Ltyentye Apurte Catholic School
www.lacecnt.catholic.edu.au

- The school is located at Ltyentye Apurte (also known as Santa Teresa) 80 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs.
- It enrols 130 students from Preschool to Year 10, almost all of whom are Aboriginal with Arrernte as a first language.
- The school attracts students from the local community.
- ‘Ltyentye apurte’ means ‘clump of beefwood trees’ in the Arrernte language.

What are the biggest wellbeing challenges?
The school is trying to build students’ ‘emotional vocabulary’ through awareness of different feelings, and identifying emotions in body clues. The next step after recognising a feeling is choosing an appropriate coping strategy. Some strategies used successfully by students include going outside, taking a deep breath, talking to an adult, talking to God, saying a prayer, and playing sport.

Ltyentye Apurte is a Catholic school in Santa Teresa, an Aboriginal settlement of 700 people belonging to the Eastern Arrernte people. The school is also known as the Ltyentye Apurte Community Education Centre and is governed by the Catholic Education Office, Diocese of Darwin.

What is the impact of KidsMatter on the school?
Paul and two Arrernte assistant teachers undertook KidsMatter training in Alice Springs in 2013. They reworked the materials in the facilitator’s package and made them relevant and applicable to the Ltyentye Apurte context. They then presented the first component, ‘Creating a positive school community’, to the rest of the staff. The strong school–community linkages have been strengthened by the KidsMatter work. Events in 2013 such as Mother’s Day liturgy, Father’s Day liturgy and Book Week were attended by hundreds of community members.

One of the main challenges in the classroom is to build resilience around solving problems and sticking with tasks even when they are not easy. There is a tendency for students to become frustrated and say, ‘I’m weak, I can’t do it’ rather than persisting.

Paul Wighton, a Year 8 and 9 teacher, says that conflict resolution without resorting to physical aggression, is a major challenge. Teasing and bullying are issues within the school and also within the community and on an inter-family level.
I find that the factors that affect learning are almost exactly the same as those which affect mental health."

PAUL WIGHTON, TEACHER

A key development in 2013 was the decision to hold a series of Men’s Nights. The aim was to start engaging with men in the community and encourage them to be more involved in their children’s education. In the past, most meetings at the school were attended by women only—mothers, aunties, grandmothers. Getting significant numbers of men attending was a very positive development.

The school has now moved to the next component ‘Social and emotional learning’.

Positive thinking

All schools have challenges around generating and maintaining enthusiasm for new ideas. Paul noticed that many new ideas were introduced in the general business section of staff meetings which meant they were put forward when people were tired and wanting to go home. He took a different strategy when he started the KidsMatter training day by talking about the importance of being solutions focused and positive. Participants were asked to reframe negative talk and use phrases like, ‘How can we make this idea work best in our context?’ ‘What if we try it this way?’

How do Catholic teachings and local beliefs mesh with social and emotional wellbeing strategies?

Since the 1950s there has been a strong Catholic presence in the community. The school’s Masses and liturgies reflect the Marist tradition. One of the three Marist brothers at the school is the Principal. The community’s strong faith is evident with a regular congregation and very large turn-outs for events such as Holy Communion, Reconciliation and Confirmation. Arrernte staff teach spirituality lessons that combine traditional Catholic stories and traditional Aboriginal stories.

Bush trips and wellbeing

Community members consistently say that bush trips are one of the most school significant activities. Sometimes these are ‘country visits’, or going to a place where one of the community members is a traditional owner. In 2013 the bush trips were undertaken with the teachers of the Arrernte and Spirituality classes. One of the trips was to a community north of Alice Springs where many of the Santa Teresa families previously lived.

Paul says that the cultural learning on these trips typically involves learning about sacred sites, stories, bush medicine or bush tucker. There are many positive mental health benefits. Students learn more about their family histories and their identity through these cultural experiences. The community awareness leads to greater self-knowledge, an important aspect of student mental health. In turn, this helps them to function better in the classroom.

“There are murals in the community which show this crossover, such as a painting of a black Jesus being baptised in a river in a central Australian setting.”

PAUL WIGHTON, TEACHER