The Worawa Way

A strengths based approach to wellbeing for young Aboriginal women

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Worawa Aboriginal College is unique as the sole Victorian Aboriginal school and the only Australian boarding school specifically catering for Aboriginal girls.

Much has been described about the intergenerational burden of trauma for Aboriginal people and a number of therapies and approaches are known to develop people’s strengths to address these issues. Surprisingly little material exists about implementation of these strengths based approaches with Aboriginal people (AIHW, 2014). Here we outline the approach that Worawa Aboriginal College has taken to strengthen wellbeing with young Aboriginal women.

Worawa is a unique educational institution in that it provides mainstream education in a culturally supportive environment, which delivers to its students a level of self-esteem and confidence for the future. Students are encouraged to develop academically, culturally and socially to their full potential. Established in 1983 in response to the difficulties faced by Aboriginal students in the mainstream education system, Worawa College is registered as a Specialist School catering for Aboriginal young women in Years 7-10. As a transition school, Worawa places emphasis on building the necessary ability, skills and confidence to transition into mainstream schooling at Years 11 and 12, and further, into higher education and meaningful work.

The young women who present at Worawa come from urban, regional and remote Aboriginal communities across the country. All have experienced difficult circumstantial backgrounds, typical of the low socio-economic status of Aboriginal people in Australia, and many have experienced levels of abuse, violence and neglect which have compromised their ability to independently seek out opportunities and grow the self-reliance and self-esteem needed for full emotional, social and physical development. The specialist nature of Worawa’s operations lie in its integrated model which combines intensive health and well-being programs with strong formal education principles and cultural activities led by Aboriginal Elders, focusing on Aboriginal values and pride in Aboriginal heritage.

The core business of Worawa is education however it must be recognised that the ability of students to engage in education is seriously impeded by poor health and psychosocial issues. Addressing student health and wellbeing gives students an improved ability to focus on their education. In short the provision of services available to students at Worawa contributes to better educational outcomes. It is in this context that the Worawa education model supports young women with intensive programs...
addressing their complex needs, providing on-site specialist care and daily routines integrating education, wellbeing and pride in culture. This physical and mental health focus, combined with sound formal education principles is integral to the success of the College in retaining and engaging ‘at risk’ young women.

The residential program provides a safe and secure ‘home’ environment as students deal with the complicated issues experienced by all young women in the crucial teenage years, and which can be especially acute in Aboriginal girls as they struggle to overcome early negative experiences and maintain connection to their Aboriginal heritage, while making a place for themselves in the mainstream world of higher education and work. The Worawa model builds trust and confidence and provides a bridge towards further education and workplace opportunities.

Worawa has a comprehensive approach to students’ physical, emotional and mental health care. Assessment, management and treatment strategies are specifically targeted to individual student needs. The College has forged partnerships with a range of organisations to deliver support services to students to enable them to focus on education.

As a result of the College’s holistic approach Worawa staff has observed a number of changes for the young Aboriginal women attending the College, which includes improved:

- concentration
- ability to self manage and soothe emotions, such as, sulking, anxiety, grief, anger or outbursts
- consistency
- appreciation of boundaries and routine
- physical and emotional health
- self esteem
- pride in personal care
- social skills
- literacy and reading
- leadership skills
- happiness and hope
- and mindfulness about health needs
Worawa prioritises wellbeing as one of three important focuses of the school, the three priority areas being education, culture and wellbeing. The strong emphasis on student wellbeing is one of the reasons guardians and parents choose to send their young women to the college. Guardians and parents are often aware that complex well being issues are preventing young women from enjoying and meaningfully engaging in education and identify that this needs to be addressed in order for students to develop in an academic environment.

Worawa provides a holistic approach to developing young women’s wellbeing and this is coordinated by the Worawa Wellbeing Team, which provides a systematic whole of school approach. The Wellbeing Team meets once a week to coordinate and respond to wellbeing at the College. The Wellbeing Team comprises the Executive Director, Head of Boarding, Head of Learning and Teaching, Social Worker, College Nurse and Mental Health Nurse.

The Wellbeing team is involved with students from the very beginning of contact with the College. The Worawa enrolment form seeks information on health and wellbeing to alert College personnel to a prospective student’s needs. Applications are carefully assessed to ensure that resources a new student may need are available for successful transition to Worawa. For instance, a student may require a program of intensive care or supervision or have complex health needs that require accommodation within Worawa’s service provider programs. Liaison may occur with the student’s previous school and health clinic to assist understanding of the student’s needs. On arrival at the College the wellbeing team meet with guardians and chaperones as well as the student to build a relationship and assess any wellbeing needs that may need to be addressed.

The holistic nature of the College program ensures an integrated approach between the residential and academic programs and wellbeing is threaded through all aspects of the program. Emphasis is placed on ensuring a safe and stable environment for students to work through wellbeing issues including previous trauma experiences. Morning and afternoon daily handover reports between leaders of the residential, academic and wellbeing teams ensure wellbeing issues are identified and supported in a timely manner. These include:

- Receiving a handover from house parents at a morning meeting
- Receiving a handover from the Social Worker at the close of the school day
- Attending daily Circle Gathering, held every morning. Here Worawa staff and students sit in a circle to convey important information and provide an orientation to the events of the day
- Providing a Wellbeing Room adjacent to the recreational area so students have easy access to and become familiar with Wellbeing Staff
- Encouraging students to contact the Wellbeing Team if they have anything they would like to bring up
- Building trust and safety with students
- Being available to liaise and support other Worawa staff with student wellbeing
Relationship, Responsibility, Respect & Rigour

Foundational to the Worawa approach are the four values that underpin the Worawa Way - Relationship, Responsibility, Respect and Rigour. One important way the school validates and reinforces these values with students is through a strengths based merit system. The four values or four R’s are embedded in the daily life of the College and is known as the “Worawa Way” with students and staff commenting on behaviour by saying “that’s not the Worawa Way” or “that’s the Worawa way”. Students are also overheard discussing whether certain behaviours represent relationship, responsibility, respect or rigour.

Worawa has a Positive Behaviour Policy. Worawa academic and residential staff are each provided with a merit book and when students display any of the four values staff are able to issue a merit. On the merit book page the staff member can tick which merit was achieved and write a description of the behaviour in the book. Three copies of the merit are made, one copy is given to the student, one is put in the students file and the staff member keeps the other. Merits are celebrated at the school Assembly and are aggregated for end of year acknowledgment.

Students learn quickly that there are consequences for breaching boundaries and consequences are often designed to reflect the boundary that has been broken. For instance “if students haven’t done their job keeping their house tidy, then I could say well you’re not doing your job and my job is to take you out on the weekend, so if you don’t do your job well then maybe as a consequence I shouldn’t take you out over the weekend and do my job well” or “no school no play”. Students who respect the boundaries and follow routine are validated and rewarded using a merit system.

Boundaries and routine are two important elements that the residential team establish with students for living in the boarding house. The students are given responsibility for keeping rooms clean, doing dishes and keeping the houses tidy. While these skills may seem mundane they are important life skills that students develop and take with them on their next steps in life after school. The residential staff and students have a shared understanding about the rules and routines, which creates a safe and predictable environment for the students and staff. There is a clear and transparent list of student daily and bedtime routines that house parents and students follow. Students are kept busy on the weekends sport every Saturday, with a shopping trip every second Friday and an excursion on Sundays. It can take students anywhere between two to three weeks to really settle in and understand the expectations and responsibilities of being a boarding student at Worawa.

Example Routine: Bedtime at Worawa

Over the years the residential team has developed a comprehensive bedtime routine to aid the quality of the students’ sleep and so assist in their learning. There are a number of factors that contribute to this. Firstly, each house maintains the same bedtime across the entire week – weekend and weekdays. Secondly, television is not available after a particular time and quiet time and use of low lighting is encouraged in the lead up to bedtime and keeping to a routine of putting on pyjamas and brushing teeth. Finally, the factor that makes bedtime at Worawa different to other schools is that the staff are proactive in assisting girls to get to sleep. If a student has a particular need for quiet time this is aided by the sensory relaxation of the quiet room. House parents are routinely seen saying prayers with the students, reading to them or singing to them at bedtime. House parents also lead the students in whole group or small group meditation or body relaxation. In this way, students go to sleep with their worries attended to and are able to rest and be ready for learning.
Strengthening Staff to Practice Wellbeing

The College has in place processes that promote psychological wellness, resilience, growth and professional competence of all members of the College community, including professional development of staff. The College involves education and residential staff in a number of programs and activities to support staff wellbeing and skills in promoting wellbeing with students and families. The programs are identified through a combination of identified need and resource availability.

In particular it has been important that staff are skilled at dealing with trauma. When adults are confident and calm when dealing with students expressing various forms of trauma then the students feel safe and reassured. In this way the staff are providing mentoring and adult role models. Worawa staff participate in a number of wellbeing professional development training areas. The staff can also directly benefit from the training provided, for instance mindfulness training developing the ability to be mindful of own need for self care or taking skills in working with trauma and mental health into personal relationships. In addition to professional development training to support staff to undertake their role, peer support is provided through Eastern Health with confidential one on one face to face or phone support with an experienced counsellor.

Strengths based professional development training in Wellbeing has included:

- Restorative practice
- Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Non-violent crisis intervention
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Yarning up on Trauma Training
- Shark Cage Facilitator Training
- Safe minds

Wellbeing Assessments

A wellbeing and health assessment is conducted with every new student and with students returning to the school from holiday breaks. This practice normalizes for students paying attention to physical and emotional wellbeing. The initial wellbeing assessment focuses on the student settling into the school and providing a space for students to bring up any issues they may be having. Often wellbeing issues will arise as the student builds trust with Worawa staff and feels safe to disclose information or concerns. If required counselling with the school psychologist or a specialist service, such as CASA house is provided.

The school nurse works with the student on the health assessment using an outline of the body as a visual cue to assist create a discussion about the student’s body and where they may be having any issues. The nurse explains that this is a quick head to toe check. This process develops the students’ mindfulness of their body and ability to identify their own health issues by pointing this out on a drawn body.

This also allows the student to get to know the nurse so that if the student is experiencing any health issues the student has met the nurse and knows whom she is and what she does. The assessment also includes: family history, allergies and a basic physical assessment is also taken (pulse, blood pressure, temperature, respiratory assessment, weight and height). A picture of the body outline, explanation of a wellbeing and health assessment is included in the orientation booklet for families and students.

Occasionally, students seek assistance with physical ailments that stem from or are related to trauma and stress. Commonly these can be headaches, nausea, vomiting, anxiety or insomnia. While all ailments are taken seriously, students are taught to be mindful of body, mind and spirit so they can identify stress and trauma symptoms and implement the skills they have learnt to address these issues.
Nutrition and Physical Activity

Students nutrition is considered important and students have a menu designed by a dietician and during the week do not have ‘sometimes foods’, such as, junk food, lollies or soft drinks. On weekends students are guided with moderation in regard to buying and consuming ‘sometimes foods’. Students are encouraged to play a sport on the weekends, such as netball, soccer, basketball, softball and more, to gain fitness, reduce stress, develop team skills, build school pride and increase social confidence. Students are able to access programs such as ‘Love the Skin You’re In’ and a body image program has also been implemented with students aiming to build body confidence and allow students to critical analyse depictions of women in media and popular culture.

Trauma Informed Care

The school takes a trauma informed approach where behaviour that may be labelled ‘bad’ is viewed as traumatic behaviour requiring a wellbeing approach to resolve. Girls can present as hyper vigilant, on alert for danger and small incidents of unrest that don’t involve them, can threaten them as they recall past experiences. Students may have normalized traumatic behaviour and need support to unlearn this behaviour and develop new strategies to deal with life situations and experiences. Some of the common ways wellbeing issues may reveal themselves are: anxiety, sleeping problems, bullying, class attendance, being withdrawn, nutritional issues, outbursts and relationship issues with other students. Staff at Worawa are mindful that trauma can be triggered by seemingly unknown sources.

There is a zero tolerance of violence at the school and behavioural expectations of students are clearly explained as part of student induction. Students spend a lot of time in social environments in the schoolroom and in the student residences. So it is very important that students are able to build their skills and understand boundaries in relating well with a diverse range of people. One element of strengthening these skills in provided every Tuesday whereby house parents and teachers provide a session for students after school that focuses on strength and resilience building.

Pathways to Womanhood

The approach at Worawa is to strengthen the identity and self esteem of young women as Indigenous Australians so that they are able to bridge both worlds and take their place as leaders within the Indigenous community and Australian society. ‘The Worawa Way’ pedagogy has a focus on building a culture of respect with emphasis on supporting young women to make a healthy transition to adulthood. Along with the core academic subjects, young women are given a range of opportunities to develop skills and knowledge in a program of Pathways to Womanhood.

The Pathways to Womanhood Program consists of a series of modules that lead the young women through a pathway of developmental activities, nurturing self-esteem, pride in Aboriginal identity and developing confidence and ability to ‘Walk in both Worlds’ connecting to leadership roles within the school and wider community. The program lays the foundation for young women to take their place as future leaders.

The program is aimed at developing:

- Self-care
- Self-esteem
- Self-awareness
- Self-acceptance
- Self-confidence
- Social interaction
- Pride in Aboriginal identity
- Communication, Trust, Hope

The approach is one of action learning and reflection, based on individual development plans where the girls establish clear goals they wish to achieve as part of their Pathway to Womanhood. An event is held at the end of the program to celebrate the students’ completion of the program and acknowledge the important steps that have been taken toward adulthood and ability to walk with confidence in both the Aboriginal and Western world.

These types of rights to passage have been practiced for many thousands of years and are recognised as approaches to strengthening girls for their journey to womanhood.

Old societies knew a lot about raising the young. They did things that, only now, our best neuroscience is proving right…. A rite of passage is a time of intensified activity, teaching, ritual and involvement that says to a girl: we will help you and celebrate you in becoming a woman….The adults who know them praise and affirm their positive qualities, what they see in them and invite them to say goodbye (and thank you) to girlhood and then to step across the threshold of adulthood.

(Biddulph, 2013)
Case Management

Worawa has a case management approach to student welfare where staff work independently with students in a mentoring capacity. These sessions involve staff meeting with students regularly and exploring a variety of issues such as conflict resolution between students, health and sleep management skills, family breakdown, sexual health, substance and drug use, Worawa values and students’ behaviour and safety plans to go home over the holidays. These independent sessions help restore relationships in the school, prevention of ongoing conflict, information and support. These sessions also encourage students to explore their aspirations and goals for the future, which helped re-focus behaviour and reflection on Worawa values. These types of strength based case management approaches are known to develop independence, confidence and self-assurance (Scerra, 2011).

Creative Arts Therapy

The creative arts program utilises the arts and cultural practices to affirm students’ cultural identity, develops narrative to allow telling of story and provides connectedness to Country. The program plays an important role in the school, particularly in cases where students have been disengaged from schooling or are dealing with trauma, stress and alienation. This program includes an Arts Therapy component, which provides a supportive multimodal program of creative arts activities, offered to student groups and individual students for the purpose of enhancing wellbeing and nurturing individual self-confidence and self-awareness.

The program utilizes the arts as a vehicle for students to express their concerns and fears, and to learn new, and potentially more imaginative and satisfactory ways to negotiate their world. Creativity and arts-based activities such as drama & story-telling, are seen as pathways to enhancing and fostering healthy outlooks, as well as a sense of self as the agent of one’s life events. Arts therapy has long been known to have many benefits;

Quiet Rooms

Quiet rooms are present in each of the boarding houses and provide quiet places for reflection, reading, meditation and prayer. These have been designed to soothe the senses with soft lighting, aromatherapy and comfortable furniture to relax in. This type of sensory integration is known to have a number of neurological benefits, particularly for those who have been exposed to trauma (DeGangi & Kendall, 2012). The students are involved in developing the space and may place objects or images of significance in the space. They are a place for students to have quiet and calm, a place for sorry business and to prepare students for sleeping well. House parents may place a range of themed pictures for students to look at and reflect upon in the space, such as, pictures of kindness. Students also use the space to read and wind down before going to bed. In a busy school where students are in class and share bedrooms a space that provides quiet and where students are not expected to socialize can provide an important refuge and help students be mindful of their need for quiet time.
Swings

Rocking chairs and outdoor swing seats are placed in indoor and outdoor student recreational areas. The rocking motion of the swings is known to provide calmness, contemplation and to be an effective self-soothing technique (DeGangi & Kendall, 2012). The swings are a useful place to talk to students about sensitive issues with the relaxing nature of the swings creating an environment for calm conversation. Students are often seen on the swings on their own or in groups as the space and activity support flexibility in this regard.

The rocking motion soothes the brain and facilitates concentration along with the ability to think logically, which provides overall better cognitive processing. Rocking helps students who are experiencing a brain state of high arousal (hyper vigilance) to be able to transition to a much more calm brain state to enhance his/her ability to learn and problem-solve.

(Vassar, 2014)

Dance Program

Some of the Worawa students bring with them to the school skills and knowledge in traditional and contemporary Aboriginal dance. Students are encouraged to share this with their peers through a dance program. Dance is known to be beneficial for wellbeing in a number of ways, it integrates the mind and body, releases tension and stress and develops cooperation and social skills particularly group dance techniques (Duggan 2001).

Restorative Practice

This is a process of resolution of conflict that aims to repair relationships that have been damaged. The approach used is to understand that when a wrong has been committed that those involved take responsibility for their behaviour, learn from the incident, hear the story of the harmed and take action to repair the harm (Blood & Thorsborne, 2013). Used appropriately by trained practitioners it is successful in stopping cases of bullying from continuing in about two cases in three (Rigby, 2013).

Shorter-term wellbeing strengthening programs have been provided for students and these have included:

The Shark Cage

The Shark Cage is a metaphor for women who have experienced abuse. The program offers practical tools for understanding and reducing re-victimisation in abused young women within a counselling context. Created by Ursula Benstead, a Melbourne-based psychologist, the Shark Cage develops skills and an alarm system for people to help defend themselves against potentially abusive people. The Shark Cage reworks the often difficult-to-grasp idea of boundaries, and learning to recognise boundary violations, into concepts women can visualise and relate to women struggling to understand why abuse is so prevalent in their lives. This is an eight-week program designed for women and girls to develop boundaries and identify acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The program offers:

Accessible, concrete and hopeful strategies for change in women’s lives, it reworks the often difficult-to-grasp idea of boundaries, and learning to recognise boundary violations, into concepts women can visualise and relate to.

(Benstead, 2011)

Pay Attention To Self (PATS)

This is an eight-week program for adolescents who have a parent with a mental health issue. It provides a safe place for young people to talk about, understand and develop coping strategies for dealing with family and friends with mental illness. The evaluation of this program found many benefits for young people:

Learning more about a parent’s illness reduced feelings of isolation resulting from meeting people with the same issues as themselves; increased confidence in seeking help; increased understanding and empathy with their parent’s experience; reduced feelings of blaming themselves – greater self acceptance; increased ability to deal with feelings and development of coping strategies.

(Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Adolescent Health, 2005)
Drum Beat

Drumbeat is a therapeutic program using rhythm to reach alienated young people at risk of problematic health and social outcomes. Drumbeat combines culturally based experiential learning with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and engages young people who may be anxious or resistant to ‘talk-based’ therapies. The physical release of striking the drum is cathartic, enabling participants to release feelings through a safe medium. It was developed as a way of overcoming the difficulties traditional interventions based primarily on cognitive behaviour therapy have in engaging young people, particularly Indigenous youth.

Worawa believes that until students are educated with alternate ways of communicating and having their needs met in a safe environment they will continue to resort to familiar violent patterns such as bullying, threatening, fighting and property damage. The benefits of drumming include: group co-operation and harmony, increased self-esteem, confidence and trust in others, sharing of experiences, communication of opinions and emotions arising from rhythms of drumming and from the greater therapeutic effects of music compared with other therapies.

Mindfulness and Meditation

Worawa staff practice mindfulness with students particularly to help wind down and de-stress, with this technique known to have a number of calming and relaxing benefits (DeGangi & Kendall, 2012). The types of mindfulness activities that staff may facilitate with students are: a three minute attention to breath exercise, a short attention to sound exercise, focusing on a beautiful image or a guided meditation. The flexibility of mindfulness activities mean they can be practiced almost anywhere at anytime and it requires no equipment. Students also quickly learn the techniques and can independently implement a mindfulness activity.
Equine Therapy

Some of the students have participated in a local equine therapy program that aims to improve wellbeing with a therapist and contact and caring for horses. These programs are known to have many benefits for people’s wellbeing:

“The difference between equine-assisted mental health activities and those done in a traditional equestrian setting is the focus on therapeutic goals. Whereas learning equine skills can be part of treatment it is not the main reason for interactions with the horse in therapy. The client’s interpretation of an equine interaction is considered more important than the horse’s actual behaviour, as it may offer insight into beliefs the client has about him or herself and others. The therapist uses therapeutic metaphors when facilitating activities in order to help generalize the client’s experiences to the rest of his or her life.”

(Fry, 2013)

Strengthening family approaches to wellbeing

One of the key messages to emerge in recent times is that trauma affects the whole person: their mind, brain, body, spirit and relationships with others. Various impacts of abuse and neglect on children and young people’s academic performance and social functioning are manifested in, and intensified by dissociation and shame. Violence results in dangerously high levels of emotional distress and antisocial behavioral problems and has been identified as an independent risk factor for problems such as depression, anxiety and aggression in youth (Scarpa, 2001). Strengthening family understanding and skills with dealing with effects of trauma is considered an important part of a holistic wellbeing approach.

In addition to regular communication with families Worawa hosts an annual School Community forum whereby the families of students are brought to the College for a two day forum including teacher parent interviews, visits to the boarding house, consultations with the School Nurse and Social Worker. The aim is to assist in building connections between the school and family to understand the issues that some students present with and allow families to learn more about how they can provide ongoing support to their girls when they are in the community setting. Parents have the opportunity to have one on one consultations with key staff including the Head of Learning and Teaching and academic staff, Social Worker, School Nurse, Head of Boarding, residential team members and Executive Director.
Partnerships and Relationships with Wellbeing Services

Efforts are made to ensure a coordinated level of care for students. This includes internal liaisons and external relationships and programs.

There are a number of elements that facilitate good relationships and partnerships and these include:

- empathy and sensitivity to the needs of students
- respect for students’ cultures and a non-judgemental, respectful attitude with a reflexive approach to students needs
- reliability and consistency, so that students can trust that if a service provider says they will do something this is followed up in a timely manner
- an ability to provide continuity in care, providing the college with information to ensure a holistic wellbeing picture of the student and follow up care
- an ability to develop independence rather than wanting to ‘help’ by encouraging dependence and the service provider becoming the ‘rescuer’. The service should be about the student’s personal needs rather than the provider’s.
- confidentiality

To ensure smooth and appropriate access to these wellbeing services Worawa has developed a number of relationships and partnerships, such as:

- Two female doctors who visit on alternate weeks from Valley Primary Health Care
- After hours clinic in Healesville
- Eastern Health Community Services outreach dental van that visits the school
- Australian College of Optometry conducts an outreach program to the school and facilitates access to glasses
- Eye and Ear Hospital provides an outreach program to the school
- Yarra Ranges Immunisation program visits the school, identifies each student’s immunization needs
- Visiting Chiropractor who specializes in mind, body and spirit connection
- Department of Health – Wellbeing support
- National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program
- Peninsula Meditation and Mindfulness
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