



An Evaluation of the National Empowerment Project Cultural, Social, and Emotional Wellbeing Program

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Abstract

An array of cumulative risk and stress factors, and social inequities, have contributed to high suicides and family and community dysfunction, in two communities in Queensland. An independent, post-program evaluation of the National Empowerment Project (NEP) Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing (CSEWB)

Program specifically developed to address these issues was conducted in Kuranda and Cherbourg communities, Queensland in early 2017. Summaries of 153 stories of most significant change (SMSC) and 30 interviews undertaken with participants who completed the CSEWB program informed the evaluation. The evaluation assessed if, and how, the CSEWB program contributed to strengthening the cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing of participants, their families and communities. Participant's interviews describe how the CSEWB Program significantly changed their lives and their families' lives in various constructive and affirming ways to bring about positive outcomes. The extent of significant changes reported are compelling, and they highlight the need for greater government commitment to services and programs which address the social determinants influencing social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) within Indigenous communities around Australia.

Keywords: Empowerment, self-determination, social determinants, Indigenous health and cultural, social and emotional wellbeing, suicide prevention, qualitative program evaluation.

Acknowledgements. Ngoonbi Community Services Indigenous Corporation in Kuranda and the community members in Kuranda and

Cherbourg who participated in the National Empowerment Project CSEWB Program.

Introduction

The CSEWB Program evolved from consultations and recommendations of the NEP. The NEP is an Aboriginal led research project established in 2012 to identify and develop initiatives to promote cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing, and reduce psychological distress and suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia (Dudgeon et al., 2013; herein the terms Indigenous, Indigenous Australians or Indigenous peoples will be used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or communities). The NEP was delivered in two stages: 1) a community consultation and 2) delivery of a two-day workshop focusing on social and emotional wellbeing (Dudgeon, Cox, Kelly, et al., 2014). The initial findings from the NEP site reports identified a range of issues impacting on the lives of individual participants, their families and communities, as well as solutions to address these issues. This information was analysed with local community co-researchers and results were published in individualised reports disseminated back to all 11 communities. The results of the consultations detailed in the NEP site reports for all 11 communities were analysed, including Kuranda (Duffin et al., 2013) and Cherbourg (Hams et al., 2013). This process aligned consultation findings within cultural, social, emotional, and wellbeing domains (Dudgeon, Cox, Dunkley, et al., 2014), and social determinants (Zubrick et al., 2014) and this formed the evidence base to develop the CSEWB program.

The re-analysis of the NEP consultation outcomes highlighted the complex inter-relationship between the cultural, social, economic, political, and historical determinants impacting on Indigenous Australians (Dudgeon, Cox, Kelly, et al., 2014). Further, Indigenous conceptions and understandings of mental health comprise physical, social, emotional, mental, environmental, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing which differs considerably to western concepts (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). Healing, empowerment and leadership are interconnected

and involve a process of decolonisation, recovery, and renewal (Dudgeon et al., 2012). Healing and empowerment enable the development of a strong sense of self and cultural identity, which are critical protective factors against community distress and suicide risk (Dudgeon et al., 2012; Dudgeon, Scrine, Cox, & Walker, 2017).

The CSEWB Program

The CSEWB program spans 12 months and is delivered as three, six week long, blocks (see Figure 2). The Queensland Mental Health Commission funded the program, which was delivered between 2014 and 2016. The program aims to promote positive cultural, social and emotional wellbeing and mental health, build resilience and prevent psychological distress and suicide, and address community identified problems such as family violence and substance misuse. Empowerment and creating strong supportive relationships between participants are also objectives of the program.

A community reference group (CRG) was formed to guide and assist the implementation of the program, strengthen community ownership, and avoid program duplication. The CRG consisted of senior representatives from each community; the main family groups, relevant service providers, and key stakeholders who share the goals of the program.

NEP local co-researchers worked with groups in the community and hosted events to achieve positive outcomes for families and community through the CSEWB program. They also worked with the CRG to identify other programs and activities to address social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) outside of the scheduled six-week program. Such activities included life skills programs, planning major community events, cultural camps, and healing programs. Where possible, existing local services in the Queensland sites were engaged to deliver relevant activities, such as Mental Health First Aid Training and Leadership Training.

The CSEWB program focuses on strengthening the different domains of cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing (of individuals, families, and the community) and involves a number of

activities that have a community-wide focus. The program promotes community relationship building where community co-researchers enlist the support and involvement of other service providers in the development of coordinated and supportive networks. Such collaborations enhance the likely implementation of program outcomes, such as increased knowledge around managing conflict, establishing healthy life choices, and exercise.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB)



Figure 1: Determinants of SEWB (See Appendix 1 for enlarged image)

The SEWB conceptual framework was originally articulated by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal psychologists (Gee, Dudgeon, Shultz, Hart, & Kelly, 2014) and elaborated further by Dudgeon and Walker (2015) as a decolonising strategy to promote wellbeing. The framework informed the development of the CSWEB program. SEWB is a multi-layered and interdependent concept with a much broader and deeper scope than mainstream perspectives of mental health. It is a whole-of-life view that incorporates and reflects a holistic understanding of health that emphasises wellness, harmony and balance, rather than illness and symptom reduction (Dudgeon & Walker 2015; Gee et al., 2014; Social Health Reference Group, 2004). It is more accurate to understand SEWB as a series of connections and interdependent relationships between self and the body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, land and spirituality as

illustrated in Figure 1 (adapted from Gee et al., 2014). The term *connection* reflects the diverse ways in which people experience and express the various domains of SEWB throughout their lives. The influence of social determinants upon wellbeing is also a part of the SEWB model. Social determinants include socioeconomic status, the impact of poverty, unemployment, housing, access to education, racial discrimination, exposure to violence, trauma and stressful life events, and access to community resources. These determinants impact concurrently and cumulatively. Historical colonisation and the associated policies of protection, assimilation and the continuing neglect and denial of cultural and citizenship rights, are particularly important when considering the broad determinants impacting on Aboriginal peoples' SEWB (Dudgeon, Cox, Kelly, et al., 2014; Gee et al., 2014).

CSEWB Program Structure and Process

The CSEWB program was developed as a multi-faceted, Indigenous-led initiative to address a range of issues affecting Indigenous families. Program aims include empowering individuals, enhancing capacity and resilience, and strengthening family and community relationships that provide unity and empowerment. This dimension enhances an Indigenous reference to identity as paramount to the overall healing and cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities. Considerable work was undertaken prior to program implementation to ensure community readiness and ownership, stakeholder support and scoping of existing programs and services to reduce risk of duplication. The program focus areas encompass self, family and community and include CSEWB, self-empowerment, nurturing of individual, family, and community strengths, problem solving, conflict resolution skills, goal setting, communication, and mentoring. The CSEWB program comprises of a facilitator's guide and a participant's handbook. The CSEWB Program delivery model is represented below in Figure 2.

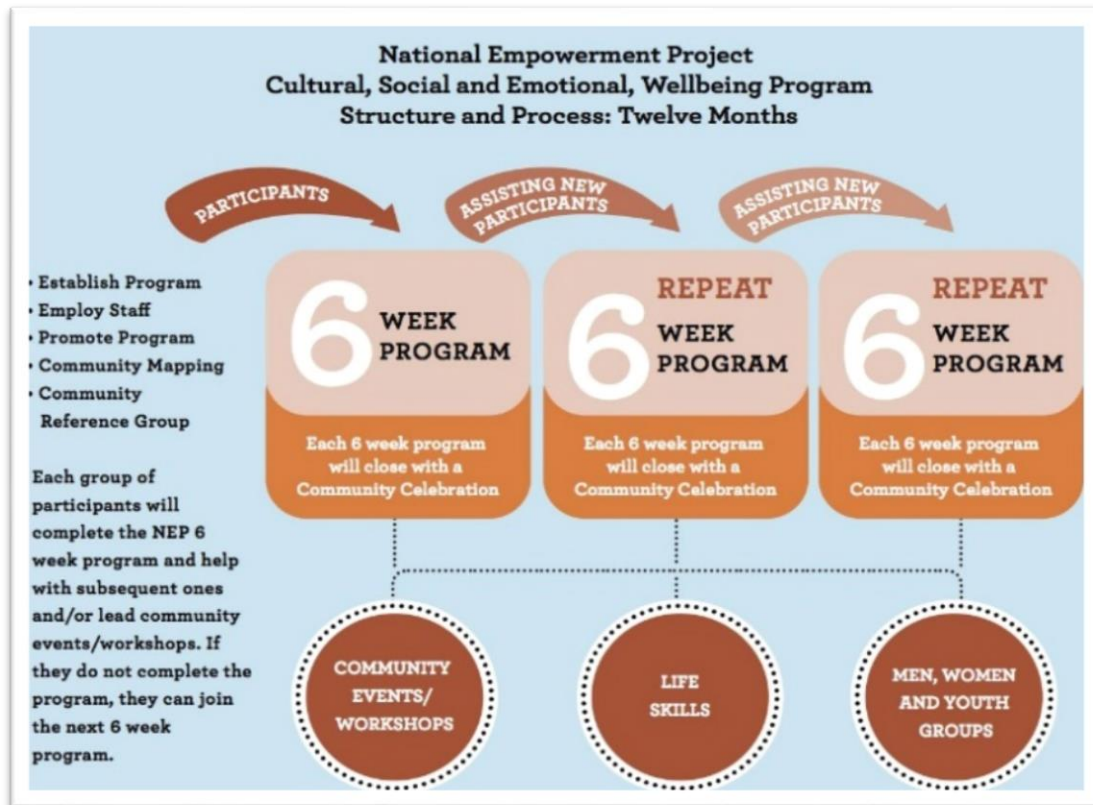


Figure 2: CSEWB Program Delivery

The CSEWB program content focuses upon three important elements, self, family, and community.

Self includes understanding self, both in the context of a colonial history and in the context of the SEWB framework. Self also involves developing greater self-awareness, assertiveness, self-esteem, empathy, positive thinking, and storying (and re-storying) and connecting oneself into family, community, history, and culture.

Family reviews Aboriginal family structures and dynamics, the importance of Elders, and the development of interpersonal and conflict resolution skills. Family also includes an increased understanding of the Stolen Generations, intergenerational trauma, and positive parenting (child development and the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in contemporary life).

Community provides an understanding of history at both local and national levels, celebrates Indigenous achievements throughout history, and explores concepts of self-determination at individual and community

levels. What it means to be a good community leader is also part of the program.

Further, life planning skills encouraged participants to identify what was not working in their lives and why, the changes they want to make, the strategies they need to put into practice to make those changes achievable, and nurturing positive outcomes.

A family tree activity, included in the program, is a valued tool in connecting and re-connecting participants to family and country, and bridging a link to their Elders to share cultural and family knowledge and history.

While the CSEWB program was developed as a generic program based on key principles it also allows for specific communities to co-design their own programs to take account of the key issues and concerns in each location. This paper focuses on the evaluation of the experiences of participants of two communities in Queensland.

CSEWB Program Participants

The CSEWB program was developed on the basis of consultations with participants across 11 sites. Although the program has been developed for implementation in all of the sites, only two communities, Cherbourg and Kuranda in Queensland were successful in securing funding through Queensland Mental Health Commission in the first instance. Participants from earlier consultations and key families in the community were invited to participate in the program, or to assist with identifying, planning and delivering other workshops or community events.

The following table represented participants who commenced and completed the program from 2014 – 2016.

Table 1: CSEWB Program Participants

	<i>Cherbourg</i>	<i>Kuranda</i>	<i>Totals</i>
<i>Participants Commenced</i>	74 (30 men & 44 women)	125 (48 men & 77 women)	199 (78 men & 121 women)
<i>Participants Completed</i>	59 (21 men & 38 women)	100 (32 men & 68 women)	159 (53 men & 106 women)

CSEWB Program Evaluation Methodology

An independent, post-program evaluation of the CSEWB program was conducted in Queensland communities, Kuranda and Cherbourg, in early 2017 (Mia, 2017). A key aim of the qualitative post-program evaluation was to collect information from participants through one-on-one interviews, Stories of Most Significant Change (SMSC) and a review of the NEP Site Reports (Dudgeon et al., 2013; Duffin et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2013). The evaluation identified the perceived benefits of the program for individual participants, their families, and communities.

¹ Participants within the scope of Kuranda also include people from Mt Garnet community and surrounding areas.

Queensland Locations



Figure 3: Map of Queensland CSEWB Program Locations

Participant interviews were carried out in Kuranda/Mt Garnet¹ and Cherbourg over a seven-day period. Due to unexpected critical events within Cherbourg at the time, only 30 individual interviews were conducted; 18 from Kuranda, six from Mt Garnet and six from Cherbourg. The overall numbers and gender balance fell short of expectations, with more women being interviewed, although participants spanned a wide age range. Participants agreed to one-on-one interviews to share their experiences, discuss the benefits of the program for themselves, their families, and the community, and to identify the success factors of the program.

Figure 4 illustrates the process of information gathering over the duration of the NEP. It includes original consultations with community sites, the program as a change variable, participants' SMSC as immediate evaluation, and consequential evaluation interviews.

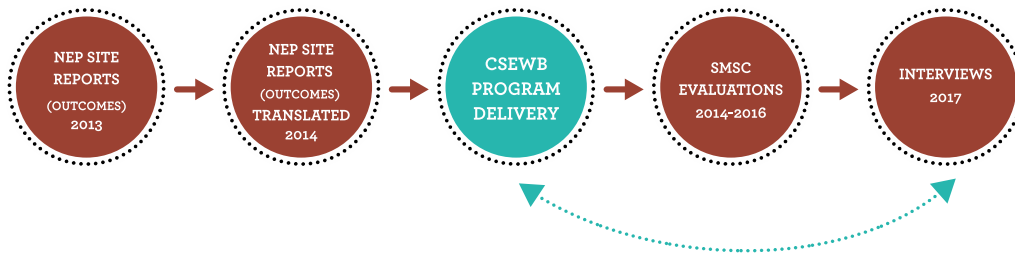


Figure 4: The NEP Outcomes Process

Research Process and Methodology

Ethical approval for the CSEWB program and associated research was gained from the UWA Human Research Ethics Office (reference number RA/4/1/5299). The methodology reflects the collaborative, culturally appropriate and community-centred nature of the NEP and the CSEWB program, ensuring the privileging of Indigenous knowledge. Therefore, the methodology utilised various principles and practices necessitated by an Aboriginal Knowledge Framework (Oxenham, 2017), Participatory Action Research (PAR; Dudgeon, Scrine, et al., 2017), and the application of cultural protocols.

The independent evaluator from Sister Kate's Home Kids Aboriginal Corporation (SKHKAC), the NEP director at UWA, and local program coordinators agreed on the recruitment process. Participants who had completed the CSEWB program across both sites were identified to ensure diversity in relation to gender, age groups (elders and youth), and Aboriginal staff from different organisations and services. A total of 30 participants were interviewed, 24 from Kuranda and six from Cherbourg, regarding their individual program journeys. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely explore their experiences in the CSEWB program. These interviews then informed a further six case studies. See Appendix 2 for a summary of the interview questions and participants' responses.

As part of the delivery of the CSEWB program, SMSC were used at the completion to assess participants' perceptions of change, at individual, family, and community levels. The

appropriateness of the program for the participants and their reflections about their experiences were analysed and matched to the summary of outcomes from SMSC.

Most Significant Change Technique

The most significant change (MSC) technique is a participatory form of monitoring and evaluation developed by Davies and Dart (2005). This technique enables researchers to determine and measure intangible qualitative indicators of importance. Davies and Dart (2005) refer to this evidence as significant change (SC) stories. In regards to the CSEWB program, researchers adapted the MSC technique as SMSC to ensure the cultural appropriateness of the evaluation methods. The emphasis on the word *stories* reflects Aboriginal values and enables participants to engage more openly in sharing their experiences. The valuing of individuals' stories reinforced the importance of their unique experiences and facilitated sharing between participants. Therefore, the MSC technique, in reference to the CSEWB program, is referred to as the SMSC.

The MSC technique, and therefore SMSC, is valuable in measuring outcomes of social change programs (Holden, 2017). It is particularly relevant when those social change programs hold seemingly intangible goals, such as strengthening empowerment or increasing confidence. The process of expressing and writing SMSC tend to focus people on the most positive and memorable experiences they have throughout a particular journey (although adverse or negative stories can arise). Further, Holden (2017) details how the MSC technique, and SMSC, is suitable for researchers who have regular contact with participants, who wish to collect data on impact rather than outputs, and who want to investigate

any possible unintended consequences of their program.

A total of 153 participants completed the SMSC process at the end of the CSEWB program. The use of SMSC enabled participants to reflect on and evaluate their experience and journey during the program and how it benefited them, their families, and communities.

Upon completion, most participants evaluated the program using a SMSC process, enabling them to reflect on their personal journey, review their growth, and reinforce positive changes. Program facilitators assisted participants in expressing their stories. Part of this process involved asking participants questions such as:

- Describe something that shows the most significant change you have experienced as a result of attending the CSWEB program?
- Why was this change significant for you?
- What title would you give your story?

Throughout the process, both facilitators and participants verified this information.

SMSC Summaries

Analysis of the SMSC data from Cherbourg and Kuranda show the emergence of eight key themes present within the communities:

1. Personal strengths.
2. Healthcare and healthier lifestyle choices.
3. Relationships: children, partners, family, and community.
4. Family/domestic violence and incarceration.
5. Life skills and life planning.
6. Education, training, and employment.
7. Cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing.
8. Cultural reconnection, identity, pride, and community.

Many of these themes are consistent with the key themes identified in the initial site reports for the NEP, as factors necessary to strengthen the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities (Dudgeon, Bray, D'Costa, & Walker, 2017). The dominant themes from the SMSC summaries are presented below and quotes from participants' original SMSC are used to illustrate these.

Theme 1: Personal Strengths

Following the program, several participants described increased confidence, including being more assertive in achieving set goals. Participants reported how the program has encouraged positive thoughts and actions to address feelings of anxiety and fear in any situation, including dealing with domestic issues (violent partners or abusive and negative behaviours). This increase in self-esteem was strongly emphasised by participants. Further, throughout the program participants saw their own development of individual assertiveness and strengths, including public speaking skills and the ability to voice their own opinions and viewpoints in family and community discussions, business settings, and other situations.

I found the NEP Program was very significant in my learning and teaching me about how to be assertive, how to go about getting country back. Every aspect of this program has given me knowledge and ideas and has changed my attitude and made me to be positive in applying these procedures so I will get positive outcomes. We are, as all Aboriginals – we are very resilient people and proud... [I have applied] these changes to my life and think more positive so I can get the outcomes that I want in everyday living. (CSEWB Program Participant)

Theme 2: Healthcare and Healthier Lifestyle Choices

For many participants, completing the CSEWB program made them more conscious of their physical and mental health. Participants believed that the program helped them identify healthier lifestyle practices, especially regarding diet, exercise, and alcohol and substance misuse issues, not only in relation to themselves but also to their families and community. Others identified major problems for families and community, due to negative behaviours, leading to continued cycles of distress, family and domestic violence, and imprisonment. Several participants spoke of their increased understanding and commitment to their health and SEWB and that of their children and families.

The most significant change that I have seen in myself is many things. I have more confidence, self-respect, love, happiness and joy in my life. I have given up cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana. I am now studying to do [counselling and support

role] and work in [various community roles]. I am more relaxed, healthy and working... I was an alcoholic living on the streets in [three towns in New South Wales]. I was also into marijuana and cigarettes. The NEP Program has turned my life around and given me the confidence to stand up for myself. (CSEWB Program Participant)

At the time of starting this [Program] I was emotionally unstable, suffering depression. I was also unemployed. Today I feel a lot better within myself. I am currently employed at [place of employment]. I feel a lot happier within myself and am able to deal with things a lot better. (CSEWB Program Participant)

Theme 3: Relationships: Children, Partners, Family, and Community

Participant's stories confirm that the program has increased their awareness and resolve to nurture more positive relationships with their children, partners, family members, and the wider community. Participants also identified an increased understanding of more positive ways to enhance individual self-esteem and health, and a greater awareness and commitment to strengthening family relationships.

Since doing the program I have gained more confidence with myself. I have also learnt a lot more about myself, and my family connections - the people around me - community. I have appreciated the input and learning that I have encountered from elders that have been present. I was feeling lost and confused but no more. I feel very much a part of this community and it has helped with my communications with others and with finding myself again. (CSEWB Program Participant)

I was not confident, [I was] insecure, nervy, anxious and stressed when I began. I did not feel part of this community. Since doing the [program], I have realised a lot - about myself, and the role of community. I am more relaxed and feel part of the community now. It has also helped me immensely with my job. (CSEWB Program Participant)

Theme 4: Family/Domestic Violence and Incarceration

Several female participants talked of the program providing them with skills to deal with family/domestic violence, and family breakdown. Such skills included the ability to identify ways to address various issues in a life-skills plan.

Participants stated they could more successfully address family and domestic violence, and incarceration issues; and commit to a stronger resolve to address these issues and make better life choices for themselves, their children, and families. Due to the sensitive nature of family and domestic violence, and incarceration, participants requested that direct quotes not be published.

Theme 5: Life-Skills and Life Planning

Several participants acknowledged how negative self-talk can contribute to their own dysfunctional behaviours and personal situations, which can in turn negatively impact on their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their families and wider communities. Participants also acknowledged that the program enhanced their self-awareness and provided tools for self-assessment of their behaviours and actions, and enabled them to develop strategies to change their current lifestyles and situations. Several participants acknowledged that program materials on life planning strategies had helped them to find different ways of caring for self, family, and others. Participants, their families, and other community members, became more purposively engaged in individual and collective healing, empowerment, and leadership roles.

Understanding my anger and stress levels and what triggers my emotions. Connecting with the other women. Admitting to needing help in times of stress and depression. I understand and admit to myself now about my behaviours and anxiety. Re-programming my stance in the family network. Knowing my concern from the core - showing love so it can shine again. Understanding strategies to overcome depression/anxiety and have asserting conversations. Knowing that I can make changes with leaving my past and trauma behind. (CSEWB Program Participant)

My change has been about self-healing, to take time out for myself. I don't have to keep going until I burn myself out. I now see the potential in our younger leaders where I can take a step back now and have faith in them, where before I didn't have time to see the younger ones stepping up and making their presence known in the community. (CSEWB Program Participant)

Theme 6: Education, Training and Employment

The majority of participants reported a renewed interest in education and training and the

associated benefits of personal and professional development for individual growth. Such developments enabled participants to have an increased recognition of their capacity for assertiveness and future prospects in attaining a better life and economic stability for themselves and their families. Participants talked of the benefits of further education including capacity building, self-determination, and securing qualifications that support their self-worth and confidence, including when seeking employment. Discussion of education also extended to the importance and need for their children to attend school on a regular basis (address truancy issues). Participants also reported a range of positive outcomes through enrolling in, and completing, education programs. Such enrolments and completions include certificates and undergraduate degrees, which will assist in securing employment opportunities for themselves and their families.

Feeling motivated and positive during this [program] also sharing each other[s] stories and company. Throughout this [program] it has given me a different aspect on changing my ways of living and a positive future for myself... To better myself and give me confidence to overcome my everyday challenges. (CSEWB Program Participant)

In my point of view, I have made changes in my life due to work. I have gotten better at knowing how to communicate, better in ways in understanding others. I also made changes in my relationship so both my partner and I could solve problems by sitting down and talking about the situation. (CSEWB Program Participant)

Theme 7: Cultural, Social, and Emotional Wellbeing

Most participants spoke of the importance of reconnecting with their country and culture, and the positive benefits from feeling a sense of belonging. Family and community connectedness, unity and support were also seen as important. Participants expressed a strong interest in learning about Aboriginal history broadly, and their own family and community histories. Participants gained an increased understanding of colonisation and the Stolen Generations, and how this history has negatively impacted on their lives, and that of Aboriginal peoples collectively. Equipped with this more in-

depth knowledge, participants were better able to understand how this history has resulted in many of the negative issues affecting them and their families today.

Many participants emphasised cultural connectedness through a stronger cultural, community and spiritual understanding. The importance of cultural history and identity gives meaning to their lives. Participants acknowledged that the program provided a culturally safe space for them to share aspects of their life in individual and group settings. Consequently, participants saw the possibility of attending to individual and group responsibilities, guiding youth, and displaying positive attitudes, behaviours, and actions. Participants identified that by completing the program and assessing their own progress through their SMSC they were able to articulate the varied benefits of participating in the program.

I need to get involved in more community events and don't be ashamed to speak out about my Aboriginality. Although I am proud of that fact, I never felt I had the right to speak out loud and be heard because other family members were doing it for me. I felt that they had the right and more experience than I could ever possess. This program made me realise that my story is just as important, because that's what makes me, me. No one else is like me, some may be similar, but I'm an individual, there is no other [me].

I am who I am because of who I am. I'm a daughter, sister, aunt, mum, nan, cousin and friend. I'm part of a strong family who fought and continue to fight for the rights of others. My thoughts and actions shouldn't be over shadowed by others' accomplishments. So now I am valued and respected within my family, friends and community. Most importantly I have come to realise just how strong my family connections mean to me, my connection to country and [how] significant it is to share what I have been told from a young age... It taught me so much about myself; that I am worth something and deserve to be heard. It gave me an opportunity to share with others about me - my beliefs and my teachings. This program allowed me to be so open and honest, not only to everyone else in this group, but to myself. I have never felt more spiritually connected to my deeper inner self because of this experience, I finally recognise my strengths. Past acts and actions [are] in the past, because that is where [they] belong, never to be forgotten. But I

need to move on into my future. Healthy self is a closer step to healthy family is a closer step to healthy community. (CSEWB Program Participant)

Theme 8: cultural Reconnection, Identity, Pride, and Community

Participants’ SMSC identified the value of strengthening culture and spirituality. The cultural aspects of both the spiritual and physical worlds includes connections in a cultural context and how this can bring a sense of inspiration, connectedness, and hope for individuals, families, and the collective community. This confirms the importance of going back to country for cultural purposes, family and community reconnection to the land, cultural ceremony, and community gatherings and activities. As well as strong gains in cultural reconnection, participants reported increased pride in their identity and a greater commitment to strengthening community.

Before I started the NEP [Program], I was lost when it came to my cultural identity. I feel this [program] has definitely strengthened that in me, and given me the encouragement and drive to continue on this path of self-discovery and empowerment... My self-identity in a cultural sense has been explored, discovered and strengthened through the many areas of discussion in the [program]. I have also developed wonderful relationships with others in the community that will assist me in my continual journey. (CSEWB Program Participant)

The diagram below (Figure 5) shows the link between the seven domains of SEWB framework and the key themes identified by CSEWB program participants through the analysis as revealed and described in the SMSC summaries related to CSEWB program outcomes. The diagram confirms how each of the themes is either encompassed within the SEWB domains such *connection to country* or are strategies essential to address key determinants which impact adversely or positively on individual, family or community SEWB.

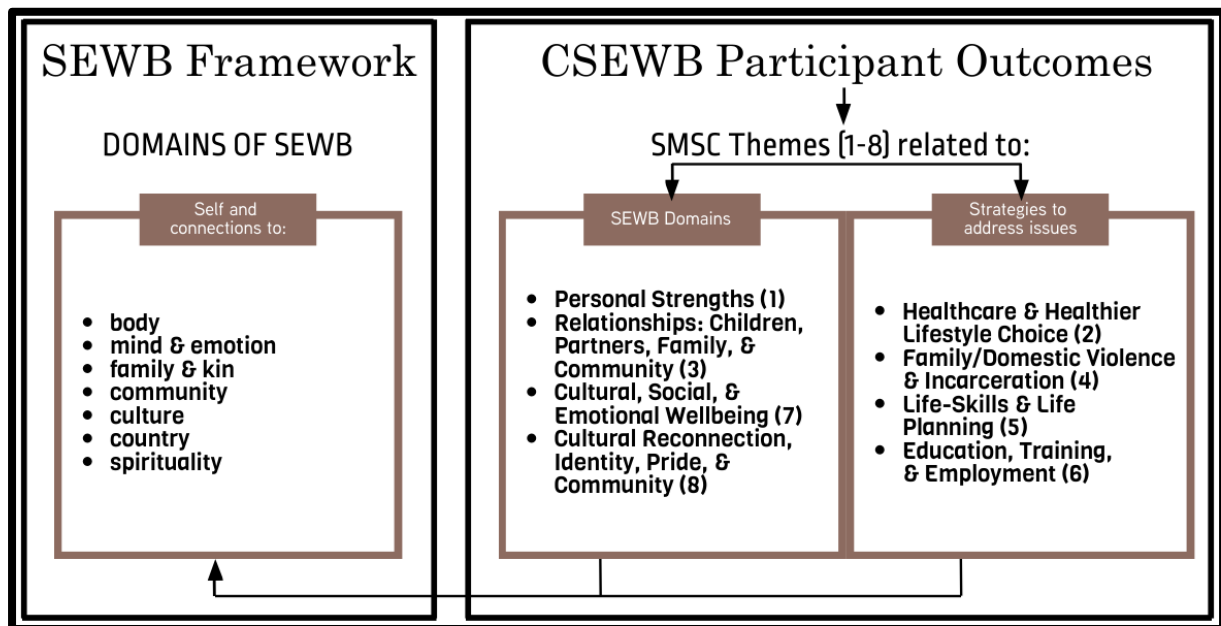


Figure 5: The interrelationship between SEWB Domains, SMSC Themes and CSEWB Outcomes

Differing Themes Within SMSC Summaries

There were strong similarities between SMSC summaries emerging from both Cherbourg and Kuranda communities, hence the eight key themes discussed above. However, some SMSC

summaries were more, or exclusively, evident in only one community. For example, the SMSC by participants in Kuranda confirmed a renewed focus on the importance of reconnecting with country and culture. SMSC from Cherbourg, however, expressed a more focused area of

concern around the impacts of family and domestic violence, and issues of incarceration.

Despite these small differences, the continual deterioration of culture (resulting from ongoing colonisation, systemic racism and the devaluing of Indigenous knowledge by non-Indigenous Australia) may negatively impact participants' ability to express hope for cultural pride and may perpetuate fear around speaking out against family and domestic violence. Therefore, the absence of an identifiable key theme in SMSC does not mean that a participant is not concerned about an issue.

Discussion

The findings confirm that since the CSEWB program was delivered in Kuranda and Cherbourg, there has been a reported significant change in both individual's aspirations and abilities, and a renewed community focus and sense of hope in overcoming some of the distress and disadvantage that has been endured for many years.

The positive outcomes for participants, when applying the program life skills strategies, has allowed them to focus on their own, and their family's needs, in a more positive and constructive way. This contributes to individual healing and strengthened family and community relationships.

Participants, both individually and as a collective, are now more confident and empowered, demonstrating a strengthened sense of insight and purpose, resulting from involvement in a program focused on community healing and empowerment. The CSEWB program provided participants with a new way of looking at the world. It enabled them to better assess what is happening around them, at individual, family and community levels. Participant's individual growth included changes to their own, and their family's lives, and the ability to use this information to further empower themselves, their families, and communities. These outcomes are reminiscent of the successes of the Family Wellbeing Program over the last two decades with a similar focus on individual, family and community empowerment (Kinchin, Jacobs, Tsey & Lines, 2015; Tsey & Every, 2000).

Further, participants were provided with information on Aboriginal history and political outcomes that have impacted on Indigenous peoples' SEWB. Participants explored how this has directly impacted on them as individuals, on their families, their communities, and Aboriginal peoples more broadly. Learning about past policies that governed the lives of all Aboriginal peoples, and what this meant for the wellbeing and self-determination of participants' ancestors, themselves, and their families and communities in the present day, was enlightening for participants.

Participants acknowledged the value of strengthening their connection to culture and spirituality. This extended to self, family, others, all living things, and the natural world. Participants mentioned cultural reclamation activities, such as ceremonies involving group and community gatherings, and going back to country for cultural purposes, as especially positive in strengthening individual, family, and community connection to culture and country.

Statements of positive participant experiences, detailing increased levels of wellbeing, strengthened resilience, and capacity to address and resolve many of the issues impacting on families both individually and collectively, have demonstrated the program's success. The extensive value of the CSEWB program was unprecedented and enabled participants to succeed in a range of areas that were perceived by participants as unachievable prior to engaging with the program.

The CSEWB program enabled participants to develop a stronger sense of cultural identity and pride and better understand the importance of personal health and wellbeing. Further, participants gained increased cultural knowledge around Aboriginal history, their ancestors, family connections, and how connection to country and experiencing a sense of belonging can make people stronger in themselves, their families, and their communities.

Conclusion

The CSEWB program was an innovative, Indigenous-led, and needs-based initiative strengthened by involving local communities and

local community co-researchers in the consultations, design, implementation and evaluation of the program. The evaluation, using SMSC followed up with interviews, confirmed the benefit of the program for participants in Kuranda and Cherbourg, Queensland. Given the commonality of issues impacting on the SEWB of Aboriginal individuals, families and communities (Dudgeon, Cox, Kelly, et al., 2014) there is strong potential for the successful transferability of the CSWEB program to other communities across Australia.

Drawing on SMSC it is evident that the CSEWB program has enabled participants to address a multitude of complex and challenging issues impacting on their own, their families', and their communities' cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing. The ability to address such issues also allows participants to embark on their individual and collective healing journeys.

A key aim of the CSEWB program was to address the high levels of psychological distress and suicide, identified as a major concern by elders and community members in Kuranda and Cherbourg. Suicides generate distress, depression and a sense of hopelessness in communities. Following the delivery of the CSEWB program in Kuranda and Cherbourg, participants have reported a significant change in their individual goals, and a renewed focus and sense of hope in the community to overcome some of the distress and disadvantage they have endured for many years. Throughout the NEP and CSEWB program research, there were a number of unexpected critical events experienced in these communities, including one suicide, two attempted suicides and the passing of an Elder, contributing to widespread community grief and loss. These events and the associated experiences within these communities, further highlights the need for continued and strengthened support and funding for community driven suicide prevention and early intervention initiatives.

The CSEWB program offered a range of activities and components designed to nurture self-determination, and strengthen capacity and resilience, essential for the genuine empowerment of Aboriginal peoples. Participants' SMSC reveal positive individual experiences and strengthening of participants'

SEWB. Recurrent themes reflected in participants' SMSC of strengthened resilience and capacity to address and resolve many of the negative issues in their lives, further demonstrate the widespread success of the program.

Whilst the summaries of SMSC confirm the resilience of indigenous individuals, families, communities, and culture in the face of adversity, major concerns about continued suicide and preventable deaths remain. These concerns are an important reminder of the need for system-wide change throughout broader policies, services, and programs. Such changes must occur in order to best address the social and economic determinants impacting on the lives of indigenous peoples in communities across Australia.

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Carolyn Mascall was part of the National Empowerment Project undertaking both administrative and research roles. Carolyn has studied and worked in health promotion, education and community liaison. She has worked with general practitioners, raising awareness of cultural appropriateness and supporting community access to primary health care. She has supported international aid sponsored students in a university setting and worked with young students participating in vocational education training in schools.

Glenis Grogan coordinates the National Empowerment Program managed by Ngonbi Community Services Indigenous Corporation for the Queensland communities of Kuranda and Cherbourg. She comes from a highly active Aboriginal family who were instrumental in setting up many North Queensland Aboriginal Organisations. Her background is nursing/midwifery and within a team has established health services, organisations, projects and higher award education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Glenis is highly active in Native Title through the Prescribed Body Corporate representing her cultural group plus trust land management returned to Mona Mona Mission descendants to enable strengthened cultural, social, and emotional wellbeing.

Bronwyn Murray is a community member in Cherbourg, Queensland. Bronwyn lives and works in Cherbourg. She is a facilitator of the National Empowerment Project Cultural Social Emotional Wellbeing Program. Bronwyn's passion in life has always been to help her people from all walks of life in any challenges they encounter on their journey. She is a multi-skilled individual who wants to set great examples for her children, family, friends and community. She is committed to getting her people to come

together and unite in one spirit, one mind and one body, whether at social, community or family events.

Roz Walker PhD, BA (Hons) is Head, Aboriginal Maternal Health and Child Development at the Telethon Kids Institute. She is working on several projects which aim to address the social and cultural determinants that impact on Aboriginal maternal, child and adolescent health outcomes. She has extensive experience in applying Community-based Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methods and ethical conduct in translating research into policy and practice. Roz co-edited the first and second editions of the: *Working Together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice* (2014) with Pat Dudgeon, the book is used widely in Australia and internationally. She also led the Telethon Kids Institute team collaboration on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP). Roz.Walker@telethonkids.org.au

Appendix 1

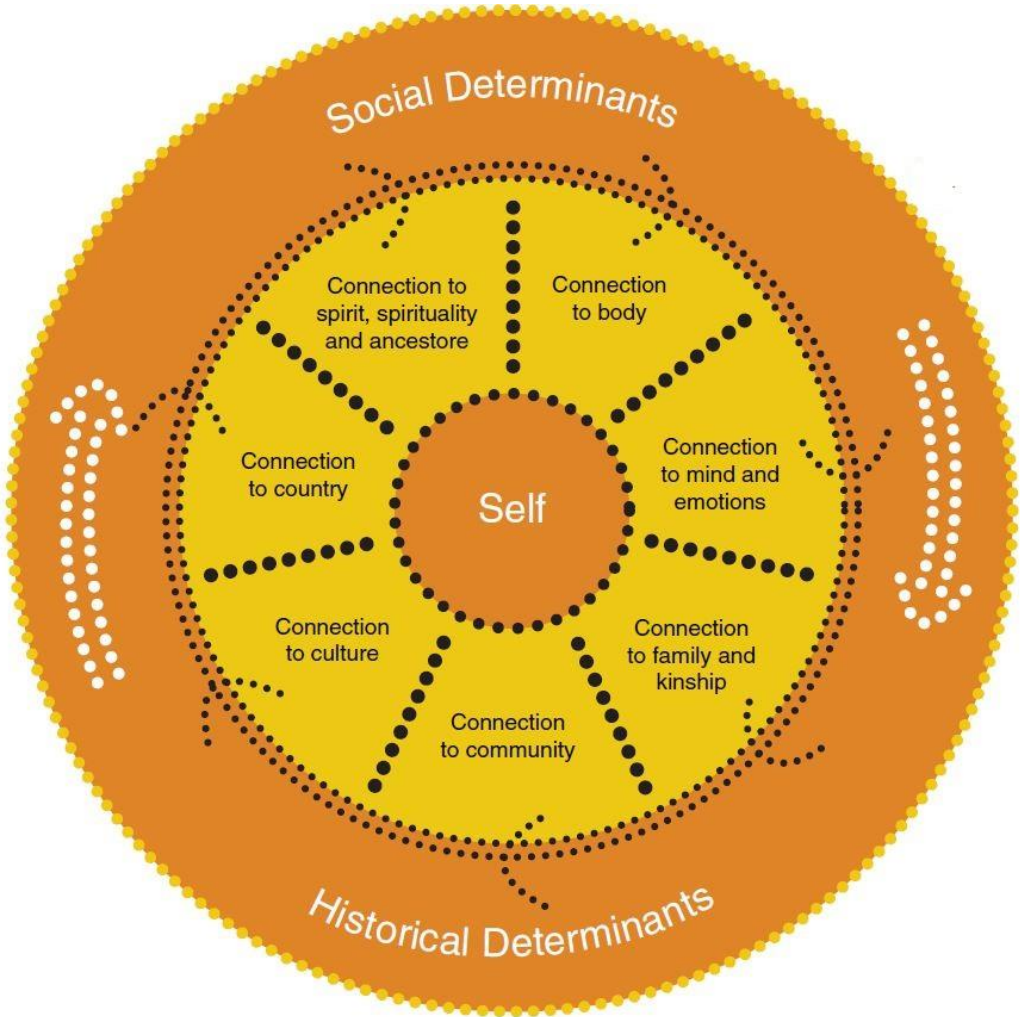


Figure A6: Determinants of SEWB

Appendix 2

Summary of interview questions and participants' responses

NATIONAL EMPOWERMENT PROJECT CSEWB PROGRAM KURANDA AND CHERBOURG, QUEENSLAND PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

