

Mental health and wellbeing strategies through a new lens

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Enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of people living in rural and remote Indigenous communities has been a focus across the decades. Even with income management, case conferencing and mandatory school attendance there can be an ongoing struggle to manage and eradicate antisocial and unlawful behaviour in groups of young boys and occasionally girls. In the communities of focus for this study behaviours included: stoning buildings, motor vehicles, and service providers; physically assaulting teachers and teachers' aides; bullying younger children; torturing and assaulting animals; and breaking into buildings and vehicles to steal and criminally damage property. The communities were struggling with these behaviours and felt unable to manage them at the community level.

This paper discusses a unique approach to working with communities on these issues where comprehensive assessments of the cognitive, social, and mental health status of a group of children were undertaken, thus enabling service providers to focus interventions within the context of the actual social and emotional wellbeing of the children. The study enabled an appropriately qualified and experienced psychologist to conduct a program of assessment and to make evidence-based recommendations about how to improve behaviour and academic achievement.

In undertaking this unique approach, community and leadership groups as well as the education provider were sought to commit to the work prior to commencement. The project was not limited to assessment and reporting but also provided additional intensive support for these families with a focus on assisting the case managers in their work, assisting in the behaviour management functions of the school, liaising with parents and carers with a focus on improving school behaviour; and providing counselling and support to students and parents as required.

The project provided assessment services to sixty students across several communities so that within-school comparisons could be completed and a better understanding of differences could be developed. The process of conducting valid assessments of troubled youth who regularly 'act out' and who are apprehensive and untrusting of strangers requires a period of engagement and familiarisation prior to anything official being commenced. As such the project started slowly but demonstrated outcomes that are significant.

This presentation aims to detail the processes utilised and the outcomes of this ground breaking work as an option for other communities with like challenges.