (Observe), invitation to reflect on school practices (Reflect/share) and the co-design and implementation of site-specific STEP-UP action plans (Plan); 2) staff capacity building through the establishment of a community of practice and

provision of professional development opportunities (Act); and 3) attendance at an annual Schools and Communities Conference (Act).

STEP-UP Action Plans

Each STEP-UP action plan was developed through an initial half-day session with school staff, in Term One of 2017. The composition of school teams varied across sites but generally included leadership teams, teaching, boarding and pastoral care staff, and in one case student representatives. The aim of these sessions was for researchers to present and discuss resilience and SEWB related evidence for school teams to Observe, Reflect on practice, Share, and Plan incremental steps toward school-wide improvements.

Thus, initially the research team presented the concept of socio-ecological resilience theory, information about Indigenous SEWB in relation to the Cape York and Palm Island context, and emerging research findings from the broader resilience study, including an annual summary of a student resilience survey (McCalman et al., 2016), first administered in term 1, 2017 to all TSS supported students. With this foundational knowledge and data in mind, school teams were encouraged to reflect on and audit their school-wide practices utilising five PAR questions: 'What are your strengths?'; 'What are the challenges?'; 'What have you tried?'; 'What is working?' and 'What are the possibilities?'. Discussions revealed 'strengths to build on' and 'opportunities for growth'. Each team then identified and planned up to three priority focus areas to develop throughout the first PAR cycle, and listed strategies, actions and additional supports required to enact their plan and how they would measure progress. School teams implemented their STEP-UP action plans over the course of the first year, with TSS ongoing support negotiated with their respective schools.

At the end of PAR cycle one, relevant data were analysed to identify the key resilience building domains useful for framing the school-based interventions. Thematic analyses were conducted of 1) evidence generated from a systematic scoping literature review on the characteristics, effectiveness and theoretical adherence of interventions to support the psychosocial resilience in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and United States (Jongen, McCalman & Bainbridge, 2020); 2) summaries of the STEP-UP planning sessions; 3) analyses of the 2017 student survey findings (Langham et al., 2018); and 4) summaries of student, community and school staff workshops at the Schools and Communities Conference. These findings were compared with international theoretical resilience models (Ungar, n.d.) and findings were presented to Indigenous health and education professionals and community members to interrogate their relevance and appropriateness and refine according to feedback.

In PAR cycle two, STEP-UP planning was refined to incorporate these six resilience building domains as the guiding framework for planning. In term one of 2018, teams met again to review the progress of their STEP-UP action plans. Learnings from the previous year were discussed and survey summaries and new research findings presented. Time was spent discussing the six domains and reviewing and planning school-wide practices and strategies through this new lens. Teams refined their focus areas and new goals were set.

Staff Capacity Building

To strengthen capacity of staff to better implement their plan, two approaches were taken. First, a webinar platform was created to establish a community of practice and each site was invited to deliver a short presentation on the practices that they felt had been most effective in improving the SEWB and resilience of their Indigenous students. This acknowledged the many examples of good practice already occurring at the various sites and the benefit of sharing these practices. The second approach was the delivery of targeted SEWB and resilience related professional development. Schools were asked to identify possible topics that would complement their STEP-UP action plans. From these suggestions three interactive webinars were offered in the first year: 1) understanding the health and social and emotional wellbeing context of Cape York; 2) trauma informed practice; and 3) understanding higher expectations relationships. In the second PAR

cycle, sessions included further trauma informed practice sessions, and the Stronger Smarter Yarns for Life early intervention suicide prevention training (Sarra, Mendoza, & Wands, 2015) delivered face to face by TSS staff and a member of the research team. All practice sharing and professional development sessions delivered via the webinar platform were recorded and made available for staff at each site to view at their convenience.

Annual Schools and Communities Conference

Distance between communities and schools poses an ongoing logistical challenge for collaboration. CQU and TSS hosted an annual two-day Schools and Communities Conference in 2017 and 2018, inviting participation from Cape York and Palm Island parents, community council representatives, students, school teams and representatives from other education and health service providers. These conferences provided a rare opportunity for students and families to talk about their experiences. It also allowed for the research team to present updates on study findings, education teams to present their STEP-UP action plans and guest speakers to share knowledge through presentations, storytelling and guest panel sessions. Further knowledge and research data were generated regarding the SEWB and resilience of students through the facilitation of student yarning circles, breakout workshops and round table discussions.

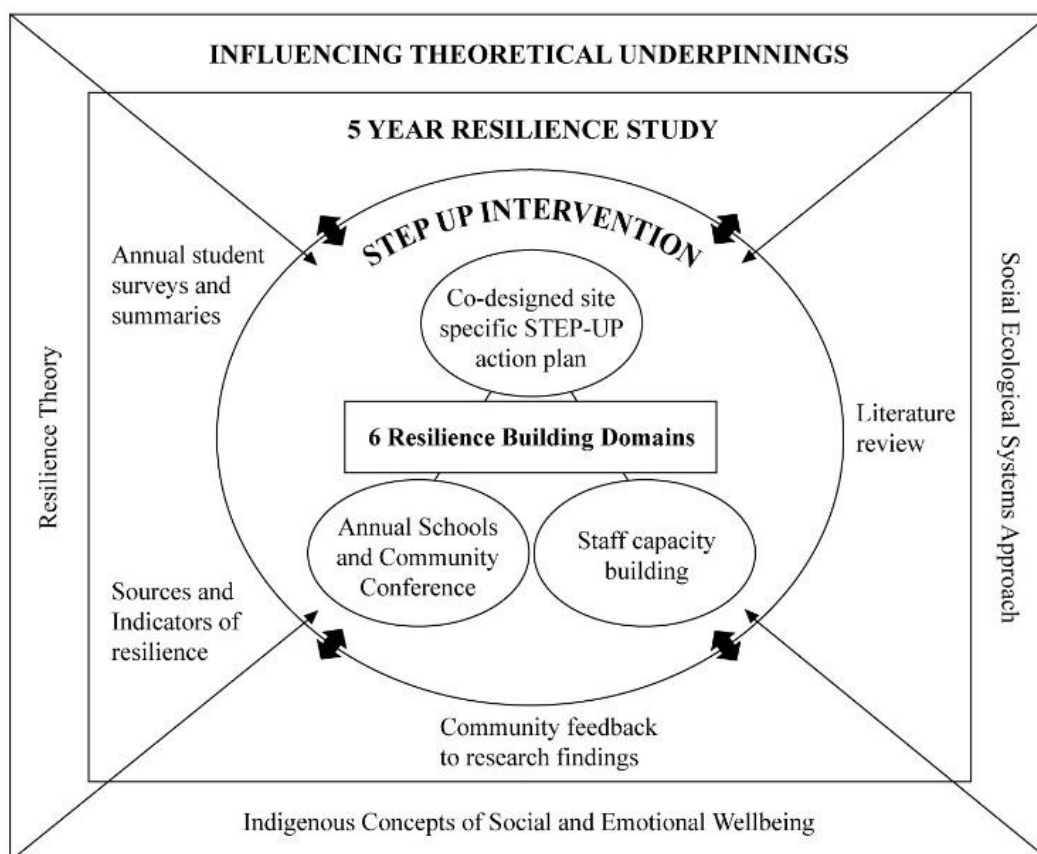


Figure 3: The STEP-UP Intervention

Data were collected from school staff, students and community members through recordings and transcriptions of the STEP-UP planning, staff capacity building and schools and community conference processes throughout the two PAR cycles. The results are presented here chronologically, with quotes from participants provided to authenticate the findings.

Results

Analysis and Reflection of PAR Cycle One - 2017

The initial STEP-UP planning sessions gave school teams a much-needed opportunity to discuss and examine their practice. Several schools had not previously had this formal opportunity. One school leader commented that *the process had “been worthwhile and that it was important for schools to stop and make time for these conversations”*. Another school team suggested *“it was a great way to check in on our school progress”*. Team dynamics varied between the schools. Only one site included student representatives in their planning days; this brought a unique perspective to these meetings and consequently influenced how their action plan was implemented. Reoccurring discussion topics raised in these planning sessions included: a desire by schools and staff to form better relationships with communities; the barriers that prevented this occurring; the benefit of having student champions and mentors in supporting SEWB and resilience; the importance of staff capacity building particularly in the area of trauma informed practice; and the need for resilient staff. By the end of 2017, five sites had developed and begun implementing their site-based STEP-UP action plan. All eight sites, however, participated in either one or both of the other intervention components.

School teams provided positive feedback about the professional development webinars, however, finding a suitable time to host these webinars was logistically difficult and participation fluctuated. One site accessed the recordings of a webinar and presented it to their school staff during a weekly staff meeting. In response to this accessibility issue, it was decided that in PAR cycle two, professional development sessions would be changed to regional face-to-face sessions facilitated by TSS and members of the research team.

Eighty delegates attended the 2017 Schools and Communities Conference. Group discussions were recorded, and a conference summary developed. Key topics that arose from this conference were: the need for staff members to learn about their students' culture, the importance of strengthening connection between schools and communities, the value of building student leadership and linking with role models; the important role of parents; the desire by community members for quality education for their children; and the need to focus on post-schooling pathways. In the student yarning circles, a consistent theme was their desire to grow in leadership. They spoke about their ideas for influencing change within schools and home communities; however, many felt they lacked opportunities, skills and support to have their voices heard. Students were also asked to write words that described what they felt helped keep them strong. Responses included: pride, being one mob, dancing, spirit, family, friends, feeling equal, help with conflict resolution, having a voice, being inspired, role models and having advocates, champions and mentors. Overall, 75% of participants reported that the Conference was either extremely useful or very useful. Participants reported that they most enjoyed: hearing different perspectives, brainstorming ideas and the ability to network. These factors influenced planning for the 2018 Schools and Communities Conference.

PAR Cycle One Response: Formation of the Six Domains

The initial auditing of existing practices at each site revealed various promising strategies and initiatives, but little evidence of systematic school-wide planning approaches. With new data being generated through the intervention and the broader research study, it became evident that there was a need for a more structured framework to organise this information for school planning (table 1). The six domains became the STEP-UP action planning framework and provided a strong focus for the remainder of the intervention activities and ongoing research translation.

Table 1: Six Resilience Building Domains

SIX RESILIENCE BUILDING DOMAINS						
Data Source	Valuing-Culture and Identity	Developing Cultural Leadership	Nurturing Strong Relationships	Creating a Safe Supportive Environment	Building Social and Emotional Skills	Staff Capacity Building
Literature Review	Language Culture Identity	Leadership	Relationships with families and communities	Work development preparing students for employment Academic support	SEWB focus: Mental health, violence, drug and alcohol; Health, life skills and socialisation; Emotions; Goal setting; Problem solving; Solution framework; Behaviour modification	Staff capacity training Development of cultural competencies
STEP-UP planning	Recognition and celebration of culture	Developing student leadership	Strengthening school, families and community relationships	Academic support; Post-school planning support	Addressing social and emotional needs and development	Building staff capacity and cultural competencies
Resilience Surveys	Sources	Connection with culture	Role models	Caring and supportive friendships; Connection with family	Safe home with plenty of good food to eat	
	Indicators	Celebrating culture				Interpersonal social skills; Knowing how to behave in different situations; Staying on task; Helping others
2017 Schools and Communities Conference	Students	Pride; Dancing; Being one mob; Spirit	Leadership Having a voice; Being inspired by role models; advocates, and mentors	Friends; Family	Feeling equal	Help with conflict resolution
	Families	Schools need to learn about students' culture		Better partnerships– (school, families and communities); School visits to communities	Preparing students for improved post-schooling pathways	Behaviours to be addressed at school rather than sending home for suspension
	Roundtable	Recognition and celebration of culture		Strengthening schools and community' relationships	Supporting academic needs; Indigenous perspectives and resources	Building staff capacity; Professional development
9 Things all children need Ungar (n.d.)	A strong identity; A sense of belonging, spirituality or life purpose	A sense of control	Lots of strong relationships; Parent like relationships	Structure, Consequences, Rights and responsibilities, Safety and support		

Analysis and Reflection of PAR Cycle Two – 2018

The STEP-UP review and planning sessions gave an opportunity for schools to reflect on their learnings in relation to the newly formed six domains and to refine and/or add to their STEP-UP plans for the coming year. Six sites participated in the review meetings. One site which had not implemented a plan in 2017 took this opportunity to develop their action plan and identified ways of moving forward in 2018. The site that included student representatives in their initial STEP-UP planning and implementation again invited the students to take part in the review. Staff made mention of “*the notable change in the students’ confidence*” and students suggested ways they could mentor younger students, including facilitating yarning circles to address issues that younger students may be facing. One student described her participation in the school planning and attendance at the Schools and Communities Conference as “*one of my greatest achievements at school*”. Another school reported noticeable changes after the first year of the intervention and a shift in school culture. The school teams’ awareness of student wellbeing and resilience had grown and was being mirrored across this school “*right down the food chain*” from the principal to the classroom teacher.

Increased participation in professional development was noted in PAR cycle two with the move to face to face regional delivery. Four sites committed to a full day of Stronger Smarter, Yarns for Life early suicide prevention training. An Indigenous elder who attended this training commented that “*this was a great learning curve for me... We spent the day doing the program, time went so fast, and it was so worthwhile. I would recommend this program for all teachers and boarding staff*”.

The 2018 Schools and Communities Conference provided further professional learning and relationship building opportunities. Ninety-one participants attended this conference. Keynote speakers shared their expertise in developing youth leadership and SEWB strategies. Focused discussions included cultural connectedness, managing stress, navigating the primary to secondary transition and health service integration. Community members and students were again invited to share their perspectives on topics of student wellbeing and resilience. Key themes included the need to ensure Indigenous voices were represented across the design, planning and implementation of educational activities and the need for collaboration between health and education systems in addressing the SEWB needs of students. Participants reported that they most enjoyed: hearing different perspectives, discussions around the resilience and SEWB of students and the ability to network and plan with like-minded professionals across sectors in health, Catholic education and State schooling.

PAR Cycle Two Response: Development of the Resilience Building Toolkit

Throughout PAR cycle two, questions arose about the sustainability of the STEP-UP intervention beyond the life of the research project. In response, a Resilience Building Toolkit website (<https://resiliencebuildingtoolkit.com.au/>) was developed to promote research translation and maintain the sustainability of STEP-UP action planning beyond the life of the research project. This website was based on the six domains and acts as a portal to a wide range of resources that support Indigenous SEWB and resilience. Extensive consultation with Indigenous educators, health practitioners, social workers, youth leaders, education advisory officers and remote Indigenous community members occurred to inform its construction and content. The website provides a suite of resources related to each of the six domain areas (table 2), including links and videos to promote further staff development in each area. It also provides a set of planning tools which includes STEP-UP planning documents, guiding questions to stimulate staff discussions and checklists with ideas for implementation in each of the six domain areas. Lastly, it features Cape York and Palm Island community pages. These pages link to community council, local health and school webpages, provide cultural and historical information, links to demographic information and a range of video clips that depict community life. These community pages were developed in consultation with each of the community councils who were invited to create resources or suggest additions to their pages.

Table 2: Descriptors of the Six Resilience Building Domains - Resilience Building Toolkit

Valuing Culture and Identity	Social and Emotional Skill Building	Developing Cultural Leadership
Students feel safe and a sense of belonging at school when their culture is valued by those in school and boarding. Taking time to develop knowledge and awareness of particular cultural groups makes students feel valued and heard. It is also important to gain a broad understanding of Australia's history of colonisation, skills for eliciting students' concerns and strategies for negotiating shared understanding and participatory decision-making, where possible.	From an Indigenous perspective social and emotional wellbeing is viewed through a holistic lens incorporating the physical, social, emotional, spiritual and cultural health of both individuals and their communities and is a source of strength over one's wellbeing. As young people enter new schooling environments, additional stressors can be present. Indigenous students need to be supported by schools to both access culturally meaningful resources that make them feel strong and to develop specific skills to assist them navigate the day to day challenges that they face.	Developing Cultural Leadership enables a sense of self, a sense of control and a sense of purpose over one's life. Indigenous sovereignty is essential to Indigenous wellbeing. Building on students' leadership capabilities is important in nurturing them as future leaders, promoting personal resilience and providing much needed skills to bring change to their communities. Cultural leadership incorporates values and practices of both Indigenous and Western perspectives.
Nurturing Strong Relationships	Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment	Building Staff Capacity
Nurturing strong relationships involves building trusting relationships that enable students to feel safe and secure and families to feel valued and part of the school experience despite the challenges of distance and cultural differences. Additionally, promoting positive and supportive peer networks is beneficial to building resilience.	A safe and supportive environment is one that supports students to feel emotionally, culturally and physically safe in their surroundings. It recognises that students who transition from remote Indigenous communities into a boarding school environment experience vast cultural, physical, academic and social differences and provides tailored support structures to meet student needs.	Developing knowledge and understanding of Indigenous learners is a key requirement for meeting the Australian professional standards for teachers. Staff who understand the cultural, emotional, social, physical and academic needs of students and can translate this knowledge into practice can improve students' schooling experiences, outcomes and build student wellbeing and resilience.

Overall intervention participation and actions

Table 3 outlines engagement with the STEP-UP intervention over PAR cycle one and two.

Table 3: STEP-UP Intervention Activities

Site	Conditions	School staff involved in STEP-UP planning						Engagement				Focus areas Six Domains					
	Site type - (c) Co-ed, (s) single sex Proportion of Indigenous students	Senior management	Boarding staff	Teaching staff	Pastoral care	Indigenous specific role	Students	Involvement in planning day	Follow-up meetings with TSS or CQU staff	Participation in professional development activities	Attendance at the annual Schools and Community Conference	Valuing Culture and Identity	Developing Cultural Leadership	Nurturing Strong Relationships	Building Social and Emotional Skills	Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment	Building Staff Capacity
Site 1	C >25%	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	*	√
Site 2	S 100%	√	X	X	√	X	X	√	√	√	√	√	X	*	√	√	√
Site 3	S <75%	X	X	√	√	√	X	√	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
Site 4	C >25%	√	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Site 5	S >25%	√	X	√	X	√	X	√	X	X	√	-	-	-	-	-	-
Site 6	C >25%	X	√	X	X	√	X	√	√	√	√	*	√	*	*	√	√
Site 7	C >25%	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	*	X
Site 8	S >25%	√	X	√	√	X	X	X	√	√	√	*	√	√	*	*	√

Key:

- √ Enacted or identified as part of STEP-UP action plan
- X Not enacted or identified as part of STEP-UP action plan
- School did not take up STEP-UP action plan
- * Indicates the practice already existed in some capacity before intervention but was incorporated into or enhanced by the STEP-UP action plan

High vs Limited Implementation of the STEP-UP Approach

Site 1 and 4 generally had high levels of participation and implementation in all aspects of the intervention. Site 1 had an intervention team who remained consistent over the two years. In addition, they had previously established Indigenous planning teams (sustainable drivers); intervention activities were easily integrated into these. There was a strong site focus on improving Indigenous outcomes from the top down and although a leadership change occurred at the end of the first year, continuity of intervention activities remained. Site 4 established a student leadership team to plan and enact positive change in their school. They set regular times to meet and were supported by a dedicated staff member and TSS staff who mentored and assisted students to enact activities. The key driver remained the same over the two years and

there was strong support from school leadership who allowed activities to be embedded into school-wide practices and routines. Students, staff and TSS noted a shift in the school culture throughout the intervention.

Sites 3 and 5 had relatively low implementation activity. While both sites actively participated in various aspects of the intervention, neither formally established or implemented a STEP-UP action plan. Both sites allocated a single staff member to take responsibility for the intervention. At site 3 the staff member had competing demands on his time and development of a plan did not come to fruition. Site 5 was in a region that had limited access to TSS and therefore support to develop a plan was limited. However, towards the end of the second year, site 5 did introduce the six domains to their site and made plans to develop this into the future.

Table 4 (below) identifies examples of activities implemented by sites. While activities have been listed under specific domains, some activities addressed several domain areas. Site 3 and 5 were not included in the table as a STEP-UP action plan was not designed or enacted at either site.

Table 4: Examples of Strategies Implemented

Strategies for Design and Implementation of STEP UP Action Plans						
	Valuing Culture and Identity	Developing Cultural Leadership	Nurturing Strong Relationships	Building Social and Emotional Skills	Creating a Safe Supportive Environment	Building Staff Capacity
Site 1	Planned camp in a Cape York community for boarding students	Held an Indigenous student leadership camp to identify and plan priority actions	School leadership conducted visits to boarding students' home communities		Staff trained in Indigenous bandscales*	Established a community website for staff to learn about students' home communities*
	Students co-planned National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee events and celebrations*		Boarding staff increased regular contact with families. Established and utilised Facebook page to increase communication			Staff participated in early suicide prevention training
Site 2	Established Indigenous specific site priorities with Indigenous parent reference group*		Established and utilised Facebook page to share with families what is happening day to day at the site*	Protective behaviours and healthy relationships training delivered to students and staff	Created positive behaviours framework Conducted weekly case meetings for students experiencing difficulties.	Invested in staff capacity building: Emotional intelligence Cert 4 Community Services (boarding) Trauma informed practice Reflective practice Ethical relationships Early suicide prevention
			Visiting families openly invited and encouraged to spend time on site when in town e.g. encouraged to join the students at mealtimes*	Promoted healthy lifestyle choices - site had a strong health and fitness program already in existence before STEP-UP planning *	Advocated for differentiated curriculum and English as a second language/ dialect support*	

Strategies for Design and Implementation of STEP UP Action Plans						
	Valuing Culture and Identity	Developing Cultural Leadership	Nurturing Strong Relationships	Building Social and Emotional Skills	Creating a Safe Supportive Environment	Building Staff Capacity
Site 4	Acknowledgement of Country at all assemblies Traditional Owners invited to provide Welcome to Country at significant events Acknowledged significant Indigenous dates Committed to embedding Indigenous perspectives TSS facilitated Welcome to Country event and enabled students to share culture	Students were integral in STEP-UP planning and implementation They were supported to reflect on needs within the school and identify areas of action Indigenous students were supported by school staff and TSS to plan and lead cultural events	Increased connections with local community by inviting Traditional Owners and parents to participate in National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee events and celebrations. Staff and students attended Palm Island open days	Older Indigenous students were supported to mentor younger students	Students supported to present on assemblies information about significant dates, their history and meaning (giving credibility and respect to the students and their cultures) Established an Indigenous specific staff position who mentored students and championed for their needs.	Increased professional development: Higher Expectations Relationships Context of Cape York and Palm Island communities-emphasising strengths and challenges * TSS facilitated a sharing best practice breakfast with schools in region that support Cape York and Palm Island students
Site 6	Linked students with the Indigenous community where the school site is located *	Engaged with Indigenous leadership organisations to provide opportunities for students to connect beyond school	Continued to build strong relationships between staff and students* Planned increase visits to students' home communities	Conducted daily check ins with students to monitor health and wellbeing * Developing a check-in app	Developed Vocational Education Training program to support post-school options for senior students	Professional development provided in: Trauma Informed Practice* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid
Site 8	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee events acknowledged, celebrated and incorporated into school routines *	Student involvement in STEP-UP planning	Staff connected with families through engagement, enrolment interviews and welcome packs Planned staff travel to communities at end of Term Connected students with family at other schools in region	Employed full time counsellor to support students at boarding and school*	Indigenous artwork is displayed around the school Students provided with safe places they can go to yarn with their peers *	Staff provided professional development in trauma informed practice. Staff increased awareness of student and family needs by connecting with people in Cape York communities

Key * Indicates practice existed in some capacity prior to the planning session, however, it was considered essential to building resilience and thus, constituted part of their ongoing plan

Discussion

Designing and implementing an Indigenous resilience and SEWB intervention that meets the needs of a diverse range of boarding school contexts was challenging. Learnings from the process of designing and implementing the STEP-UP intervention across eight diverse sites highlighted five design principles that are important to consider. These were: 1) the adoption of a strengths-based approach; 2) the need for design responsiveness; 3) the value of collaborative partnerships; 4) the need to build institutional capacity; and 5) the need for sustainable drivers. This discussion expands on each of these design principles in relation to the STEP-UP intervention, discusses challenges faced and outlines research limitations.

Firstly, the STEP-UP intervention promoted a strength-based approach by focusing on those attributes and “resources that may enable adaptive functioning and positive outcomes” (Hunter, 2012, para 1). Evidence suggests that educational engagement is likely to be enhanced by a school environment that affirms culture and identity and seeks to engage positively with students and their families (Bottrell, 2009; Munford & Sanders, 2016; Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg & Ungar, 2015; Theron, Liebenberg, & Malindi, 2013; Ungar, 2004). The six-domain framework provided a lens to reflect, discuss and develop opportunities to promote cultural and individual strengths within the school environment. Consultation and co-design with students and communities was strongly encouraged with the Schools and Community Conferences providing opportunities for shared learning, understanding and collaboration. This approach is supported by Armstrong et al., (2012) who suggest that when working with Indigenous students a strengths-based approach should focus on

abilities, knowledges and capabilities ... recognis[ing] that the community is a rich source of resources; assum[ing] that people are able to learn, grow and change; encourag[ing] positive expectations of children as learners and ... characterised by collaborative relationships (p.9).

Secondly, in designing the intervention, it was important to acknowledge and be responsive to diversity across the sites. Thus, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all pre-designed program, the research team elected to provide a broad STEP-UP framework that guided and supported sites to tailor their own interventions around their distinct contexts and student needs. This decision acknowledged differing site demographics, levels of staff knowledge and experience, pre-existing programs and strengths and challenges. It also recognised the unique socio-ecological factors that influenced student experiences and highlighted the resources that were available or lacking at each site. In conjunction, utilising PAR principles allowed for the collective voices of a range of stakeholders including students and families to be included in the research journey and enabled design responsiveness to occur (Nicholls, 2009).

Thirdly, collaborative partnerships are essential for supporting Indigenous and community-led approaches to enable contextually appropriate perspectives and culturally meaningful elements to be embedded in suicide prevention interventions (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013; Dudgeon et al., 2016; Turner, 2018). This can be particularly challenging in the boarding school context where distance can prove problematic; however, it is possible. Both prior to and through the STEP-UP intervention process, sites engaged in practices that promoted engagement and direction from their Indigenous students, families and communities. They included, engaging students in STEP-UP planning and review sessions, initiating or increasing staff visits to students' home communities, engaging with regional Indigenous groups and Traditional Owners, and establishing Indigenous or parent advisory groups and student leadership groups. The annual Schools and Communities Conferences were an effective way to bring together students, parents, community, schools, and education and health services, fostering deeper relationships and collaboration. Tuning into the different perspectives allowed for shared understandings to evolve, and for partnerships and relationships to develop between school staff and members of remote communities. This is particularly pertinent in the boarding school context where few

opportunities exist for parents, community members, school representatives, students and other to come together and discuss key issues.

Positive outcomes were also noted when students were consulted and supported to play a central role in the planning and implementation of their school's STEP-UP action plan. For example, site 4 particularly embraced a student-led approach that supported an increased students' sense of belonging and connection within the school. As found in other studies, the very attributes that make up resilience such as adaptability, responsibility, optimism, and hope were harnessed to promote Indigenous students' ownership and engagement at school and empower change towards improving their education and wellbeing outcomes (Bottrell, 2009). This practice can be particularly significant in a structured boarding school context, where there are often limited opportunities for students to exert control over many aspects of their lives. In discussing youth resilience, Ungar (n.d.) suggests that having a sense of control is one of the nine key things that all children need. Furthermore, cultural leadership and self-determination are important factors in improving the SEWB of Indigenous people (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

Fourth, building the knowledge and capacity of all staff members was perceived as a critical element in bringing about school-wide change. Auditing by schools revealed that sites with predominantly Indigenous enrolments generally had a higher percentage of Indigenous staff, reported a greater awareness of Indigenous issues, and were more likely to have implemented a range of targeted programs or strategies related to supporting Indigenous students. However, one site noted that due to the low salary allocated to boarding positions, they often attracted boarding staff who had limited prior training, and this could prove problematic when dealing with student cohorts that often had complex needs. This led the site to invest in regular training and mentoring of their staff members. All participating sites recognised the need and expressed positive intentions to cater for student resilience and SEWB needs, however, many reflected that they lacked the cultural capability, skills and confidence to know how to implement changes within their individual and school practice. When undertaking the evaluation (Benveniste et al., 2020) found, the new knowledge, understanding and cultural awareness gained by staff through the three components of the intervention contributed to building staff capacity and confidence to change practice.

Finally, sustainable drivers, or the factors embedded in school-wide planning that ensure continuity and progression, included such things as Indigenous wellbeing planning teams, student leadership teams, Indigenous/parent reference groups and allocated Indigenous teacher, teacher aide and liaison officer positions. They were also formally included in school policy documents and allocated time and budgeting resourcing. Such drivers were responsible for enabling the ongoing reflection, planning and implementation of programs that support Indigenous students' needs including a dedicated strategy to embed Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. These groups are beneficial as they enable schools to work collaboratively and tune in to the varied perspectives about students' wellbeing needs and allow for a sustainable approach. Accessing outside support services such as TSS was also valuable in providing school staff with constructive advice, guidance and professional development opportunities. Furthermore, they provided support and mentoring to students to take up leadership roles (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2019) and assisted in brokering relationships between schools and families and communities.

Challenges in implementing the STEP-UP approach differed between sites in which Indigenous enrolments were less than 25% compared to those with a majority Indigenous enrolment. Where Indigenous students were a minority, the challenge was to build respect for Indigenous culture into a wider and diverse school culture. While these sites often had staff 'champions' invested in implementing change, they were often aware of the need to integrate strategies in ways that embraced strengths and celebrated difference, yet, promoted inclusivity rather than creating divisions or an 'us and them' mentality. Sites with high Indigenous enrolments could more easily focus on strategies that nurtured culture and identity and this was evident when sites audited

their programs and strategies. These sites did note however, that they were more likely to have higher populations of students with complex needs, requiring greater demands on staff and other resources. With increased enrolment numbers, these demands intensified.

Regardless of site type, there were also common implementation challenges. The team developing and driving the STEP-UP action plan greatly influenced outcomes. The involvement and support of school leadership strongly influenced uptake and a broader range of staff involvement influenced better institutional integration. Where a single staff member was solely responsible for implementing the plan, there appeared to be more difficulty in progressing plans. Time and resource constraints also influenced implementation and progress of the action plans as did staff turnover, which was high at several sites. Initiatives such as STEP-UP planning should therefore entail a school-wide, systematic approach embedded into policy, planning and budgeting, rather than bolt-on or personality dependent strategies. Studies suggest that supportive environments for Indigenous students are created when schools integrate policies and practices to reduce discriminatory and exclusionary practices through, high teacher expectations; understanding or valuing Indigenous cultures, worldviews and issues; sensitivity to Aboriginal English; a culturally inclusive curriculum, pedagogy and supportive teaching and learning strategies; and strategies to improve Indigenous student success and resilience (Doyle & Hill, 2008; Krakouer, 2016; Education Council, 2015). Interventions such as STEP-UP action plans should address these.

Unless there is both the integration of components that explicitly embed sustainability in the design and delivery of mental health promotion programs, and attention to quality assurance of the components and implementation processes in schools, programs are likely to atrophy and die (Askell-Williams, 2017). In this PAR study, a sustained resource for schools was developed and implemented through the development of a Resilience Building Toolkit website which provides access to the resilience framework to support embeddedness of the resilience approaches beyond the life of the research project. There are multiple ways for schools to utilise this website, for example: planning documents can be downloaded, and resources utilised to support school-wide planning; it can be utilised for staff professional development sessions; as an induction resource for new teachers; and community pages can be used as conversation starter between staff and students. Furthermore, it allowed Cape York and Palm Island communities to share their own stories, strengths, cultural practices and protocols. Utilising technology such as this website, provides an alternative for communities to have a voice where distance can be a barrier. There is scope for communities, parents and young people to continue to share their perspectives and build connections with schools through such a medium. Whilst initial feedback from various schools, Indigenous education advisory teams, Indigenous students and community has been extremely positive, monitoring, regeneration and renewal is now needed to meet the changing needs and capabilities of staff members and Indigenous students.

Limitations and Further Research

Measurable changes in resilience and SEWB require long term investments and are influenced by a myriad of factors both within the control of the education sector and externally. The STEP-UP intervention promoted incremental and manageable steps towards sustainable and embedded change. Through iteratively reviewing their STEP-UP plan, school teams were encouraged to build upon their existing strategies. This is intended to be an ongoing process and in the short term, may not manifest in evident improvements in student resilience or SEWB. Furthermore, findings of student resilience measured through tools such as the student survey cannot be attributed solely to school practices. While an evaluation of the appropriateness, feasibility and cost of implementing the intervention was conducted after PAR cycle one (Benveniste et al., 2020), the authors suggest there is a need for further research and longer-term evaluation to ascertain how school cultural shifts and practices impact student resilience in the long term.

Conclusion

There is an increasing need for boarding schools to prioritise and support the SEWB and resilience of their Indigenous students. However, enacting systematic and sustainable change does not occur by accident. The intention of the STEP-UP intervention was to provide guidance and support for school leaders to prioritise and plan for meaningful actions at both a school policy and budgeting level, based on a range of evidence and emerging information, and invest in building the capacity of staff to provide appropriate support. Several factors were identified as important considerations when enacting STEP-UP action plans: embracing a strength-based approach; design responsiveness; a need to work collaboratively with students, families, communities and other key stakeholders to identify strengths, challenges and ways forward; building institutional capacity; and embedding sustainable drivers to maintain the ongoing development and review of interventions. Through thematic analysis of the intervention processes the six resilience building domains emerged as key elements that influence student resilience and SEWB at schools: valuing culture and identity; developing cultural leadership; nurturing strong relationships; social and emotional skill building; creating a safe and supportive environment and; building staff capacity. Utilising the six domains and applying PAR principles can offer schools an effective planning framework to comprehensively review their practices and tailor a plan to each unique setting. A Resilience Building Toolkit website was developed to support further learning and enable STEP-UP planning to be sustained. This website aligns with the STEP-UP framework, provides planning tools, an array of supporting resources and importantly, a platform for community voice.

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