The intercultural collaborative processes underpinning the development of the KidsMatter resources to support the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children

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KidsMatter is an Australian mental health and wellbeing initiative for primary schools and early childhood education and care services. The initiative utilises an inter-sectorial partnership between mental health, primary school education and early childhood education and care settings. The need for the development of specific resources in relation to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing was identified by KidsMatter, to strengthen the model but particularly to support families, communities and educators in communicating and deepening understandings to better support Aboriginal children within a holistic approach. This article outlines the intercultural collaborative processes utilised in the development of these resources, noting the importance of processes to recognise and reduce power imbalances, enable participation through a range of consultation and engagement processes, and manage the expectations of all parties.

KidsMatter is an Australian mental health and wellbeing initiative for primary schools and early childhood education and care services. The initiative utilises an inter-sectorial partnership between mental health, primary school education and early childhood education and care settings. These sectors work together to implement the framework which builds upon a prevention, promotion and early intervention model adapted from the World Health Organisation (1994). KidsMatter brings together the adults in the lives of children and encourages education staff, parents and carers, and health and community professionals to work together to create settings that support children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The initiative includes a framework which encompasses four components: 1) Creating a positive community, 2) Social and emotional learning for all children, 3) Working with parents and carers, 4) Early intervention for children experiencing mental health difficulties. Within these components the KidsMatter initiative uses Guiding Principles to assist education settings progress through the KidsMatter journey, utilising a process of data collection, professional learning for staff, effective planning and ongoing review (plan, do, review). The Guiding Principles include: diversity is respected and valued; respectful relationships are foundational; parents and carers are recognised as the most important people in children’s lives; students need to be active participants; and education, health and community agencies and families need to work in partnership.

The KidsMatter framework utilises three well-known theoretical models: the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), risk and protective factors framework (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Spence, 1996) and a whole setting approach based upon the World Health Organization’s model for promotion, prevention and early intervention in education settings (1994). The socio-ecological model views children as active participants in their own development, both shaping and being shaped by their environment. This recognises that children’s development is influenced by the wider social, economic, cultural, workplace and political forces in which their relationships with their families, communities and education settings exist. Risk and protective factors exist
in each of these contexts and efforts can be made to prevent or mitigate those risks. Whole-setting approaches encourage all community members to work together and to implement the initiatives across the setting.

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, Milroy (2014) noted that:

[a]lthough there is a paucity of data on specific child mental health conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, there is evidence of greater risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties; greater exposure to risk factors and stressful life events; higher rates of suicide; higher rates of hospital admissions for mental health problems; higher rates of incarceration; and higher numbers of removal of children under child protection compared with the general population. Added to this is the increased risk for: developmental disability; low birth weight; physical health problems; and poorer educational outcomes, suggesting the need to consider a comprehensive approach when considering mental health disorders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (p. 374).

In a 2011 literature review relating to the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, Dobia and O’Rourke identified education settings as critical for the socialisation of children and young people, noting that “[t]he reactions of school staff to the psychological, social and cultural needs of students can support or hinder a sense of belonging and nurturance for students and families alike. Family, community and school were nominated as the most important influences in contributing to a positive self-identity, crucial for academic performance” (p. 21).

In 2012, an evaluation report by Flinders University was conducted to examine the KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) model which explored the extent to which the KMEC Model relates to early childhood services in communities with relatively higher proportions of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The findings of this report indicated that broadly, the KMEC model, professional learning and framework suited the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, although culturally specific elements were lacking in the KMEC resources. It was recommended therefore that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culturally-specific elements be embedded within KMEC to better adapt the initiative in Indigenous Australian contexts. The research concluded with a strong call for significantly greater efforts to be made to engage and involve local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the implementation of KMEC, and that KMEC needed to provide information on the social determinants of mental health that were relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Slee, Skrzypiec, Dix, Murray-Harvey & Askell-Williams, 2012).

It is within this context that the need for the development of specific resources in relation to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing was identified by KidsMatter, to strengthen the model but particularly to support families, communities and educators in communicating and deepening understandings to better support Aboriginal children within a holistic approach.

Cultural Domains of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing

According to Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart and Kelly (2014), “… the social and emotional wellbeing of individuals, families and communities are shaped by connections to body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, land and spirituality” (p. 58). The authors further describe these connections in terms of the diverse experiences and expressions of the domains of social and emotional wellbeing throughout an individual’s lifetime, which change over time as their needs shift during childhood, youth, adulthood and old age. This may include healthy connections and resilience in some domains, while also encompassing some difficulties or need for healing in other domains (Gee, et al., 2014).

The authors further note the importance of
family and kinship systems to the functioning of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. They note the complexity and diversity of systems with interconnectedness through cultural ties and reciprocal relationships. Further, Milroy (2014) noted that “[u]nderstanding child and youth mental health can be challenging especially when considering the cultural context, historical legacy, and social determinants as they apply to child development” (p. 373). In particular she noted the importance of understanding developmental milestones and the impact of development on language, behaviour, and relationships. Further, these aspects of development also contribute to the emerging sense of self, ways of seeing the world and learning life skills which will adapt across the life span (Milroy, 2014).

Project Development Principles and Processes

A number of principles were drawn upon during the development and implementation of the project to guide the partnership development with the consultants. Cultural safety was the primary guiding principle. The intersection of the principles of Participatory Action, Critical Theory and Reflexivity, and Narrative Therapy offered further promise for the task of creating culturally safe practice.

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety refers to the culturally appropriate provision of healthcare which is empowering and respectful of cultural identity. It aims to create environments and relationships which are “safe for people, where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experiences of learning together with dignity and truly listening” (Eckerman et al., 1999, cited in Williams, 1999, p. 213).

Culturally safe practice refers to “effective clinical practice for a person from another culture, [whereas] unsafe cultural practice diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and wellbeing of an Individual” (Walker & Sonn, 2010, p.162). Cultural safety is determined by the individual receiving the service and can also be an effective decolonising process. This process can enable awareness of difference, consideration of power relationships, reflective practice and most importantly, Indigenous self-determination regarding the meaning of safety (Laverty, McDermott, & Calma, 2017).

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is considered an appropriate approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as it advances the sharing of knowledge and understandings in the context of respectful relationships. PAR centres on the collective ownership of the research processes and outcomes. This approach can also be empowering as the research is driven by those most affected by the topic, and researchers become facilitators rather than experts. Participatory action processes aim to recognise and address social inequalities and power imbalances.

According to Kidd and Kral (2005), PAR involves the following key elements: “understanding, mutual involvement, change, and a process that promotes personal growth” (p. 187). They further stated that it is “ideally, a process in which people (researchers and participants) develop goals and methods, participate in the gathering and analysis of data, and implement the result in a way that will raise critical consciousness and promote change in the lives of those involved” (p. 187). The research relationship is one of respect and trust building, where researchers take the role of facilitators rather than experts. The research or project becomes a process for change driven by those who are most affected by the topic (Kendall, et al., 2011). This approach is based on critical theory, which asks social justice questions related to power and exploitation, and is particularly important when non-Indigenous researchers or project workers are engaged in research or projects with Indigenous people (Wright, 2011). Mason (2015) noted the complexities of participatory action research as the researcher has “multiple ethical relationships to maintain, with research partners, the academy, the institutions of the state, notably ‘the law’, and with her or himself. The researcher must consider how to do the right, fair, just or legal thing by a variety of

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people and institutions, between which there are often tensions or even conflict” (p. 500). He further outlined the role of emotional engagement in projects utilising participatory action processes, noting that:

[committing to participatory action research means having to ask yourself questions about who you are and the life choices you make: it is not a straightforward impersonal, abstract or un-affecting decision; not an easy emotional, political or career choice… It is a strength of participatory action research that it can create opportunities for research partners to reflect on the power relations and knowledge they foster and then experiment with other ways to do things (p. 502).

Participatory action processes take an approach that focuses on collective ownership of the research and project process and outcomes, where a shared understanding is generated to mobilise collaborative action for change (Kendall et al., 2011). Consultation throughout the process is key and data is taken back to the community for validation, ensuring ways of knowing and meaning have been captured (Sherwood & Kendall, 2013).

Participatory action processes that promote participation can include creating an environment of mutual respect and openness, establishing flexibility for adapting a project to the pace of participating communities, involving the community from the beginning, and incorporating the community’s physical and intellectual resources (Van der Velde, Williamson & Ogilvie, 2009). Kendall et al. (2011) explain that these participatory strategies can be challenging for many research and project workers due to time, funding and logistical restraints. These challenges need to be negotiated with Indigenous research partners to ensure that power relationships do not change or diminish through each phase of the project.

Critical Theory

Critical theory requires the practitioner to consider how their own social positioning can impact on relationships by reflecting on their cultural base, evaluating their own contribution to the encounter, and considering what is going on for them during the process (Laverty et al. 2017). The practitioner’s understanding of what they bring to the relationship and how this might impact is considered critical to culturally safe practice because “otherwise there is an assumption that all people have similar experiences and can therefore speak on behalf of each other” (Wilson, 2014, p. 6).

Such critical reflexivity also supports the principles of participatory action. Parker (2005) stated that reflexive work is part of action, and in projects utilising action research methods much of that reflexive work is undertaken alongside and in collaboration with clients. A central focus of this reflection process is to analyse and address power imbalances throughout the project process that highlights the privileged position of the project researcher or worker. One common reflexive question in research or project work is who is able to have a choice about staying or leaving the group. This highlights the privileged position of the project researcher or worker, who is the one who has that choice. An ongoing relationship may be formed but the worker might not continue to work with the group in the same way over time. An ‘exit strategy’ will enable the worker to manage the changes in emotional engagement with the group over time and develop a process to pass on the roles and responsibilities that were taken on. Mason (2015) warns that workers should be prepared for the emotional impact of this leaving on themselves. One also needs to consider the different levels of investment community partners have compared to research project staff and how this investment continues beyond the completion of projects.

Critical reflection requires the examination of one’s own social and cultural identities and the power and privilege which are afforded because of these identities (Walker & Sonn, 2010). This involves the process of reflecting critically on the self (as researcher) as the human instrument and defining this as a conscious experiencing of oneself as both the inquirer and respondent, as well as the teacher and learner. Through this process, the researcher becomes the one coming to know the self within the process of the research itself.
(Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Reflective practice of this kind is integral to working towards creating culturally safe practices as it can address power imbalances in collaborative partnerships by allowing the sharing of power and control between Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous practitioners. Reflexivity provides the opportunity for learning and contributes to improving social justice outcomes for Indigenous people. It can also promote a culturally secure process and environment that increases the likelihood of improved health and wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous people (Walker et al., 2014).

Narrative Approaches

Narrative approaches or ‘conversational methods’ to working with Indigenous peoples provide a means of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition which is congruent with an Indigenous paradigm (Kovach, 2010). Narrative practice has been considered an appropriate approach to working with Aboriginal peoples and in the Aboriginal context has been described as telling stories in ways that strengthen. Narrative approaches can also be empowering, situating individuals as experts in their own lives, encouraging dominant narratives to be challenged and privileging the alternative narrative.

The project also embodied narrative practices through its principles and processes. Narrative practices take a collaborative and non-judgemental approach to counselling and community work that embodies respect and views people as experts in their own lives (Morgan, 2000). This approach takes a social justice perspective that considers the broader context of people’s lives particularly in the various dimensions of diversity including class, race, gender, sexual orientation and ability. Narrative practices understand that people possess skills, competencies, beliefs, values and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of their problems and views problems as separate from people (White, 2007). While Aboriginal people and communities are diverse and are not one homogenous group, Wingard (cited by Drahm-Butler, 2015) explained that there are shared stories throughout time and across place which connected experiences of Aboriginality through the currency of relationships. She referred to the time since colonisation in which injustice and harm occurred. Wingard continued that Aboriginal stories have survived over generations and that Aboriginal people have always told stories about their lives, knowing how important it is for people to be connected to their stories that directly related to land (Country), languages and culture (cited by Drahm-Butler, 2015).

These approaches formed the basis of the way of working with the Aboriginal consultants to guide the development of the KidsMatter Aboriginal Children’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing Project. They enabled the APS KidsMatter staff to reflect and engage in rich discussions as a project team and with the consultants as well as to advocate for these approaches to be incorporated into the process for the use of the resources by education communities.

The KidsMatter Aboriginal Children’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing Project

The project aimed to strengthen the KidsMatter project through the addition of culturally appropriate resources to promote understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Working with Aboriginal consultants was recognised as critical in order to develop resources that would be culturally-appropriate and meaningful for Aboriginal families. The focus of the project therefore included the development of quality content through processes which were empowering and culturally appropriate. The phases of the project are outlined in detail by Smith, O’Grady, Cubillo & Cavanagh (2017) and are summarised below.

Phase 1: The Consultation Process

Phase 1 of the project focused on consultation, engagement and learning about social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families. A total of nine Aboriginal consultants (four from Melbourne, five from Alice Springs) were invited to work with the Australian Psychological Society (APS) KidsMatter team. The consultants included Aboriginal educators, health workers and Elders from both the Central Australia and Melbourne regions. Two Indigenous psychologists were also engaged to review and provide comment on
The content of project materials. An Aboriginal media production company was engaged to produce the animations including an Aboriginal script writer, director, actors for voice overs, film crew, artists and musical composer. Funding and geographical limitations impacted the ability of KidsMatter to work with Torres Strait Islander consultants. Therefore, the content in the videos cannot be assumed to represent the social and emotional wellbeing of Torres Strait Islander families, nor can they be considered representative of all Aboriginal people.

The use of participatory action research and narrative approaches was incorporated into the development and facilitation of workshops held in Alice Springs and Melbourne in late 2013 to explore what wellbeing meant when talking about Aboriginal children. Smith et al. (2017) outlined the initial themes identified in the workshops which were then further refined and the Indigenous Psychologists were engaged to provide feedback on the consistency of these themes with literature relating to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The APS KidsMatter team also reviewed the themes in light of KidsMatter core messages.

The three core concepts which would become the themes for the animated videos were further refined as follows:

1. Cultural (self) identity: mind, body, spirit; strong values and beliefs with respect for elders and relations; knowledge systems embedded with values and beliefs; acknowledging the family’s structure and teaching children about relationships and a sense of belonging; being assertive and strong and having responsibility for each other.

2. Parents and families caring for themselves: engaging in positive activities, pride, having a role, including employment; role of stress and shame; division between males and females; seeking support and being assertive to deal with pressures.

3. Resilience/strength: trust in relationships; being comfortable to be alone sometimes; safety; boundaries, values and beliefs; gathering knowledge over time from stories, cultural role modelling.

Once the core themes were developed, the focus shifted to the production of a series of 12 animated videos to communicate these with key messages about the day-to-day caring of Aboriginal children that supported their social and emotional wellbeing. Regular meetings were held with the consultants during this period to enable them to provide input into the development of the messages and images. Several consultation stages were built into the project plan to enable the project team to:

- Confirm the appropriate translation of content to the scripting, styling and design of the animations;
- Ensure a shared approach/responsibility to the project implementation;
- Actively continue to include the Aboriginal consultants;
- Privilege Aboriginal voices when working to address the needs of Aboriginal peoples; and
- Continue to maintain trusting relationships.

This process is outlined in Figure 1 overleaf.

Phase 2: Supporting the Culturally Safe Use of the Animations

The critical reflection process, through the focus groups and consultations undertaken with workers in the field, which took place after the animations became publicly available, suggested that the animations could trigger strong emotional responses for some individuals; they seemed to be used more broadly than anticipated and there was also some confusion about the intended audience for the animations with some people believing they were developed for children. It was recognised that there had been insufficient time in the project development phase to audience test to identify these issues earlier. Therefore, Phase 2 of the project involved the development of resources to support the culturally safe use of the animations. This included actively highlighting the various possible uses of the animations and some of the potential risks associated with their use. This phase was enabled due to additional funding made available after the launch of the animations, however, project staff had mostly moved on to new roles. However, the trusting relationship that had formed with the consultants enabled...
their ongoing interest and participation in the project.

Significant efforts were required to maintain project sustainability during transition. It was evident that project viability depended on relationships being developed between the new APS KidsMatter team and the cultural consultants. Effectively, the relationships formed in Phase 1 needed to be ‘handed over’ to the new project team. Smith et al. (2017) noted that this was a sensitive point in the project requiring an ‘exit strategy’ to be developed to help the project transition. Transition strategies included engagement of new staff with handover processes while maintaining consistency where possible in relation to the Indigenous psychologist and film production company and crew.

The experiences of the Aboriginal consultants were drawn upon heavily for this phase of the project to develop guidance resources. Smith et al. (2017) provide a summary of the consultants’ reflections on processes which underpinned the making of the animations, with comments including:

⇒ You know when you’re talking about yourself you need to feel safe and comfortable and then that comes from the people who you’re sitting in the room with you know and this was, that was nearly every time we met that’s what we talked about at the start. How’s everyone going? Everyone feeling safe? Ready to get going?

⇒ Because we don’t often have a voice and to me this is our voice and it’s, a lot of the stories we can connect to and [it’s sort of] we’re sharing our stories and it’s [um]
group members noted that the stories were powerful and emotive, so that safety needs must be prioritised. They also noted that the messages contained in the animations highlighted how cultural strengths, traditional practices and kinship can support Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing. They also confirmed that they believed the animations could be helpful for educators and other professionals to begin conversations with Aboriginal families, as well as help them to increase their knowledge of Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Smith, et al., 2017).

To assist in the culturally safe use of the animations, a series of documentary style ‘How to’ films was developed which featured footage from the consultation workshops, as well as individual interviews with the cultural consultants and key project stakeholders. Drawing on the key themes from the consultation workshops, the conceptual framework and content for each film was developed and the films scripted to enhance those themes:

- **Connecting to Heal** - explores how the concepts of identity, resilience and ‘adults taking care of themselves’ are important to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing;
- **Starting Conversations** - explores the layers of meaning in the animations and ways in which they can be used to start conversations around children’s social and emotional wellbeing;
- **Through Your Lens** - explores the importance of creating culturally safe environments (Smith et al., 2017).

Accompanying written resources were also developed to complement the guidance films, enabling the user to explore the concepts highlighted in the films in more depth. They aimed to enable the user to begin with their own personal and/or professional experiences to explore the concepts of both the animations and the guidance films. It was intended that this process would assist the user to make the best use of the animations for their own circumstances.

The range of tools included safety statements, scenarios, suggestions for use, key

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themes and messages with accompanying discussion points, reflection tools to encourage users to reflect on their own current practices, and action charts to encourage ways to strengthen practices. In keeping with the consultation process previously established, the Melbourne-based cultural consultants and other focus group members reviewed the films and written resources to ensure the materials were consistent with the key messages of the animations and reflected their experiences, and to ensure the cultural appropriateness of the materials. (Smith et al., 2017).

**Phase 3: Showcasing the Resources**

Once the guidance resources were finalised the next phase of the project focused on showcasing the resources to early childhood services, schools and health and community professionals in various locations around Australia. The KidsMatter APS project team sought guidance from the cultural consultants on the development and delivery of the workshop presentations, which required tailoring to take into account the audiences and community in which the workshops took place. This was especially important as the initial workshops included co-facilitation by the KidsMatter APS project team member and one or more consultants. The local KidsMatter project staff were also involved in the planning of the workshops and where possible were in attendance on the day. In particular, the following factors were explored:

- Content of workshop, taking into account location, timing, attendees
- Anticipated cultural constraints that may impact on the workshop
- Role clarity, including areas of presentation the consultants would like to lead
- Composition of audience (i.e. professional backgrounds of registered participants, Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal participants and community representatives).

It was identified that particular emphasis would need to be placed on safe viewing considerations for participants and the potential for the animations to trigger strong emotions in viewers. At the beginning of the workshops some time was spent on a safety statement which involved:

- Presenters acknowledging that the animations can trigger strong emotions in viewers
- That some viewers may find themselves identifying with the characters or themes of the stories
- Strategies to manage any strong emotions which might arise, including debriefing with colleagues
- An explanation of the processes involved in the development of the animations, including the involvement of the Aboriginal cultural consultants guiding the culturally safe project processes and content development
- Any arrangements for support and debriefing of staff if necessary.

It was important that the cultural consultants’ voices were included in the session. The guidance videos featuring the consultants’ reflections on the development and use of the animations were screened at various stages throughout the session. This was done to reinforce how the animations and resources had been developed as a process of co-design and co-production with Aboriginal people, including Elders.

The presenters acknowledged that, although the session would take a strengths-based approach and focus on higher level promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies, the trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities was acknowledged. The session would encourage partnerships between schools, families and health and community services and explore how these partnerships can best bring about positive mental health outcomes for Aboriginal children. These considerations were critical to the cultural safety of the workshop for the following reasons:

- The presentation was being delivered off Country (not within the consultants’ own traditional communities)
- It was anticipated that the audiences would comprise both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants (therefore a broad range of experiences and levels of understanding around presentation content could be assumed)
The animations were screened in parts to explore the three modules (Cultural Identity, Adults Taking Care of Themselves and Resilience) and how these modules connect to the KidsMatter components. Group reflective exercises were then conducted and questions were put to the group to prompt reflections as follows:

- **a. Positive School Community: Cultural Identity**
  - In what ways did connecting to culture support a sense of identity for the characters

- **b. Social and emotional learning: Adults Taking care of Themselves and Resilience**
  - What role did the adults and extended family play in supporting the characters social and emotional wellbeing?
  - How can schools and families use these animations to determine what’s important to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing?
  - What were some of the strengths/protective factors that supported the characters to overcome these challenges?

- **c. Helping children with mental health difficulties: Starting Conversations**
  - How could the animations be used to start conversations with families and school staff/colleagues about helping children with mental health difficulties?
  
Given that the resources were developed within the context of strengthening the KidsMatter resources more broadly, increasingly the workshops focused on those early childhood services and schools who were already, or interested in, participating in KidsMatter. Having the local KidsMatter project staff on hand to follow up was also helpful, particularly within the context of further KidsMatter involvement.

Follow up beyond the workshop was critical to ensure ongoing reflection and learning and processing of any concerns. Accordingly, the APS KidsMatter team contacted the consultants in the days following the workshop to debrief and discuss any recommendations they had for consideration when planning future workshops.

It was recognised that the success of the resources was dependent upon the ways in which they were used. To this end the workshops focused on promoting the culturally safe use of the resources, within various contexts in which people would engage with them. Over the course of the period in which the workshops were held, it became evident that workshops functioned best when the resources were seen as part of the KidsMatter model rather than as standalone animations. It was also noted that the opportunities provided for participants to explore ways they might work together to support Aboriginal children and families within their local networks was highly valued and useful. All of this required time and commitment in order for participants to consider the use of the resources within their particular circumstances. This meant that the focus of the workshops shifted to becoming embedded into KidsMatter events so that the resources could be utilised as part of the implementation of the KidsMatter project at an early childhood service or school.

The general aims of the workshop then became to showcase the KidsMatter Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing resources as specific tools for professionals to:
Torres Strait Islander project, critical reflection on cultural safety enabled those involved to take into account people’s cultural and historical context. This required ongoing reflections on one’s own social and cultural identities, the power and privilege which arose from those identities and how these could influence the project and its other partners. This ongoing process of reflection and awareness can help promote a culturally secure and safe process and environment that will improve health and wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous people (Walker et al., 2014).

The collaborative processes of the project also assisted in building a culturally safe environment. The continuing engagement of the cultural consultants throughout the project and the application of narratives contributed by the consultants enabled the formation of trusting relationships between the Aboriginal consultants and the project staff. Through balancing power and providing a safe environment for consultants, it enabled the project content to be rich and meaningful as well as realistic as it was drawn from real life experiences (Wright, 2001). Aboriginal consultants provided ongoing feedback through active participation throughout the project on the conceptual development of the animations, including the scripts, imagery and key messages. Finally, there was important feedback and contributions from the consultants to provide ways of continuing cultural safety processes and practices in the use of the animations.

The current project had made a commitment to the use of Participatory Action processes that involved Aboriginal project partners from the beginning and throughout the project. Ongoing consultation and negotiation through all phases of the project was essential for shared ownership of the project and to ensure as far as possible that the resources accurately reflected what was considered most important to the development of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing. Whilst there were ongoing challenges in this process, such as limited time and funding, Aboriginal project consultants were able to utilise their knowledge and expertise through the development to the implementation of the resources. These

- gain confidence to engage in conversations with families based on an increased understanding of the important social factors to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing; and
- support the creation of culturally safe environments for Aboriginal children families and staff.

Feedback from these workshops indicated that participants found the resources useful as part of their KidsMatter tool kit to engage and progress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within their respective communities. Opportunities for links to the KidsMatter Training to be held later in the day were made where appropriate so that the resources were not seen in isolation of the broader KidsMatter framework (e.g., mapping of community agencies and linking with Aboriginal Elders). While the content was at times confronting for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, the themes’ messages and the nature of the animations led the group to further discussions about the historical, political and social disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples within a contemporary context, and how this impacts on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children. The workshops enabled participants to discuss how the resources could be shared within their particular education contexts, including boarding schools (i.e. if resources are appropriate to share and discuss with school students). Participants also emphasised the need for a better understanding on how to use the animations and guidance resources within the context of KidsMatter prior to sharing more broadly amongst colleagues or using the animations with families.

**Discussion**

Cultural safety was seen as paramount in the project’s development and implementation principles and processes. Reflection is a key aspect of applying cultural safety, where one needs to critically examine their own power, privilege and position. Guba and Lincoln (2005) also point out the importance of seeing and experiencing oneself as both a teacher or respondent and a learner or inquirer, to be open and know the self within the process of the research.

In terms of the KidsMatter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander project, critical reflection on cultural safety enabled those involved to take into account people’s cultural and historical context. This required ongoing reflections on one’s own social and cultural identities, the power and privilege which arose from those identities and how these could influence the project and its other partners. This ongoing process of reflection and awareness can help promote a culturally secure and safe process and environment that will improve health and wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous people (Walker et al., 2014).

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were taken on. As Mason (2015) warned, workers and consultants should be prepared for the emotional impact on the self that this leaving can have. This was particularly important in the transition phases of the project, which incorporated strategies to ease this process such as KidsMatter National Project Manager and Senior Project Officer (Phase 1) attending consultation workshops held with cultural consultants and the new project team to facilitate handover; re-engagement of the Aboriginal psychologist involved in Phase 1; and project staff from Phase 1 being engaged in the planning and development of Phase 2. Phase 3 enabled the consultants to continue to participate in the dissemination of the resources, although over time this reduced as the resources became more strongly embedded in the KidsMatter resources more broadly.

Furthermore, balancing the expectations of the project workers and the consultants was also an important and sensitive area. A pertinent example of this was the KidsMatter APS project staff being clear in relation to time and financial restraints when it came to the development and review of animations. For example, cultural consultants were advised that during feedback sessions about the draft animations, not all desired changes might be able to be accommodated, due to time and funding constraints, so prioritising would be required to ensure the project’s timelines and budget were met. This highlighted the need for project staff to remain transparent when discussing project expectations, and conducting regular discussions and collaborative problem-solving on these matters was vital.

The current project could be considered as a way of ensuring stories are told in ways that help to make sense of factors which impact upon Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The narrative process of the current project, particularly in Phase 1, involved an extensive listening process. This occurred when Aboriginal consultants shared narratives regarding Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing where project staff engaged in listening practices, developed themes, engaged writers to translate the themes and ideas into stories for animation, and then came back to the Aboriginal consultants for feedback, with this...
process cycle continuing throughout each stage of the project. This process cycle was employed not only for developing themes and cultural content for the animations and their distribution but even how the animations looked, the sounds, the visuals and each detail for how their stories were being represented. Whilst this ongoing process took time and resources, it was vital for the consultants’ stories, connections to their stories and their contributions to be reflected accurately in the resources.

Challenges and Limitations

One of the major challenges, which has already been briefly discussed, was the role of power in the relationship between project workers and Aboriginal partners. As the project developed, further discussions were held about the nature of power in the relationship, with an example being the language of ‘consultant’ versus ‘partner’. As the project progressed, the Aboriginal consultants saw the project as a partnership and suggested that it was important for consideration of the language shifting to represent this as well as the ways in which they worked with the APS KidsMatter project staff to adjust accordingly. This feedback was taken seriously with project staff exploring ways of working together and planning events together as opposed to project staff just inviting them to events (Smith et al., 2017). It was noted, however, that given the structure of the project, with external funding sources and a limited timeframe, it would be difficult to make the shift to a true partnership. Efforts were made to enable the consultants to have more input where possible, for example, on occasions the consultants invited the APS KidsMatter project staff to attend events that they were part of. Discussions often took place with the consultants about the risks of consultations taking place without appropriate follow up and efforts were made throughout the project to be transparent and find effective ways to communicate with the consultants, particularly as funding periods ended.

Other ongoing challenges, and ones that are likely to be experienced by almost every community-based project, are finding effective ways to achieve meaningful outcomes with integrity within the limited funding sources, particularly money and time. When restrictions on time and ways of working are placed by funders it can place pressure on the way the project embodies a culturally-appropriate and safe perspective, that seeks to engage in dialogue, reflect on power systems and work collaboratively (Kuipers, Harvey, Lindeman & Stothers, 2014). These processes take time and tensions can develop when culturally appropriate ways of working require time which is not necessarily enabled by project deadlines. This can impact on the success of the project if consultants do not have the opportunity to contribute as much as they would have liked or if they feel their voices have been excluded. This can create a power imbalance and place the intercultural participatory process approach at risk.

In this project, the APS KidsMatter project team’s responsibility ultimately was to deliver the project outcomes to the funding body as part of the broader KidsMatter Project (Smith et al., 2017). Doing so in a culturally appropriate manner was important and considerable efforts were made to ensure this was embedded into the project planning as much as possible, although at times compromises were necessary. For example, this sometimes meant a re-prioritising of aspects of the project or changes in roles or employment as the project entered different stages. However, at the completion of the project the Aboriginal partners had invested cultural knowledge to help their communities. This investment did not stop when the project ended and the project staff moved on (Smith et al., 2017).

Challenges also arose in relation to maximising the use of the resources within the broader KidsMatter resources to reach the education, health and community professionals they were intended to support in their work with Aboriginal children and families. Often these professionals have many competing demands and a range of resources from which to choose. Some challenges arose while showcasing the resources via workshops. It became evident that among professionals there exists a range of knowledge and understandings about Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures and experiences in working with Aboriginal children and families. Some professionals had very limited knowledge or no experience of working with Aboriginal children and families, while others, in particular Aboriginal
professionals, have extensive knowledge and experiences. This means that targeting the workshop content to the needs of a broad range of learning needs could be challenging.

It is critical that the learning environment be safe for all participants to maximise individual contributions and learning outcomes. However, the varying knowledge and experiences among the groups could at times create the potential to place the cultural safety of the learning environment at risk, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. For example, Aboriginal participants might identify with the content of the animations which could trigger strong emotions. Comments or discussions among those with limited experiences or understandings of the content could lead to Aboriginal participants feeling disrespected and some comments to be interpreted negatively. Those with limited knowledge may have concerns that their contributions to group discussions, or their questions regarding the content, might cause offence. To mitigate these risks, it was crucial for the APS KidsMatter team to work in partnership with the KidsMatter partners to effectively scope the learning needs and environment as best as possible at the workshop planning stage. KidsMatter state-based staff can effectively guide the planning process for the resources to be showcased by identifying the existing local education, health and community networks for the workshops to be delivered to, gauging interest among those networks and identifying network linkages with Indigenous workers and organisations for the KidsMatter resources to leverage.

The KidsMatter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources were effectively added on to strengthen the existing initiative, and in practice could easily be missed amongst the range of KidsMatter information and resources available online. Ideally Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources will, in future projects, be able to be developed in conjunction with all of the project’s resources and incorporated more effectively. This would enable all professionals and families accessing the resources to more easily access the information and in so doing enable greater understandings. This process would require the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in employment within the project, rather than as consultants outside of the project, overcoming some of the power imbalances identified above.

Conclusion
Developing projects in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires approaches and practices that enable trusting relationships to develop. Utilising principles from intercultural participatory and critical theory can enable project staff to ensure processes are in place that work to recognise and reduce power imbalances, enable participation through a range of consultation and engagement processes, and manage the expectations of all parties. This can enhance the partnership while also enabling the project to work within the constraints of time and funding limitations. The KidsMatter project case study provides an example of ways in which these approaches can be utilised to achieve the aims of strengthening the project for Aboriginal children and families.

References


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Author biography
Samantha Smith is a Darug woman, descended from the Boorooberringal people of the Darug nation. She holds a Bachelor of Health Science (Aboriginal health and community development) and Graduate Diploma – Indigenous Health Promotion from the University of Sydney. Samantha has worked in health and justice settings in the areas of...
Aboriginal health promotion and health education, drug and alcohol, Aboriginal youth health, Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, psychology and reconciliation, and has particular experience working in Aboriginal family violence at service delivery and policy and program levels. Samantha has a keen interest in reconciliation as it relates to improved social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal people. Her work in this space has included supporting organisations to strengthen relationships with Aboriginal communities and to support the creation of culturally safe system and service environments and engagement protocols.

Dr. Lyn O’Grady is a Community Psychologist with a range of professional experience in the community, education and health sectors. She is a registered supervisor of psychology interns. Her most recent work has related particularly to the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families. This interest has extended in recent times to understanding suicidality and she has completed a Masters of Suicidology at Griffith University. Lyn has worked with parents in parenting programs, individually at the community level and in schools for over 20 years and managed a number of community-based projects. Lyn also worked as a school psychologist in the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. At a more systemic level, she currently works as the Manager, Strategic Projects at the Australian Psychological Society.

Fletcher Curnow is currently the Manager of Learning and Development at The Reach Foundation. He was previously the KidsMatter Health and Community Project Officer at the Australian Psychological Society. Within this role Fletcher managed project deliverables for the national children’s mental health initiative, and provided professional development for project staff. Fletcher has completed his Masters in Community Psychology and has a strong research and practice interest in young people’s mental health and wellbeing. In his previous roles working with young people in primary and secondary schools he has designed, developed and coordinated several community projects working with Indigenous, migrant and refugee communities.

Lone Pearce was the Senior Project Officer on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander KidsMatter project, and is also the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement Officer with Mercy Community Services (Qld). Lone’s cultural connections are Gunggari people (South West Queensland region) through his father, and he is equally proud of his non-Indigenous heritage. Lone comes from 15+ years of public service at a State and National level undertaking policy, financial management, project management and community engagement particularly in the education field, including The University of Queensland, and at the Queensland University of Technology.