Caring in the Kimberley

**Ngalangangpum School**
www.ngalawarmun.wa.edu.au

- The Ngalangangpum School is located at Warmun (also known as Turkey Creek) which is halfway between Halls Creek and Kununurra in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia.
- Established in 1979, the school is run by Catholic Education and is the sole provider of education to children in the region. Almost all of the 100 students who attend the school from Kindergarten to Year 10 are Aboriginal.
- Students are drawn from the Warmun Aboriginal Community, outstations and Bow River.

**What is the biggest wellbeing challenge?**
The Ngalangangpum School is situated in a very remote corner of Australia. The community of Warmun deals with a range of ongoing issues relating to health, housing, employment, school attendance and completion rates.

> The current and historical impacts of poverty and disadvantage have led to a sense of trauma in this community. As a school we deal with the after-effects of that trauma on a daily basis.”

LEANNE HODGE, PRINCIPAL

The school works with the community to develop greater understanding about how to respond to traumatic events outside the school. The school knows that these impact on students’ ability to learn. Ms Hodge notes that boys tend to act out, whereas girls tend to withdraw. While there are more immediate issues about male students’ behaviour, she fears there is a risk that the needs of female students can be overlooked.

**How does the school teach about brain function?**
In 2013 the school had a focus on teaching about the brain and trauma. Part of this work was with children whose behaviour had ‘escalated’. Teaching time included drawing diagrams of the human brain and indicating which parts stop working when a person is scared, traumatised or angry. Illustrating the trigger for their behaviour and the way in which the brain responds was an effective way of helping children modify their actions. This was found to be particularly useful for older students. In the younger years, the ‘Stop. Think. Do.’ approach is used.

www.kidsmatter.edu.au
Recently the school has started to emphasise English as an ‘additional language or dialect teaching’. This approach focuses on the importance of the local language (predominantly Kimberley Kriol) as well as the English language. Aboriginal teaching assistants (ATAs) have taken a lead role to help students understand and value their home language. Ms Hodge notes that this has had a positive impact on self-esteem among students as well as boosting the profile, and valuing the contribution, of ATAs in the classroom. ATAs are currently studying Kija, the traditional language in Warmun, in partnership with the Warmun Art Centre. They then apply their knowledge and skills across the curriculum.

How are Catholic teachings, local beliefs, and social and emotional wellbeing strategies integrated?

The school endeavours to integrate Aboriginal culture and Catholic faith into everyday life through ongoing community consultation. The fusion of this is known as the Narmakarni. This has always been part of the school’s approach, and dovetails with the Ngapuny Way, which is about getting students to stop, think, and make good choices.

What is ‘Two-Way learning’?

‘Two-Way learning’ is the educational philosophy used by all Catholic schools in the Kimberley. The aim is to provide an education that values both traditions (traditional Aboriginal and contemporary Australian), equipping students for life beyond school while honouring their cultural identity.

What is the impact of KidsMatter?

Ms Hodge says that engaging with KidsMatter was a catalyst for examining mental health initiatives across the school. ‘It is also very good for mapping where we are heading,’ she says. ‘The KidsMatter PD [professional development] sessions were a very positive experience. And taking time out to reflect on what is happening is valuable and something we need to continue to do. Expanding what we are doing within the school to the wider community would be great.’

The establishment of the Student Representative Council is a concrete example of the impact of KidsMatter. It encourages student leadership in the secondary years. The structures of the school have been modified to respond more adequately to students experiencing trauma, post-traumatic stress, and/or other mental health issues. A secondary class has been set up to support these students who are matched with the junior class that caters for children who need an alternative approach. The senior class is called ‘Transition’, because the aim is to provide an environment where these students can grow and function better. At the moment, the class is boys only, and the new program focuses on work and social skills.