

## **SECTION 2. INTRODUCTION**

### **Title of the Research Project:**

#### **Walking together to make a difference: A case study of Worawa Aboriginal College**

#### **Description of Worawa Aboriginal College**

Situated to the east of Melbourne on the former Coranderrk Aboriginal Station and near the township of Healesville in the tranquil Yarra Valley, Worawa Aboriginal College continues to honour the ideals of its founder, Aboriginal visionary Hyllus Maris. Speaking at the opening of the College in 1983, Hyllus said: "...in this, the first Aboriginal school in Victoria, the educational curriculum has been specially designed to suit Aboriginal students to bring them to their full potential. Aboriginal culture will be imparted not only as a school subject in each class's timetable but as an integral part of every day life at the school".

The beautiful rolling hills and country setting of the College includes the world-renowned Healesville Sanctuary and provides wonderful opportunities for students to interact with and contemplate their relationship with the natural environment.

Worawa Aboriginal College is a boarding school for young Aboriginal women in the middle years of schooling who come from communities in urban, regional and remote locations across Australia. It is the only independent boarding school for Aboriginal girls in Australia. Worawa provides holistic education combining academic education, culture and wellbeing. The College is owned and operated by Aboriginal people. The Worawa Model of Learning is grounded in Aboriginal values and ways of knowing, doing and being. The Worawa Model consists of four interrelated values: Relationship (Ways of being), Responsibility (Ways of knowing), Respect (Ways of valuing) and Rigour (Ways of doing), together these form The Worawa Way. A Council of Elders oversees the culture curriculum and the College resident Elder provides cultural guidance to students and staff.

A hallmark of Worawa is the focus on the physical health and wellbeing of students. The physical health of the students is monitored and they receive care from the resident fulltime nurse as well as visiting medical professionals. The fulltime wellbeing coordinator works personally with the students as well as coordinating the various programs available at the College or externally if appropriate. A wellbeing team consisting of College and external personnel ensures the availability of well-researched professional and culturally appropriate programs facilitated by appropriate personnel. Personal development and social competence is enhanced through the innovative Pathways to Womanhood and Partnerships programs.

The academic program is based on the Australian Curriculum (ACARA). The curriculum is delivered through a series of Learning Centres involving Aboriginal Culture, Health and Sport, Creative Arts, Languages, Mathematics and Science Environment. The education program includes personalised learning, digital portfolios, partnerships with other schools and organisations, vocational education experience, sport and physical fitness and health and well being arrangements. The

Worawa Academic Reference Group provides advice on curriculum and pedagogy when requested. This group is composed of people currently engaged in tertiary or secondary academic education.

The College offers a themed approach with realistic pathways to continued education or the world of work through the opportunity to study certificate courses. Environmental management through a state of the art horticulture centre provides the opportunity for students to develop knowledge and skills in Indigenous plant use and extends to special projects such as maintaining a Koala feed plantation for the Healesville Sanctuary. A strong relationship with the nearby world-renowned Healesville Sanctuary enables students to gain work experience in wild life care and management and interpretation. A feature of life at Worawa that brings together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learning is the artwork created by students. Reflecting stories of community, family and land, the designs of wonderfully expressive paintings have been incorporated into fabric patterns and are displayed alongside original costume jewellery. The public art gallery on the property displays high quality student art as well as art from the students' home communities. This demonstrates the holistic and creative nature of learning for all to see. The College has a very modern creative arts centre for the visual and performing arts as well as its own art gallery, which holds exhibitions that are open to the public. Through partnerships with the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Art and Culture at the Victorian College for the Arts, Ilbijerri Indigenous Theatre and Malthouse Theatre and partner schools, Worawa is expanding its arts program to encompass the Performing Arts. Aboriginal languages are seen as a focal point and the College will introduce skills development in media through family oral history collection. Focus on students' first languages is significant in developing English literacy skills.

In February 2014 the student population was 61. The staff relevant for this research project, consists of the Executive Director and Principal, the Deputy Principal, Head of Learning and Teaching, the Head of Boarding, the Wellbeing Coordinator, the Resident Nurse, 8.95 FTE house parents, 9.3 FTE academic teachers and 2 teacher aides.

### **Purpose of the Research Project**

The overall purpose of the research project is to explore and present a rich picture of Worawa Aboriginal College including adults' and students' understanding of nurturing a strong sense of cultural identity through embedding the values Relationship, Responsibility, Respect and Rigour in two-way schooling processes. These values are fundamental to student wellbeing and the development of a sense of self-esteem as well as to a productive learning environment. This picture will demonstrate the achievement of the goal, "walking together to make a difference".

The project will identify how adults and students learn about and nurture a strong sense of cultural identity. It will also identify ways in which the values Relationship, Responsibility, Respect and Rigour relate to the concepts of Connectedness, Empowerment and Learning as described in the celebration of Worawa Aboriginal College's thirtieth anniversary presentation, *Building On A Dream*. Consequently the project will document the continuation of the narrative

described in this production. The narrative of Worawa Aboriginal College relates the story of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people “walking together to make a difference”. At the commencement of the College, Hyllus Maris the Founder walked with people such as Sandra Bardas, Philippa Ransome, William Lasica and Sr Brigida Nailon CSB through the establishment of the Greenhills Foundation to provide funding for the College. The Board of Directors of Worawa embraced the philosophy of “Walking Together” and the narrative continues today as Aunty Lois Peeler the Executive Director and Principal walks with the Chair of the Worawa Academic Reference Group Pam Russell, an external education expert and developer of the Worawa Education Model and the members of the Worawa Executive, Kathryn Gale Deputy Principal, Head of Learning and Teaching, Kim Walters, Head of Boarding and Andrew Jans, Business Manger. Together with Aunty Lois the members of the Executive comprise the College Leadership Team.

The project will demonstrate how respectful relationships are built at the College and how these relationships enable learning through participation, contribution and the setting of high and achievable expectations so as students are sustained and advanced in both ancient and contemporary cultures as articulated by Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls when he said at the Opening of Worawa Aboriginal College in 1983, “Aboriginal children must be educated in the way of our people. They must learn their history, about their great ancestors, the language and the law. It’s time for them to know and understand themselves. They must also be educated in the ways of the society in which they live, in the very best of what it has to offer, so they can truly be part, not only of Australia’s past, but also its present and future”. These aspirations were subsequently translated into reality in 1983 by Hyllus Maris, Aboriginal visionary and the founder of Worawa Aboriginal College, when she said the Worawa curriculum “should be based on the best elements of both traditional Aboriginal and current Australian education, aiming to produce an Aboriginal person versed in his/her traditions and proud of his/her identity, who has the tools and necessary qualifications to contribute effectively to the Australian community”.

The major focus therefore, is the nurturing of a strong sense of cultural identity in the context of the respectful relationships formed at Worawa Aboriginal College and the reflection of these relationships in rigorous learning experiences, as the students develop skills and take increasing responsibility for their intellectual and social development. Relationships between adults are also relevant.

### **Key Concepts**

All four key concepts of Culture, Connectedness, Empowerment and Learning emanate from a paradigm or world-view that understands everything as interconnected. This world-view does not see physical life as disconnected, separate entities, but as entities that are interrelated (Macy, 1983; Hooley, 2009).

## *Culture*

The term 'culture' is generally understood to refer to the characteristics of a particular group of people. For Aboriginal people culture refers to their belonging to a people and a place. This belonging is an 'ontological belonging' (Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Sarra, 2011). Therefore relationship with land and people affects their very being. Traditional Aboriginal beliefs state that people come from the land and through the Dreaming there is a vibrant spiritual connection with the land (Hooley, 2009; Sarra *ibid*). The land is sacred because of this and so people are irrevocably connected to it.

Connection to people is evident in complicated kinship relationships (Fryer-Smith, 2008). Community is fundamental and so Aboriginal people are community minded and work for the collective good rather than individual gain. This is reflected in law and in daily encounters with each other. Language is an important part of culture as it binds the community (Dugeon et al, 2010). There are many Aboriginal languages. A single language is common to a relatively small community. Communication also takes place through art and dance (Fryer-Smith, 2008). All of this engenders a network of shared meanings and activities, which evolve as communities develop (Nakarta, 2007; Sarra *op cit*).

## *Connectedness*

The previous section encapsulates an understanding of connectedness from an Aboriginal viewpoint but connectedness is a term that has come relatively lately to the educational arena. The term originated in the resilience literature with the work of Bernard (1991) and Resnick, Harris & Blum (1993). The primary focus of this research was the social and emotional wellbeing of children across the world born into high-risk conditions (Bernard, 1997; Burns, 1996). The term connectedness for Bernard, Resnick, Harris, Blum and others who work in this area describes a person's sense of belonging within the family, school and wider community.

Three broad categories are defined that elicit and foster resiliency in children. They are:

1. Caring relationships,
2. High expectation messages,
3. Opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution. (Bernard, 1991; 1997; Resnick, Harris & Blum, *op cit*).

The delivery of high expectations for Aboriginal students is explicit in the writing of Sarra (2007) an Aboriginal educator, who calls for a change in the expectations for and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Sarra says teachers need to have high expectations for these students and these students need to have high expectations for themselves. The three categories articulated in the resilience literature are also evident in the Worawa Education Model in the values Relationship and Rigour.

The term connectedness has additional meanings relevant for this project, one of which is to make connections within curriculum areas (Marsh, 2001; McKenny, 2001; Murdoch 1998; Palmer 1998; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003; Zyngier, 2003.). This is

closely aligned with teaching and learning within a community of learners (Fullan, 1992; 1999; 2001; Hill & Russell, 1999; Kruse & Louis, 1995; Palmer, 1998, Dufour 2004). It is a professional learning community that gives teachers and ultimately students, a sense of belonging and empowerment within their school community.

### *Empowerment*

The understandings of empowerment as enabling, either personally (Cahill, 2002; Macy, 1983; Tse & Every 2000;), personally and socially (Macy, 1983; Smith, 2000; Rigney 1997; Sarra; 2011; Louth 2012;) or socially and politically (Freire, 1973; Shor, 1992; Dodson 1995;) are relevant for this project. Each of these understandings incorporates contexts involving personal and social empowerment and it is these that have application in the school setting. These three contextual aspects, however, are interdependent and do not exist as separate entities if power is to be mutual and synergistic.

Relevant too is the *modus operandi* of power in any social context. The two major descriptors Macy (1983) uses are ‘power over’ and ‘power with’. ‘Power over’ is a dominating power, whereas ‘power with’ facilitates the development of contexts that are mutual and synergistic. Sarra (2011) uses the descriptors Power<sub>1</sub> describing this in terms of transformation and agency and Power<sub>2</sub> as the dominating power.

Hyllus Maris (1983), a visionary and avant-garde thinker articulated empowerment of students as a goal of Worawa Aboriginal College: “to produce an Aboriginal person versed in his/her traditions and proud of his/her identity, who has the tools and necessary qualifications to contribute effectively to the Australian community”. The understanding of mutual and synergistic power is currently expressed in an outcome in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Plan 2010 – 2014 (MYCEETYA): “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities are empowered through the promotion of their identity, culture and leadership in community partnerships with providers of early childhood and school education” (p. 13).

### *Learning*

In this context of learning and teaching for connectedness and empowerment, theory of learning and approaches to learning and teaching are paramount. Learning theory, which best promotes learning for connectedness and empowerment is enactivism (Hamilton, 2005). The emerging theory of enactivism, which Begg (2002) describes as a development from constructivism, provides a sound basis for teaching and learning, incorporating the concept of ‘power with’ (Macy *op cit*) or Power<sub>1</sub> (Sarra *op cit*) and obviating the dualistic approach to teaching and learning that dominated education in the twentieth century (Darling-Hammond, 1997) and is still prevalent in the twenty-first century (Hooley, 2009).

Holistic learning is the most appropriate philosophy of learning from an enactivist perspective as it emanates from an ecological perspective (Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi & Liaghatdar, 2012). Holistic learning (Hyllus Maris, 1983) within a

model of Two Way Schooling (Harris, 1990), involving experiential (Dewey), discursive (Hooley *op cit*) and the Aboriginal Ways of Learning (Yunkaporta, 2009) are relevant in this context. The information booklet produced by Worawa Aboriginal College (2013) immediately communicates a holistic philosophy of learning by stating on the cover, “We believe in education, culture, wellbeing and you”. Encapsulated here is holistic learning in a cultural context. An exploration of the Cultural Interface (Nakarta, 2007) and the Contact Zone (Sarra, 2011) are paramount in the pursuit of a realistic approach to learning in an Aboriginal educational setting, especially when setting high, achievable expectations and in addressing inherent issues in Aboriginal Education (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Boulden, 2006; Sarra, 2011).

### **Definitions of Terms and Key Concepts**

After reviewing the literature, for the purposes of this project, the definitions of the key concepts as follows:

1. Culture as the characteristics of Aboriginal people defined by their connection to people and place, manifested in a contemporary context.
2. Connectedness as a sense of belonging to a learning community.
3. Empowerment as the ability to act with confidence in order to direct one’s own life within the context of school.
4. Learning as 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.

### **Research Design**

The methodology of this research project draws on the work of Rigney (2001), Martin (2003) and Hooley (2009) in that it is rigorous and empowers the Worawa Aboriginal College Community. An Aboriginal member of the College Community is both a researcher and participant, consequently the perspective is critical emancipatory. Narrative Inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Clandinnen, 2006; Hooley, 2009) “as a democratic means of qualitative Indigenous research (*ibid*, p 138) is used, as it enables the exploration of lived experience in context.

The design of this project includes commissioning of the research by the Executive Director of Worawa Aboriginal College and the formation of a chosen research team consisting of a key Aboriginal staff member and two other staff members from Worawa Aboriginal College as well as two members of the Worawa Academic Advisory Group (WARG). The Worawa Academic Advisory Group (WARG) was constituted in 2009 to provide advice to the Worawa Aboriginal College Board in the development of the Worawa Education Model and Learning and Teaching Program. WARG meets regularly and is provided with briefings from the Executive Director and Head of Learning and Teaching. All members of the WARG have experience in Indigenous education, as well as undergraduate and post-graduate university teaching experience. Their experience is across seven Victorian

universities. Some members hold research and teaching positions in universities, others provide education consultancy to the secondary sector. WARG in conjunction with the Executive Director auspices research projects to both validate and challenge the Worawa Model.

Methods democratically devised enable the generating of data including exemplars from all members of the Worawa community. These include Elders, Board members, students, staff as well as external professionals working with the students and staff. The members of the research team undertake the process of theorising and making commendations and recommendations. Critical friends and an external advisor, all from external academic environments critique this process.

### **Research Team**

Members of the research team:

Aunty Lois Peeler AM: Executive Director and Principal, Worawa Aboriginal College

Kim Walters: Head of Boarding, Worawa Aboriginal College

Kathryn Gale: Deputy Principal, Head of Learning and Teaching, Worawa Aboriginal College

Pamela Russell: Chairperson of the Worawa Academic Reference Group

Dr Mauricette (Mauri) Hamilton: Member of the Worawa Academic Reference Group

Critical Friends:

Associate Professor Gary Thomas: Associate Director, Academic Indigenous Knowledges, Learning and Teaching Unit, Chancellery, Queensland University of Technology.

Associate Professor Zane Ma Rhea: Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Monash University.

Dr Shannon Faulkhead: Researcher, Faculty of Arts. Monash University.

Dr Kaye Price: Research Associate, David Unaipon College of Education and Research, University of South Australia.

Lindy Joubert: Founding Director, UNESCO Observatory on Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts

Editor-in-Chief UNESCO Observatory Refereed Journal

Vice President, World Craft Council Asia Pacific Region, South Pacific

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning: The University of Melbourne.

External Advisor:

Dr Neil Hooley: Author and Lecturer, School of Education, Victoria University.

### **Research Questions**

To fulfil the purpose of this project it is necessary to focus on the key people at Worawa Aboriginal College and identify 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 answer 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?

From this question the following sub- questions emerge:

What factors do students and adults at Worawa Aboriginal College understand as enabling or challenging:

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

A further research question that goes beyond the immediate context is:

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

### **Significance of the Research**

This research project is significant for:

1. Worawa Aboriginal College Community

This project identifies factors that students and adults at Worawa Aboriginal College understand as enabling or challenging:

- 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
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and so contributes significantly to the development of a real picture of the College. This is important for all members of the Worawa School Community as they strive to constantly improve student outcomes.

## 2. Indigenous Learning Communities within Australia

This project exposes the value of the Worawa Way as a Model of Education incorporating an holistic philosophy of education that is particularly relevant for the education of Aboriginal students. It also identifies challenges that require attention in the provision of a productive holistic education for Aboriginal Students.

## 3. Providers of Mainstream Education within Australia

This project addresses the middle years of schooling, which has been a strong focus since 1993. Major projects, such as the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD) (Russell, McKay, & Jane, 2001; 2003), have highlighted the need for learning that is relational and rigorous. Low achievement of Aboriginal students (Boulden, 2006; Sarra 2011) in mainstream schools has been a constant agenda item for education plans since 1988. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Plan (MYCEETYA 2010-2014) attests to the contemporary relevance of this focus. This project, researching relational rigorous learning that delivers a broad range of outcomes, is relevant not only for Aboriginal students in mainstream schools; a study such as this demonstrates a broad, deep approach to learning in a relational context, an approach that benefits all students in all schools (Russell, McKay, & Jane, 2001; 2003).

## 4. Providers of Indigenous Education World- wide

This project has relevance globally as providers and researchers of education within First Nations People discover that there are very many similarities in these groups from different parts of the world (Hooley & Levinson, 2013). Therefore the theorising within this project will inform this ongoing conversation.

## 5. Researchers in an Aboriginal context

Both the process and the implementation of the research design described above, will inform future research involving Aboriginal people.

## **Conclusion**

Worawa Aboriginal College is unique. It advantageous therefore, for this school to research its own scenario in order to generate relevant data that may be of use in enhancing its operation as a learning community. For this purpose the concepts of Culture, Connectedness, Empowerment and Learning are significant because they provide the conceptual context of the narrative. The story told in the project, ‘Walking together to make a difference’ is one of growth and the unfolding of the narrative forms an “iterative spiral” (Creswell, 1998).