

WALKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: A CASE STUDY OF WORAWA ABORIGINAL COLLEGE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Research Team acknowledges those individuals, who more than three decades ago, worked together to realise the vision for an Aboriginal school. Hyllus Maris, Sandra Bardas and Philippa Ransome were the founders of The Green Hills Foundation established to support Aboriginal education. This Foundation was the cornerstone of Worawa Aboriginal College. Their commitment and the work of William Lasica, Sr Brigida Nailon CSB and Mrs Geraldine Briggs AO (Aunty Gerry) provided the school's foundation. The support of Aboriginal Elders Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls, Uncle Manual Cooper, Aunty Merle Jackomos, Aunty Elizabeth Hoffmann and Terry Garwood in bringing the vision to fruition epitomised the philosophy of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people "Walking together to Make a Difference". Today the Worawa Board of Directors continues to embrace the ethos of 'Walking Together', bringing together Western education and Aboriginal knowledge, values, pedagogy and leadership and consequently enriching the College program through shared wisdom and knowledge.

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TERMINOLOGY

1. The term ‘Aboriginal’ is used when reporting and discussing the data in relation to Worawa Aboriginal College, whereas the word ‘Indigenous’ may be used in referenced documents or in a global and historic sense when referring to general issues of knowledge and learning.
2. The term ‘Mainstream Education’, when used in this report refers to the prevalent attitudes, values, policies and practices of schools providing education for students from a range of cultural heritage. This includes education provision in Government and Catholic Systems and Independent Schools in Australia.
3. The term ‘Worawa Aboriginal College Community’ includes Elders, Board of Directors, Parents, Grandparents and Carers of students, relevant Community members, all Staff and Students of the College.
4. The term ‘First Nations’ refers to people who are the original inhabitants of the land in any country and who were the first to encounter sustained European contact, settlement, trade and colonisation. There are exceptions such as Hawaii, where after European contact, settlement and trade emanated from Asia as well as Europe and annexation from the USA. In Australia this term refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
5. Exemplars are field texts. In a research design appropriate in an Indigenous context it is appropriate to include non-written artefacts (Hooley, 2009), that “respectfully represent participants’ lived and told stories” (Clandinin & Huber, in press 2010 p. 5). In the context of this project Exemplars include digital records of events and productions, Worawa promotional material both digital and written, College Newsletters and material from the College Facebook page.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research project ‘Walking together to make a difference: A case study of Worawa Aboriginal College’ demonstrates the continuation of the narrative of this College, as described in *Building On A Dream* (2013). The narrative recorded on the DVD, *Building On A Dream* includes members from all sections of the Worawa Community, who were instrumental in realising the dream of Hyllus Maris through their involvement in the early years of the educational enterprise that is today, Worawa Aboriginal College. ‘Walking together to make a difference’ enabled the exploration and consequent presentation of a rich picture of life at Worawa using data generated between December 2013 and December 2014 as well as existing exemplars. The data demonstrate the commitment of all to the development of strong, proud Aboriginal young women, who are able to walk in two worlds. This is achieved through commitment to nurturing and celebrating culture, the development of a sense of belonging to, and the empowerment of students within the Worawa College Learning Community, in the context of respectful, responsible relationships and a program of rigorous, holistic, personalised learning.

The project focused on key people at Worawa Aboriginal College and identified factors that enable or challenge:

- the nurturing of a strong sense of cultural identity
- the building of a sense of connectedness through the development of respectful relationships within the learning community of Worawa Aboriginal College
- the empowerment of students and adults in taking responsibility for their own actions
- rigorous student learning

and therefore answered the fundamental research question: What factors do students and adults at Worawa Aboriginal College understand as assisting the nurturing of a strong sense of cultural identity through connectedness, empowerment and learning in their life at school?

and the further research question that goes beyond the immediate context:

To what extent are the findings/ explanations from this project, applicable to the wider Australian education community both Aboriginal and mainstream and to the global First Nations education community?

The key concepts, Culture, Connectedness, Empowerment and Learning, present in ‘Building On a Dream’, were identified in the literature, related to the Worawa Values of Relationship, Responsibility, Respect and Rigour and used to develop relevant questions for interviews. Definitions of Culture, Connectedness, Empowerment and Learning derived from the Literature Review are:

Culture: the characteristics of Aboriginal people defined by their connection to people and place, manifested in a contemporary context.

Connectedness: a sense of belonging to a learning community.

Empowerment: the ability to act with confidence in order to direct one's own life within the context of a learning community.

Learning: a complex co-emergent process of holistic development enabled through the construction of meaning, taking place within a community that is dynamic and robust in adapting to changing circumstances.

The qualitative methodology included data generation through individual and focus group interviews as well as data gathering through the collection of existing exemplars. All sectors of the Worawa Aboriginal College Community were represented in the participants, Elders, Members of the Board of Directors, Community Members, Parents and Grandparents, Staff Members and Students. The composition of the research team enabled the collation and close analysis where necessary of the extensive list of exemplars. Data was collated according to the following themes:

1. Connectedness and Empowerment Through Culture and The Worawa Way
2. Connectedness and Empowerment Through Respectful, Responsible Relationships
3. Connectedness and Empowerment Through Rigorous Learning.

From the collated data 'Enabling Factors' were identified in each theme and from these, four 'Key Enabling Factors' emerged:

1. The continual articulation of Vision and significant Values by all members of Worawa Aboriginal College Community
2. Commitment of all members of the Worawa Aboriginal College Community to developing proud young Aboriginal women through rigorous two-way education in a culturally appropriate and safe environment.
3. Strong committed Aboriginal Leadership, with the ability to implement a rigorous two-way education model, appropriate for the students.
4. The successful implementation of a rigorous two-way model of holistic learning, personalised for each student, giving her the knowledge and skills and confidence to walk in two worlds.

It is especially significant that in all sections of the data the research team found multiple consonant voices. These voices were discovered in written and visual material. The written material is on the Worawa Aboriginal College website, in prepared publications, either promotional or resulting from research and in student writing. The visual material takes the form of videos on the College website. The

voices are also found in the interviews and conversations and discussions held with Elders, staff members, parents and grandparents and students of the Worawa Aboriginal College Community. There is no dissonance in the views expressed.

It is clear that all adult members of the Worawa College Community are committed to the nurturing and celebrating of Aboriginal culture in a contemporary context. Through this, they have a strong sense of belonging to this community and so are empowered to be the community that is dynamic and robust and adapting to changing circumstances. All members of the Worawa community are connected and empowered through the constant reminder of the vision of Hyllus Maris. Through the vision for the College, their sense of belonging to Worawa has an historical dimension and they are empowered to act in the present, through the words of this very significant figure in the Aboriginal community.

It is also clear that in their time at Worawa, the students have augmented their existing knowledge of their Aboriginal culture and have valued and enjoyed this nurturing and celebration in a culturally safe environment. During this time, they have also developed a deep empowering understanding of and commitment to the Worawa Values of Relationship, Responsibility, Respect and Rigour. The students have developed a sense of belonging to the Worawa College Community by experiencing a wide range of respectful, responsible relationships, in the context of meaningful learning, in a two-way program that is rigorous, holistic and personalised. Through all of this, they have gained the confidence and ability to direct their own lives and continue their growth as strong, proud Aboriginal young women, who, whatever the future holds, can walk successfully in two worlds. They have also developed leadership qualities that assist others to ponder deeply on their actions in the context of the Worawa Values.

Student and Parent voices are very strong in the data. They value and are empowered by the breadth of opportunity offered the students in the holistic education program. The program includes physical health and wellbeing, social, sporting, artistic and academic learning in a two-way cultural context. The relevance of Indigenous knowledges, including the Aboriginal languages and learning in and through the Arts is significant in this context, as is the understanding that learning is enhanced through physical health and wellbeing. Social learning is an important area of learning and personal progression in all learning is assured through *personalised learning*, a hallmark of the Worawa Education Model. At Worawa the curriculum enables the students to access the mega-narrative of their Aboriginality. On a beautiful and significant property they learn about and reflect on their own heritage and the heritage of others. Relational learning regardless of the girls' upbringing facilitates the sharing of Aboriginal realities. Students are very forthcoming in speaking about the many aspects of their learning in relation to their own heritage and the heritage of others. Through this process new knowledge is developed. Dialogue with their own individual story is also portrayed in the expression of student hopes for life after Worawa.

Worawa Aboriginal College is an Aboriginal initiative, Aboriginal owned and operated and developed from the experiences of Aboriginal people themselves. This case study demonstrates the capacity of the Worawa Aboriginal College Board of Directors and in particular, the Resident Elder, Executive Director and Principal to

conduct rigorous two-way education in a culturally appropriate and safe environment. Two-way education at Worawa utilises the expertise of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to provide educational opportunities that enable students to become proud young Aboriginal women who can walk successfully in two worlds. The findings of this study contribute to research that indicates the desirability and effectiveness of restoring capacity to Aboriginal people enabling them to engage Aboriginal students in a school learning program similar to that of Worawa Aboriginal College.

The narrative of Worawa Aboriginal College continues in the vision and tradition of Hyllus Maris to develop strong, proud Aboriginal young women, who can walk in two worlds. The overarching concepts of Connectedness, Empowerment and Learning are encapsulated in the thoughts of the proud, young Aboriginal women who are the students.

5.1 *Connectedness:*

a sense of belonging to a learning community.

When the girls were asked what they would say about Worawa to someone who was thinking of coming to the school, many responses reflected Connectedness, connectedness to place and people:

Worawa is a place you call home. Regina (Ntaria/ Hermannsburg)

Worawa will make you feel at home even though you are a long way from home. You become one, as a family I guess. Maxine (Tiwi)

Worawa is not like a normal school, it is like a school filled with love. Everyone cares for everyone. You are pretty much part of the family. Andrea (Darwin)

You'll miss Worawa when you leave. Hakira (South Australia)

5.2 *Learning:*

a complex co-emergent process of holistic development enabled through the construction of meaning, taking place within a community that is dynamic and robust in adapting to changing circumstances.

Many responses to the same question reflect Learning in the context of the Worawa Way.

To come to Worawa will be the best decision you will ever make. It will help you find out who you are, help you discover yourself in many ways you had not known before. Jamira (Bardi resides Collingwood)

Worawa gives you so many opportunities and teaches you not just learning but life long skills. It's just a good environment. Jaden (Darwin)

Worawa is the best boarding school and we have '4R's' and it is fun. Sasha (Elcho Island)

The '4R's' mean a lot to me. Responsibility, Respect, Relationship and Rigour mean a lot to me. Alliyanna (Wadeye)

The '4R's' go with you everywhere. Jamira (Bardi, resides Collingwood)

The '4R's' are good values to have because you need them throughout your whole life. Jaden (Darwin)

5.3 Empowerment:

the ability to act with confidence in order to direct one's own life within the context of a learning community.

When the girls were asked how they had changed in their time at Worawa, many responses reflect empowerment:

Worawa has changed my life it has given me an idea of where I want to go and what I want to do in the future. I don't know what I want to do but I feel confident. Jamira (Bardi, resides Collingwood)

At Worawa I have made friends and this has given me confidence. Zarkema (Warmun)

If I hadn't come to Worawa I'd probably be home doing nothing, walking round community smoking, doing a lot of bad stuff like drinking alcohol. Maxine (Tiwi)

Before I came to Worawa, if someone asked for my help I would say, "Ask someone else." but now I just give all my help and I am very much the big sister. It gave me a second chance at schooling. Andrea (Darwin)

At Worawa, I guess I grew up. Hakira (South Australia)

Here I am and I have learned and changed so much. I am proud of what I have achieved over the past 4 years. My family is proud and my community is proud of me too. Alliyanna (Wadeye)

Worawa has shaped and transformed me from a scared immature girl to this grown up, confident and bright woman – a leader. Andrea (Darwin)

All the girls expressed gratitude for their time at Worawa and are determined to translate the learning into their future lives. When asked if she might change something at Worawa in order to make it a better school, Kahealea acknowledged that three years ago she would have had a long list of suggestions, but now she says that change is unnecessary and:

Worawa is an experience I will never forget.

Zarkema expressed gratitude simply but powerfully, when she concluded her speech at the Presentation Day in 2013 with the words:

*I would like to thank Aunty Lois, Kim and everyone else at
Worawa for changing my life and making me a happier person.
All your faces and names are engraved in my heart.*

COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Commendations

Worawa Aboriginal College is commended for:

- Conducting a school based in Aboriginal culture while recognising different Language Groups
- Conducting a school catering for the unique needs of young Aboriginal women
- Conducting a trauma-informed school
- Developing a sense of identity and self esteem in the students
- Developing in the students, belief in themselves as learners

Recommendations

Culture, Connectedness and Empowerment

Continue to be dynamic and robust in adapting to changing circumstances by:

- Providing links to the vision of Hyllus Maris
- Using the Worawa Values, Relationship, Responsibility, Respect and Rigour to underpin and inform all actions in College life
- Including Elders, Parents and Community Members in deliberations relating to the education of Worawa students
- Nurturing and celebrating Culture and finding new and innovative ways to accomplish this
- Incorporating first language within both the Culture and the Language (English) programs
- Fostering connectedness through respectful responsible relationships

Learning

Continue to be dynamic and robust in adapting to changing circumstances by:

- Implementing the Worawa Model of Learning – What, Why, How, Now What to develop students understanding and ownership of their learning
- Exhibiting a growth mindset through the implementation of rigorous personal, social and academic learning supported by Physical Health and Wellbeing Programs
- Encouraging students to maintain the ‘productive struggles’ in their learning
- Giving a breadth of opportunities to students
- Nurturing giftedness in students
- Planning for succession in order that Aboriginal leadership is maintained

- Providing professional development for staff in their role in a trauma informed school
- Placing an emphasis on attracting quality staff

Consider:

Connectedness and Empowerment

The Leadership Team act as planned for 2015, to ensure regularity of Leadership Team meetings.

Learning

- Within the framework of the Worawa Model of Learning – What, Why, How, Now What, the College develops a ‘Strategic Reviewing and Renewing’ Plan of 3 to 5 years duration, to ensure that the Worawa remains at the forefront of education provision for Aboriginal girls. The plan to include the Vision, all Policies, Learning and Teaching programs and Assessment, Recording and Reporting programs and procedures.
- Within the framework of the Worawa ‘Strategic Reviewing and Renewing Plan’ and the Staff Appraisal Program, the College reviews and renews its targeted Professional Learning Plan for staff that incorporates both internal and external professional learning programs.
- To ensure that the Worawa holistic education model is continued and strengthened, Learning and Teaching Programs incorporate and make explicit links to the major themes that may be instigated through the Culture Program (for example Reconciliation Week), Major Events (for example Sapphires) and Specialist Programs (for example Pathways to Womanhood).