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Gary William Robinson Bernard Leckning Richard Midford Helen Harper Sven Silburn Jess Gannaway Kylie Dolan Tim Delphine Craig Hayes

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Developing a school-based preventive life skills program for youth in remote Indigenous communities in north Australia.

Introduction

Among Australian Indigenous people rates of suicide have risen significantly in recent decades. Rates of suicide for Indigenous people peak at a younger age compared to non-Indigenous people (SCRGSP, 2011; De Leo et al, 2011) and are higher in rural and remote areas than in capital cities (ABS, 2012). From negligible rates before 1990, the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia now has the highest rate of Indigenous suicide among persons aged under 25 years of any Australian jurisdiction, with an overall rate over twice that of non-Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2012). For many NT communities, youth suicide has reached the dimensions of a developmental, social and cultural crisis.

A recent study of coronial records of child and youth suicides in the NT between 2005 and 2010 found that the suicides were distributed across the Territory. Remote and very remote communities accounted for 10 of 18 suicides of people under the age of 18 years for that period (Robinson et al, 2012). Childhood adversity, including neglect and abuse exacerbated by family conflict were present in cases of suicide in early adolescence. Substance misuse, problems with law and police and, in some cases, increasingly irregular school attendance or problems at school were common among older adolescents. The study concluded that for many young people, suicidal behaviour was associated with poor self-regulation, limited problem-solving, communication and coping skills and an absence of identifiable help-seeking pathways, and that these should be a focus for preventive intervention in early to mid-adolescence (Robinson et al, 2012). The findings are consistent with research in other populations, suggesting that poor self-regulation and a lack of connectedness with trusted adults are together important risk factors for suicide among youth in disadvantaged communities (Pisani et al, 2013).

Remote community contexts in north Australia have been characterised as “communities of risk”, that is, as contexts in which multiple risk factors converge, such as alcohol misuse, violence, stress and family dysfunction and the exposure of young people to suicidal behaviour (Hunter et al, 1999). These exposures amplify the likelihood that individuals will adopt self-harm as a means of dealing with distress. In these environments, young people develop distinctive styles of coping that can place them at further risk.

As the need to respond to Indigenous youth suicide has become more urgent, there has been significant interest in developing school and community based approaches to suicide prevention that may be able to reach those populations at highest risk.

Approaches to suicide prevention among school-aged youth

Reviews of the effectiveness of school-based suicide prevention programs suggest that suicide can be safely addressed in the classroom with appropriate teacher training, and well-designed, age-appropriate content in curricula that focus on positive life skills (Kalafat, 2003; Robinson et al, 2013; Kirmayer et al, 1993). A systematic review of universal interventions found that such programs were able to improve help-seeking attitudes and behaviours without iatrogenic effects (Klimes-Dougan et al, 2013).

Internationally, a number of interventions aiming to develop strengths and resilience, while explicitly addressing self-harm and suicide risk factors have demonstrated promising results (Miller et al, 2009; Botvin and Griffin, 2004; Klingman and Hochdorf, 1993; LaFromboise and Howard-Pitney, 1995; Aseltine et al, 2007). The Zuni Life Skills Development (ZLSD) was a school-based community-initiated suicide prevention program that produced promising

outcomes (LaFromboise and Howard-Pitney, 1995; LaFromboise and Lewis, 2008; Kirmayer et al, 2007). It was a culturally tailored curriculum that taught social and emotional skills in order to improve individual resilience and reduce risk behaviours. Its pedagogy was based on an interactive skills-training approach to suicide prevention. ZLSD combined the social learning approach with extensive collaboration with communities to define content and activities in culturally appropriate ways (LaFromboise and Howard-Pitney, 1994). Community input was sought concerning strengths and supports and ways of discussing difficult topics like loss, suicide and mental illness. ZLSD directly addresses these topics in the context of common social causes of difficulty for Indigenous people.

Approaches to building life skills: social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools

SEL in schools can contribute both to academic outcomes and to wellbeing (Zins and Elias, 2006; Zins et al, 2004; Greenberg et al, 2001; Merrell, 2010). A meta-analysis of school based universal preventive interventions found that compared with controls, students exposed to rigorous SEL programs showed significantly improved social and emotional skills and behaviours and substantial gains in academic attainment (Durlak et al, 2011). In addition, whole-school frameworks for behaviour management, such as *School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support* (Metzler et al, 2001) have been found to reduce behaviour problems in the school environment, with some evidence that combined classroom SEL and school-wide approaches may be more effective than either alone (Cook et al, 2015; Wells et al, 2003).

Mindmatters is an Australian framework for mental health promotion and prevention in secondary schools (Wyn et al, 2000). It provides professional development, materials and resources for schools and teaching staff to incorporate case management and programming within normal classroom teaching activities. As many as half of all secondary schools in some jurisdictions reported using *Mindmatters* as a key resource (Rowling, 2007, 233). However, the preferred approach to implementation by diffusion may mask limitations. An evaluation of *Mindmatters* as an intervention found no effect on student knowledge and risk behaviour (Franze and Paulus, 2009). *Mindmatters* has been adapted at a local level for some remote Indigenous schools. Adaptations of *Mindmatters* in schools in remote central Australia and Queensland were reported to have high levels of acceptability when accompanied by appropriate language translation, community engagement, and integration within school processes (Osborne, 2013; Rabaa, 2010; Sheehan et al, 2002). There have been no evaluations of the efficacy of these adapted programs for Indigenous students.

Curriculum based approaches to mental health promotion frequently employ experiential learning strategies based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). These approaches to skills-based training emphasise structured interaction, “peer to peer learning” between participants and may include innovative and unconventional instructional strategies (Herbert and Lohrman, 2011; Hromek and Roffey, 2009). Applied to the design of skills-based training interventions, social learning theory underpins certain elements of therapeutically oriented learning activities: 1. Provide information about helpful or harmful effects of certain behaviours; 2. Model target skills; 3. Rehearse behaviour for skills acquisition; 4. Provide feedback for skills refinement. These are consistent with the preferred practices (the training approach is sequenced, active learning is promoted, there is a focused approach to skills development and explicit learning goals) described in the meta-analysis of SEL interventions by Durlak and colleagues (2011).

To date, teaching methods and curriculum content based on social learning approaches have not been specifically developed for Australian Indigenous youth in remote communities. In most remote and very remote communities of the NT, residents speak languages other than English (traditional Aboriginal languages and varieties of non-standard English) at home and

in the community. These are associated with very low levels of English literacy and even spoken fluency. In addition, lifestyles and social relationships are shaped by traditional cultural concepts, concepts of kinship and associated relational patterns and social-emotional competencies. Both curriculum content and teaching need to be adjusted for low levels of English fluency and literacy and to better reflect students' social and emotional preoccupations and life experience.

This paper reports the initial development and pilot implementation of a life skills program for middle school students – students in years 7-9, between primary and senior secondary school - in a very remote community college in north Australia that seeks to integrate proven educational and psychological techniques with culturally informed notions of relatedness. Now known as *Skills for Life* (SFL), the *Indigenous Youth Life Skills Development* program commenced in 2013 at a research institute in Darwin, NT, with funding granted under the Commonwealth Department of Health's *Taking action to tackle suicide* strategy, a program within the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

A pilot life skills program at Maningrida

Maningrida is a coastal town of approximately 2,500 persons in West Arnhem Land about 500 km to the east of Darwin, capital of the NT. Maningrida is a community on lands owned by traditional Aboriginal people through the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT), 1976, and over 90% of residents are Indigenous descendants of land-owning groups in Maningrida and neighbouring regions. A former welfare settlement, it is now one of the larger very remote Aboriginal communities of the NT. Aboriginal influence on governance is exercised through the Land Rights Act and through various representative boards constituted under NT and Australian government legislation. However, to some extent this is belied by the dominance of bureaucratic structures of management and service provision that are centrally managed and staffed by mainly non-Indigenous personnel recruited from outside the community.

Among Maningrida's Indigenous residents, over 5 languages are represented, including Ndjébbana and Burarra, the languages of local landowning groups, as well as eastern Kunwinjku, Yolngu matha and others. The NT government-run Maningrida Community College teaches all years from preschool to year 12, although a number of students leave the community to attend secondary boarding schools in Darwin. The language of instruction is English, and the College maintains a program responsible for Indigenous language and cultural maintenance activities.

As reported by the NT Department of Education, in 2015 the College had total enrolments of approximately 700 students, with approximately 60% attendance in the first term (NT Government, 2015). Attendance was 60-65% for middle years 7-9 but dropped to well below 50% in the senior years. It was usually lower in the latter part of the year than in the first and second terms. Literacy and numeracy levels as measured by the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) were low, with over 80% of students scoring in the lowest band for reading, compared with just 3% nationally (ACARA, 2015).

Maningrida College had adopted the *You Can Do It!* Program (Bernard, 1997) as the basis for a whole-school approach to positive behaviours and wellbeing. It had a resident School Counsellor, who provided psychological support to individual students at risk and also delivered health promotion and SEL initiatives in classrooms. The College has hosted suicide awareness training for staff. Teachers were trained in a specialised teaching method to address students' literacy levels. The College also managed the local Child and Family Centre which delivered early childhood programs.

After consultations with traditional elders in the community's Local Reference Group, with members of the interagency Maningrida Suicide Prevention Committee and with the College Principal and staff, it was decided that the research team would collaborate with the College and the Maningrida Greats Youth Services to develop and pilot a life skills curriculum for youth in middle school (years 7-9).

The pilot program was generously assisted by the College and participating teachers. *Yu Ya Bol*, the Maningrida College Indigenous Advisory Committee and other knowledgeable community members provided advice on relevant themes and issues. Consultations with the School Counsellor, Assistant Principal and other staff were undertaken regarding timetabling and alignment with policies and practices at the College. With the school leaders' support, two teachers responsible for middle school girls' and boys' classes agreed to participate in the project. Weekly health and physical education classes were rescheduled to enable delivery of the curriculum in collaboration with two Menzies staff members. They were assisted by the Indigenous teacher assistants normally assigned to each class. Workshops on the program were conducted at commencement of the program in early 2014, and again at the beginning of term 3, at around midpoint of the 12 week program. Delivery of the program in separate boys' and girls' classes for a weekly two hour lesson commenced in week 5 of term 2, and concluded by week 7 of Term 3.

Aims of the Skills for Life pilot implementation project

The aims of the pilot implementation project were to develop a 12 week curriculum and resources that could address both general promotion of resilience and the need for specific prevention relevant to known risks in Indigenous communities, to trial a collaborative process for joint delivery in middle school classes and to gauge student responses to content and the program delivery process. Facilitators provided reports on perceived weekly outcomes in the classroom, and all sessions were video-taped to enable review of sessions to identify relevant student responses, instances of successful teaching and any difficulties or challenges encountered.

The pilot project provided an opportunity to trial individual outcome measures for the evaluation of a follow on, longer term implementation project. These measures focused on youth wellbeing, self-concept and social relationships and are to be analysed with data on school attendance and teacher assessments of student behaviour. Findings of the pilot evaluation strategy will be reported elsewhere.

Curriculum

The first phase of curriculum development was based on a review of existing models for social skills development including "Stop, Think, Do" (Peterson and Adderly, 2002; Peterson and Lewis, 2004), "Mindmatters" (Wynn et al, 2000), "Friends" (Barret et al, 1999) and others. The implementation was also informed by a 3 year trial implementation of "Exploring Together" adapted for upper primary school children in remote NT communities (Robinson and Tyler, 2008; Hemphill and Littlefield, 2001). That program informed the incorporation of perspectives on the family context of children's social and emotional development and risk behaviours in the curriculum.

Eleven lessons were developed on the following themes:

- strengths in the community
- character strengths
- emotional literacy and managing strong emotions
- positive thinking and problem-solving
- passive, aggressive and assertive communication

- dealing with grief and loss
- saying “no” to alcohol
- help-seeking and working together with friends

Options for development of a classroom photographic project on themes determined by the students were explored with results to be included in a final presentation in the 12th session.

When consulted about the topic of emotions and emotional self-control, members of *Yu Ya Bol*, the College’s Indigenous advisory group suggested that Indigenous youth experienced feelings of shame and found it difficult to make eye contact and talk confidently in ways expected in the school setting. Their difficulty talking about their feelings directly in the classroom in the presence of peers was exacerbated by the fact that they need to move from their first language to English to communicate. According to advisory group members, many young people in specific language or cultural groups within the community experienced barriers to communication and were socially excluded and disadvantaged. It was considered that the involvement of Indigenous co-facilitators sensitive to these issues would be critical for the program to succeed in engaging all young people.

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Menzies School of Health Research and the NT Department of Health, approval number 2013-2120, 31 March 2014, and approval to conduct research was given by the NT Department of Education.

Parents of students in the two participating classes were contacted by the evaluation team including local community members employed as research assistants. The aims of the program were explained and parents signed written consent to the gathering of evaluation data. All parents approached consented to the evaluation, but not without some searching questioning about the aims of the project, and in one or two cases a visit to the school to reassure themselves of the reasons for their child’s inclusion. Students were sent from class singly and in pairs and questionnaires administered by a member of the Menzies evaluation team over approximately 20 minutes each, before returning to class.

Understanding the classroom: preliminary process assessment

All lessons were video recorded from two angles to enable thematic evaluation of activity, facilitation and student participation. This was combined with additional feedback from participating teachers. A number of conclusions about appropriateness and structure of content within the curriculum emerged from this preliminary analysis.

Indigenous community-specific themes

Social-emotional and behaviour programs in schools often focus on the student experience of school expectations and teacher-student and peer relationships at school and seek to increase students’ capacity to cope with and engage more productively within the school environment and with peers more generally. Teachers’ tacit knowledge of students’ living situations outside of school may be sufficient to bridge the gap between the domains of students’ experience inside and outside of the school. However, in remote Indigenous communities, lessons and experiences within the school space may not generalise well to situations of adversity or challenge encountered by the students at home or in the wider community. Conversely, the impact of experiences outside the school setting on behaviour and learning in the classroom may not always be understood by school staff. Teachers and facilitators may not be able to bridge the gap through their own experience, with the result that language, scenarios and teaching strategies used in lessons may not resonate with student experiences.

Attendance and lesson sequence

Exposure to the program for the total of 51 students enrolled varied considerably across the 12 weeks. The average number of lessons attended by students enrolled at the start of the program was 3.4 lessons for girls and 3.5 lessons for boys. Only 6 of the 26 girls and 6 of the 25 boys enrolled at the start of the program attended at least half of the lessons. The average attendance in the girls class was 10.9 students per week (sd = 4.9) whereas in the boys class this was 8.8 students per week (sd = 4.3). It should be noted that the girls' class was expanded by 30 additional enrolled girls who attended at between 1 and 3 lessons from week 6 onwards. This consolidation of two girls' classes was a result of declining attendance. There was considerable variability in the number of students in class each week and little consistency in the attendance of individual students across the 12 weeks of the program.

Attendance of students affected the delivery of lessons. The original draft curriculum developed some key concepts and ideas over a number of sessions, each building on content and ideas from previous weeks. This assumption of continuity was undermined by the irregular attendance patterns of students, which meant that most classes consisted of only a minority of students who had attended the previous week. As a result, some of the ideas intended to be developed across lessons were not successfully established.

Lesson delivery and content

It became apparent that with the literacy levels and low reading confidence of many students, working with texts, even in the form of short scenarios and vignettes about behaviour or emotions was taxing. Overuse of text-based resources and cards with scenarios potentially added to the cognitive load of lessons and at times decreased student learning. It was concluded that there needed to be more use of pictorial devices and physical activity including cartoons and games that reflected metaphorical constructions of key ideas. A not unrelated issue concerned the use of spoken language to explain ideas. Guest facilitators, unfamiliar with students' range of English language use, often introduced additional words and phrases as they sought to explain key concepts and in so doing "lost" the students. It was concluded that key words and constructs needed to be intentionally introduced and explained in a way that was clearly linked to lesson goals. Overall, language use, whether in discussing key concepts or exploring stories and scenarios needed to be carefully scaffolded. However, maintaining challenge and engaging students both cognitively and affectively was only in part a question of framing linguistic content: it was also important to challenge and engage the students through the mix of activities, by including kinaesthetic games and visual tasks and challenges with scope for fun, excitement and enjoyable interaction, alongside reading and writing tasks.

Pedagogy

The lack of lead time in developing the curriculum meant that there was an over-reliance on the classroom teachers and their knowledge of the students, with inadequate preparation for what was different and specific about the lessons. Further, there was some disruption to existing teaching patterns and classroom routines which challenged the sense of familiar routine and safety of some students at the expense of their capacity to learn.

For the pilot program in 2014, the class was located in a large room within a training centre within sight of the school, but away from the student's usual classroom. This was done in part in order to create a different space with its own special focus and ambiance. However, at about the midway point of the program, teachers felt it desirable to return to the usual classroom, where they felt that all members would feel secure and that learning goals would be better achieved. Some students seemed distracted or even at times disturbed by activity in the unfamiliar space. From the researchers' point of view, this confirmed the need to

explicitly develop strategies for teachers in the pedagogical space of the classroom, rather than to rely on resources and processes outside of normal classes. In order to develop a pedagogy emphasising strategies for experiential learning, with active demonstration and practicing of skills and using group interaction and games, it may be important to explore how to draw on and complement aspects of established learning styles and familiar uses of classroom space.

In reviewing recordings of lessons, it appeared that students at times had grasped some ideas and already made some sense of them in their own terms. However, this was sometimes expressed in some joking or in physical games and teasing by students that echoed or parodied lesson content. At other times, it involved a behavioural reaction, such as withdrawal or a distracting behaviour that reflected a reaction to content or process of the lesson, or that responded to signals by other members of class. The facilitators were not always able to recognise relevant instances of the students' outputs and insights and to engage with and build on them. The challenge for the development of an appropriate pedagogy for social and emotional learning in this context is to better understand how to recognise these responses, and to harness them to promote learning, rather than to react to or ignore them in order to manage behaviour.

Conclusions: Lessons from the Skills for Life pilot program

Prevention programs for Indigenous people as yet remain caught between two poles: those based on psychological and educational theory with minimal or no adaptation to context and taught with limited cultural competence, and “cultural programs” delivered within communities by community members with minimal input from professionally developed, evidence-informed approaches to social learning and vulnerability to self-harm. The development work for this project aims to overcome some of these limitations.

Culture and community context

The correlates of risk in community contexts were the elaboration of distinctive strengths and styles of coping, expressions of resilience, that were narrated in often socially and culturally specific terms (Kirmayer et al., 2011). The Zuni Life Skills Development (LaFromboise and Howard-Pitney, 1995) contained activities that explicitly referenced common experiences and challenges of American Indigenous students, including not only sources of stress and distress they are likely to face, but also culture-specific responses to them. The latter included traditional practices of grieving and mourning in response to sadness or loss, specific ways of expressing anger or kinship-based patterns of dispute resolution, help seeking or support. These themes were clearly relevant in the north Australian remote context.

The pilot curriculum utilised scenarios and activities using visual aids and narrative prompts written to enable limited exploration of such issues. However, openness to community themes and acknowledgement of cultural patterns needed more careful balancing with conventional provision of factual content and evidence-based information to students, for example about mental health and illness, such as depression and anxiety. Teachers and facilitators expressed the need for support to explore cultural, community-specific themes relating to risk or mental illness without risking unintended misinterpretations or exacerbation of underlying concerns and anxieties of students. Culturally informed, evidence-derived materials and training can help to ensure that teachers are on firm ground in treating themes that may relate to student vulnerability.

Many students have witnessed destructive and suicidal behaviour in the community and on more than one occasion a student spoke about suicide in response to questions in class. Staff are to be prepared to respond appropriately in lessons and to take follow-up steps so that

students showing preoccupation with these themes can be assessed by the school psychologist.

Although the Indigenous assistant teachers brought important insight into social emotional and behavioural issues, there were barriers to their contribution, relating to external factors that disrupted their participation and to differences between the teaching approach desired for the program and their normal classroom role. It was concluded that additional Indigenous facilitators would be recruited to deliver the life skills program to work alongside the teaching assistants in the College. They would help to provide insight into young people's communication styles, draw on their own experience to translate key concepts into scenarios and language that students more readily understand and assist the team to understand emotional and behavioural expressions of the students. The development of culturally informed reflective practices would strengthen connection with the capacities of the students and their concerns, and form a key element of future training for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous personnel.

Teaching SEL in the classroom

On the basis of the review of findings, teacher manual, resources and guidelines for implementation have been produced for the formal evaluation phase. Lesson plans were redesigned with clearly articulated lesson goals and an appropriate mix of activities. Each is a coherent whole. Repetition of key concepts and approach is emphasised rather than development of themes over successive sessions. Information on the principles and practices for each lesson as well as information on particular themes, such as alcohol education, mental health and self-harm, were provided along with corresponding material in student workbooks. An approach to support around sensitive topics, such as suicide ideation or suicidal behaviour has been developed.

Place Figure 1 here

Content has been mapped against NT and Australian curriculum frameworks and there is a systematic effort to align the process with contemporary teaching practices, including the "visible learning" strategies that have been adopted in the NT and more widely to strengthen teaching practice (Hattie, 2009).

The aim of the current phase of the pilot program is to rigorously scrutinise classroom strategies and processes, including scaffolding of topics to address students' levels of literacy and comprehension and integration of these with the interactive learning strategies. Three important foci are: careful scaffolding of activities for literacy and learning styles; encouragement of positive interaction in the classroom through affective learning strategies, that is, strategies that encourage empathic emotional learning; and engagement with contexts of experience through narrative reflection and discussion.

The current pilot stage of development of the teaching approach rests on joint lesson facilitation by research staff, classroom teachers and an Indigenous co-Facilitator. Team teaching entails important learning in its own right, and requires attention to preparation and delegation of roles, and to debriefing after the classroom experience. In the formal evaluation phase, it is intended that the *Skills for Life* curriculum, resources and training will support independent delivery of the program by individual teachers and by teams of school staff (teachers, counsellors and others, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous personnel).

Alignment with school and community processes for optimum impact

Achieving quality, intensity and duration of exposure (dosage) are important for the effectiveness of any program. The attendance levels noted mean that, even for a 12 week program that is well delivered in a relatively high attending class, there may possibly be sufficient variation in attendance to undermine consolidation of skills and thus to limit program impact. Nevertheless, if the program is only delivered to the higher performing classes it may be that the impact of the program could be limited among academically weaker and less engaged students, some of whom are thought to be in most need of support. From an evaluation point of view, it is important to demonstrate whether the program is potentially effective for all students rather than just for selected groups.

In conclusion, the middle school years represent an important transition period in children's education and development. It has been observed that factors such as poor or irregular school attendance may have the potential to limit the effectiveness of this program. Since, as has been argued, short-term preventive interventions are likely to produce short lived results (Greenberg et al, 2003; 470), extension of the approach may be necessary. To optimise its effectiveness, it would almost certainly be desirable to consistently offer elements of the same high quality SEL to all students in a continuing cycle beginning before middle school and on to secondary school in order to expose as many students as possible to the curriculum over time. The prospects for long term change among for young people in communities like Maningrida are likely to be improved with exposure to the program over more than one year and alignment of the classroom program with complementary initiatives at the school level.

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Figure 1. SEL in classrooms in a remote school setting.

