Empowering our youth, building up our communities

The Aboriginal Youth Empowerment Project team. From left is Kaitlyn Taylor (research officer), Daniel Morrison Jnr, Denzel Miller, Stephanie Riley, Chanell Garlett, Kirsty Barry, Dr Kate Derry (senior research fellow) and Dr Rama Agung-Igusti (senior research fellow).

Authors:
Edith Boundry (BRAMS), Chanell Garlett (Wungening), Daniel Morrison Jnr (Wungening), Stephanie Riley (SWAMS), Kirsty Barry (DYHS), Denzel Miller (OVAHS)

We are part of the Aboriginal Youth Empowerment Project, a youth-led research project that brings together university and community-based youth researchers to hear from young people across Noongar Country and the Kimberley about what wellbeing means to them.

The project brings together the Kwop Boorn Djenara Centre (Boorn Centre) at the University of Western Australia (UWA), and WA Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) to develop a program for young people, developed by young people. The aim is to create a program that empowers young people, makes them stronger, and builds pathways towards a good future.

Our young people today face many challenges, and there is often a lack of safety in school environments to support life transitions. Social media and comparing yourself to others, artificial intelligence (AI), and all the things that are competing for your attention can make life more difficult.

For some of us growing up, we always went hunting, and camping. We were always surrounded by family. Sometimes, you can take these things for granted without realising how many young people do not have the same support systems.

Our culture and strength have always been there — long before colonisation — and we are going back to our roots so we can get rid of the barriers young people face.

Having culture, having Country, having family, and keeping connected are all important. Even understanding our wellbeing and how we can maintain it is essential. Just having those connections and that family support is a very big thing while growing up, especially during your teenage years.

Denzel Miller and Daniel Morrison Jnr from the YEP research team.

We are very excited to see what we can do for our community through this project, and to allow room for more understanding around young people and their Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB). We want young people who are experiencing challenges to have the opportunity to understand that they are not alone in their experiences, and that there are always people who have walked a similar path available for support.

Being a part of this project, we get to become a role model for other young people to look up to and be there to support our community. Young people should all be able to dream and be better for themselves; we can do so much to support them and not limit their potential.

We want to work with kids to help them understand how they can regulate themselves and connect with people around them better, through finding the right role models to guide them. That's what we hope to achieve through this project; to become role models for our youth. We want to help young people see who they are and where they come from, and to help them find the pathway that is going to be best for them.

We know how strong and resilient our young people are, especially when they have the right support system and people around them. Sometimes people do not recognise their own self-worth, and we think that is an important first step in their journey. Good mentors can provide you the ability to see yourself objectively for who you are and can guide you down a good pathway.

Kirsty Barry, Chanell Garlett and Stephanie Riley from the YEP research team.

This year, the focus of the project has been on sharing knowledge, doing research, and about reflecting on what we know is important for young people in our communities. Next year we will go out to communities and learn from our young people themselves.

We need to listen to young people and their experiences, they know themselves better than anyone else. What young people need, what young people want, needs to be said in young people's words.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing is about being strong. It's about the things that keep you well and healthy. It's about family, it's about Country, your peers and community. It's about mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. It's about staying in positive spaces, and places where you can be yourself. It's about being comfortable in yourself. It's about knowing who we are and how much we are really valued. These are the things we want for young people.

This article is part of a series of columns to appear in the *Koori Mail* about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the Boorn Centre (previously the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention), which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.

2iWyMfShpdmP34e+mIIhKZw==