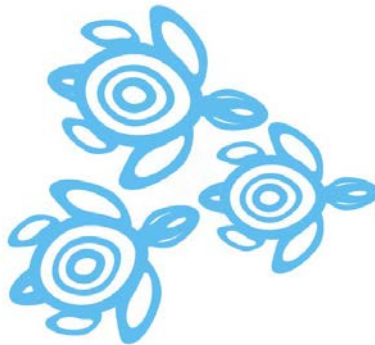


Strong Foundations Report

Written for the South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation



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1 Introduction

In 2017, suicide was found to be a leading cause of death for children and young people aged 0-18 years old in New South Wales (NSW). In response, the NSW Government parliamentary enquiry sought information from leading experts in relation to suicide. From this enquiry, Aboriginal children were identified as a vulnerable group (New South Wales Parliament. 2018).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide the South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation (SCMSAC) with a descriptive analysis of the delivery of the Strong Foundations program over a six-month period January – June 2018.

1.2 Scope of the report

This report provides an exploratory work to assist in contextualising the impact of the Strong Foundations program implemented by the SCMSAC.

2 The Strong Foundations Program

The Strong Foundations program is a weekly school based program that has been informed by the Koori Kids Wellbeing Program (KKWBP), along with Mind Matters, Aussie Optimism and Triple P - Positive Parenting Program (Beyond Blue. 2014, Sanders M, Kirby J et al. 2014). The KKWP was the first iteration of the Strong Foundations which has been delivered since 2007 in response to the high rates of suicide in Aboriginal children nationally (Siggins Miller. 2008, Siggins Miller. 2009). Funded by Commonwealth Department of Health National Suicide Prevention Scheme, the Primary Health Network, South Eastern NSW Primary Health Network, has funded the Strong Foundations program since 2016. The further development of the Strong Foundation program has been informed by the Siggins Miller evaluation, as well as community feedback, and has evolved into a program which is framed from an Aboriginal standpoint that is embedded within Aboriginal cultural practices that are locally contextualised and known within the Shoalhaven region (Siggins Miller. 2008, Siggins Miller. 2009). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe that wellness and wellbeing is linked to strong connections with culture, land, family, spirituality and the more broader community which are protective factors related to health and wellbeing (Zubrick, Dudgeon et al. 2004).

As referred to above, the KKWP is focused on the provision of a culturally safe approach to supporting Aboriginal children (aged 3-12 years) and their families through a schools based program that also included a community capacity building component (Siggins Miller. 2008, Siggins Miller. 2009). The focus of the program was to identify mental health and emotional distress in children; it provided a parent education program and school mental health education (Siggins Miller. 2008, Siggins Miller. 2009). The KKWP program was evaluated through a phased evaluation process that included a formative evaluation. Overall, participants of the program were found to be satisfied with the services provided (Siggins Miller. 2008,

Siggins Miller. 2009). However, it was not possible to assess the outcomes for participants and their families due to difficulties in accessing data. For example, the program provided capacity building activities for 12 facilitators of the Mind Matters program who were from four different services, but there was no data available to assess an increase in skills and capacity of the parent education component. Modifications to the KKWP since the evaluation in 2007 has occurred which will be discussed later in this report (Siggins Miller. 2008, Siggins Miller. 2009).

2.1 Program aims

The Strong Foundations program aims to:

- Provide a person centred and culturally safe service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families requiring mental health support.
- Improve access, complement and link to existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream activities/services.
- Improve social and emotional wellbeing and mental health outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families through access to psychological therapies and techniques including improved care coordination
- Capture the overall service experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people utilizing the service
- Deliver evidence based culturally appropriate mental health and suicide prevention education and training program/s.
- Develop and manage clinical governance processes, including any risks to the activity and plans to address those risks

2.2 Program model

In each school, the program is implemented on a weekly basis with one session per age group. Some schools have two age groups those in years 3-4 and 5-6 over one school term. These activities include the following:

- One-hour session delivered weekly to school aged children.
- Access to supportive case management, referral pathways and feedback to school.
- Engagement with school and key staff.
- Parental engagement.
- Assistance with the transition from primary to high school.

3 Methods

The evaluation of the Strong Foundations program was undertaken in June-October 2018 and utilised qualitative and quantitative data which had been previously collected by the Aboriginal

health staff of South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation (SCMSAC). Data for this report comprised:

3.1 Qualitative data collection

- **DOCUMENTS:** Notes from meetings and session plan reports from staff delivering the program.
- **PARTICIPATION DATA:** Individual program participation data was collected throughout terms one and two of the 2018 school year from 240 school aged children.
- **SESSION TOOLS:** Activity reports from each session were utilised to obtain feedback from staff that provided information about the session, whether any follow up was required, school staff in attendance and community visitors that may have assisted in the delivery of the program. This provides an ongoing assessment of the children while also ensuring that if further follow up or referrals were required this was actioned. Reflective practice is ongoing with staff providing suggestions in relation to the effectiveness and challenges to the delivery of the session with staff considering the improvements that could enhance the programs.
- **INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS:** Informal discussions were conducted with SCMSAC staff.

3.2 Quantitative data collection

- **STUDENT QUESTIONAIRES:** Two locally designed data collection tools developed by SCMSAC program staff: *My Feelings* and *Understanding Culture* (see Appendix B). These tools were culturally contextualised to meet the needs of young people in the Shoalhaven region. The *My Feelings* tool was informed by the KKWP. The *Understanding Culture* tool is a new addition to this program developed by Aboriginal people specifically for the Strong Foundations program. The two data collection tools were administered at the end of every one-hour session throughout the school term, with a total of 71 data collection points. Due to the need to protect the confidentiality of participants, descriptive quantitative data was analysed as a collective of the total number of participants.

As this evaluation report is for program information and SCMSAC use only, an assessment by a Human Research Ethics Committee was not required.

4 Current knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and suicide

A brief scan of the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and suicide in Australia was undertaken for the evaluation report. The topic of suicide and mental health conditions with Aboriginal children and young people is extremely sensitive. Currently, there is a paucity of data or empirically based studies that detail the extent of suicide and self-harm within the age group for which the Strong Foundations program supports. Based on currently available research, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-18 years are particularly vulnerable and comprise 30% of the deaths associated with suicide (Dudgeon P, Milroy J et al. 2016). A Queensland report that assessed suicides in Indigenous children aged 10-14 years, utilising the data of the Queensland suicide register between 2000-2010, identified that 46.7% (n= 21) of the recorded deaths by suicide were Indigenous children, at a level of 12.63 times higher than non-Aboriginal (Soole, Kölves et al. 2014). Additionally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged between 5–14 years, were at 10 times greater risk of suicide (Soole, Kölves et al. 2014). Of the 10-14 year olds, Indigenous children and youth received less treatment for psychiatric conditions, lived in regional or remote locations and were less able to access mental health services, and lastly, help seeking behaviour was lower in Indigenous children (Soole, Kölves et al. 2014).

The work of Farrelly (2008) provides insight into adult help seeking behaviours that are perceived to be hampered due to the relational connection of 'close knit' families and the possible complexities of blame and feelings of wrong doing if seeking support. Additionally, mainstream mental health services were believed to not be culturally safe, in addition to multiple issues related to inadequate service delivery and a lack of culturally informed practice that is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal community members (Farrelly 2008, Soole, Kölves et al. 2014). While this work focuses on Indigenous adults, there remains a significant gap in our knowledge about Indigenous children of primary school age.

As noted in the studies by Dudgeon et al (2016) and Soole et al (2014), Western constructs of health and wellbeing differ from those of Indigenous Australians, especially as they relate to social emotional health and wellbeing. There is very little evidence of interventions that work in this age group, particularly those with a focus on suicide prevention. It is important to ensure interventions are responsive to the community as whole. They should include individual support while also directing interventions towards population groups that are tailored to the local community, led by the community, and age specific (Dudgeon P, Milroy J et al. 2016).

Within in New South Wales, Aboriginal children are 10-times more likely to be in contact with the child protection system than non-Aboriginal children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2016). Risk of death is much high for these children in contact with the child protection system (NSW Child Death Review Team. 2014). Likewise, Aboriginal children who are

not in living in their home are found to be at a higher risk of suicide or self-harm (Soole, Kõlves et al. 2014).

In the recent Parliamentary enquiry into the Prevention of Suicide in NSW, the risk of suicide to Aboriginal children was noted as being linked to the complexity of factors that impact Aboriginal communities (New South Wales Parliament. 2018). Further, a report from the NSW Child Death Review Team reported that the vulnerabilities and complexities associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who come into contact with the Out of Home Care system (NSW Child Death Review Team. 2014, New South Wales Parliament. 2018). Aboriginal Psychologist Professor Pat Dudgeon, who provided expert advice to the Parliamentary enquiry, acknowledged that localised and culturally contextualised programs that are co-designed with Aboriginal communities are vital (Dudgeon P, Milroy J et al. 2016, Dudgeon, Calma et al. 2016, New South Wales Parliament. 2018). Further, such programs are likely to be successful where they are comprehensive and provide a broad range of supports to Indigenous children and their families (Dudgeon P, Milroy J et al. 2016, Dudgeon, Calma et al. 2016, New South Wales Parliament. 2018). School based programs targeting young Aboriginal children were thought to be important as an upstream approach to ensure children who experience distressing events are supported (Dudgeon P, Milroy J et al. 2016, Dudgeon, Calma et al. 2016, New South Wales Parliament. 2018).

Developing strategies of self-regulation

A key component to the Strong Foundations program is understanding individual feelings and learning skills of self-regulation and the responses to these feelings. Self-regulation is an important skill to master as it relates to the response to stressful situations and the activation of the brain alarm systems of identifying a potential and imminent threat (Perry B. 2005). Child trauma specialist Professor Bruce Perry (2005) discusses the link between self-regulation and prevention of aggressive and antisocial behaviour in children recommending '*age appropriate solutions*'. Dudgeon also insists that programs that assist with children experiencing distressing events require support (New South Wales Parliament. 2018). Thus programs that assist in the identification of emotional responses and ways to address them may help to improve the help seeking behaviours of Aboriginal children and young people targeted by the Strong Foundation program.

In summary, suicide is increasing in Indigenous Australian communities (Dudgeon P, Milroy J et al. 2016). The body of knowledge about what is needed to deliver culturally safe programs with a focus on suicide prevention for Indigenous children of the age group Strong Foundations targets is limited. Thus it is important to continue this work so as to further develop this model that may assist with evidence base practice of working with Indigenous children and youth. The Strong Foundations program addresses many of the recommendations in the current literature in relation to responding to Aboriginal communities and suicide prevention.

5 Implementation of Strong Foundations

5.1 Target group, location and frequency of program delivery

During the evaluation, there were two target groups for this program: Aboriginal children attending primary school in years three and four; and those in years five and six. The program is delivered across six schools within the Shoalhaven region, in New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and private primary schools. Sessions were delivered on site within the school facilities during school hours.

The Program was delivered on a weekly basis throughout the term for an hour session. Schools were alternated during the year to ensure access throughout the school term by multiple schools. Attendance is open to all Aboriginal children in the school. Implementation was delivered through age specific activities. Depending on the number of children at each school and ages, the children were separated into age specific groups, for example; group 1 being year's 3 and 4, and group 2 being year's 5 and 6. The different age groups were not mixed (for example; children from year 3 and year 5) this was to ensure the program and activities were age specific. Throughout the term, each school has set days that are pre planned between SCMSAC and the respective schools. Where large numbers of Aboriginal children attended a particular school, group selection was made by the school staff on a rotational basis throughout the year. SCMSAC staff worked closely with the school staff to ensure the program did not impact learning time of the children which was the key decider of the times and implementation of the Strong Foundations program within school time.

5.2 Methods of engagement with the students

Aboriginal processes and methods of communication were utilised within the context of engaging with the children who participate in the program. This included a set of yarning techniques that relates to a social yarn of grounding the group (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, Durey, McEvoy et al. 2016), followed by using a yarning technique that included an educational type of yarn (Lin, Green et al. 2016). These methods ensure that Aboriginal children were engaged within an Aboriginal context and through a method they are accustomed to.

"We began with a yarning circle; name how you feel, something you are grateful for, and something interesting about yourself. "My Feelings & Understanding Culture Questionnaires were completed. A brief discussion was had about Sorry Day and the Stolen Generation. We also discussed what it meant to the students to be Indigenous, strengths in culture. Group closed with an outside game. All students today thoroughly enjoyed Strong Foundation, they expressed their gratitude and excitement to see Strong Foundation back in the school".

Staff reflection: Activity Report

“Group 1 – Today the students were introduced to [new staff members]. The group started with a yarning circle. They said their name, what they were interested in, what they were grateful for and how they were feeling. The students then completed the MY FEELINGS survey and the UNDERSTANDING CULTURE survey. Some of the students then performed in front of the circle playing the didgeridoo with aid UNCLE MARK. We ended the session with a game of silent ball”

Staff Reflection: Activity Report

5.3 Program model

The program was delivered through an outreach model. The model draws from current evidence base practice that was blended with Aboriginal cultural processes of engagement with a program that focused on developing personal skills to address distressing situations.

5.3.1 Supportive case management, referral pathways and feedback to schools

The Strong Foundations model provided access to intensive counselling and support services by a qualified counsellor who was employed as part of the SCMSAC team. Students were able to access the counselling and support through a referral from parents or a school-based referral. Children attending the program are able to request access an appointment with the counsellor, however due to confidentiality and consent process, parental consent was required. Counselling assessment tools included the administration of the Kessler 5 to measure psychological distress, in addition to this, culturally safe counselling and follow up support was provided throughout the term (Kessler & Mroczek. 1992). Information on student progression was sought from parents, school staff and the young people themselves to assess social emotional health and wellbeing. Data from the Kessler 5 was not incorporated into this evaluation due to the privacy and confidentiality of the participants as the report did not have ethical approval.

5.3.2 Defining culturally safe trauma informed care

SCMSAC ensure services that are provided come from the centering of Aboriginal ways of being doing and knowing (Martin. 2001). This also includes defining what culturally and trauma informed care means. To SCMSAC staff, a culturally safe and trauma informed approach is defined as having;

“An awareness and understanding of the historical background of Aboriginal people, including the impact and effects of colonisation, past child removal policies and multigenerational trauma. Staff are trained in culturally safety training that includes the review of changing trends in health outcomes and health service delivery, while also

participating in professional development. Language that is used is appropriate and sensitive to the young person and their families. Using trauma informed practice that is relevant to Aboriginal people and the age group. Reviews are held with schools and the young person to gain feedback to ensure we are providing opportunity for input on quality improvement, particularly around cultural sensitivity. We also offer alternate counselling therapies that are relevant to the particular young person needs, allowing different settings to work with them in, whether it be in school, outside in their environment, in a clinical setting if required or at home if that is more appropriate”

SCMSAC staff interview.

This approach defines the work implemented by the SCMSAC that considers the cumulative and historic impacts of trauma, while also ensuring service delivery is based within an Aboriginal cultural framework.

5.3.3 Role of the school and key staff

The schools were engaged with the program through a number of ways. The weekly program is facilitated by SCMASAC staff, while in some schools the Aboriginal Education Assistant is present. However, this was not standardised across all schools. School Deputy Principals and Principals were engaged with the overall facilitation of the program, however are not present during the weekly sessions. Other school staff include the school counsellors who are able to support the participants during the school week.

5.3.4 Parental engagement

The primary focus of the Strong Foundations are Aboriginal children of primary school age. Parents are engaged in the school-based program where they choose or where the children are referred to the counselling support. Additionally, the SCMSAC provides training to community members including parents of the children attending the schools where Strong Foundations is implemented. This training includes; suicide prevention, Aboriginal mental health first aid.

5.3.5 Preparation of transition from primary to high school

While the program focuses on primary school aged children, some support is provided for those transitioning from primary to high school. This occurred in a less structured manner. Children who have been supported through the counselling remain part of the program if counselling support continues into high school. During the evaluation period, this part of the program was not included.

5.4 Facilitators involved in delivery of program

5.4.1 Qualified staff

The program was staffed by six people. It was managed by a program coordinator with multiple VET sector courses in project, business and front-line management and a Diploma in Community Services (Alcohol and Other Drugs and Mental Health). A counsellor with a Bachelor of Psychology. Project officers (1 full time, 2 part time), currently undertaking VET and undergraduate university studies. All staff members are trained in case management, responding to clients affected by substance misuse and mental health conditions.

5.4.2 Cultural program

The cultural component of the program provided the basis of connection to community and family. This part of the program was developed by local Aboriginal men and contextualised to the age group specifically for this program. Lead by SCAMSC staff who are Aboriginal and from the local community, this part of the program is unique to the service delivery with the development of the '*Understanding Culture*' tool. Throughout the weekly program each term, Aboriginal children learn through a staged process the elements of Aboriginal culture and significant events that are relevant to the Aboriginal community. The participants are able to participate in creative activities through art and storytelling. The local Aboriginal community people who are invited to speak are known to many of the children.

5.4.3 Activities were very engaging for young children

The resources, activities and group games provided were specifically designed to address the learning needs of children in year's three to six. These included learning through arts, crafts, storytelling and physical activity games. Topic discussions were delivered in an interactive and educational session.

5.4.4 Activity reports

The program provided self-reflective practice through the use of session activity reports. These reports not only record attendance and reporting data, but also provide an opportunity for staff to revise sessions that factors in, in-house evaluation to modify implementation of the program.

5.5 Challenges involved in delivery of program

This section reports findings that were categorised as challenges to the program. Data for this section included informal discussions, program documents and session plans.

5.5.1 Short term funding impacts program delivery

A major challenge for the program is the nature of short-term, periodic funding. This impeded planning service delivery and impacted on the recruitment and retention of staff, as staff who are recruited commit to the time of their contracts and seek out new employment opportunities elsewhere when funding ceases. Short term and periodic funding also impacted the planning and implementation of the program.

5.5.2 Responding to increasing demand for the program

Despite the limited and ongoing funding, the program continued to be implemented but on a small scale. Funding limitations and uncertainty means that it was not reaching all of the schools in the region who could benefit from the program, including schools with large numbers of Aboriginal children.

There is a growing demand for this program. The program was delivered to six schools, while three others in the region were seeking to incorporate the program into their school activities. The limited availability of staff to implement the program due to funding limitations and certainty, limits the expansion of the program to these schools. With the current staffing levels the program can deliver to approximately 15 – 20 participants per group. This means that for the schools with the larger number of Aboriginal children, a waiting list was created and the alternate approach by terms ensures that as many children as possible who could and would benefit from access to the program are able to participate throughout the year.

5.5.3 Staff available and time to deliver a regional program

The schools have a set curriculum and learning time from 9am – 12pm. As a result, the program is delivered around these times to ensure the SCMSAC continues to respond to community need. However, this impacts service delivery, as staff employed on the program are required to commence their day earlier than normal, requiring time for program set up at each site. SCMSAC staff commence work at the school well before 8.30am to set up group sessions, and also spend considerable time traveling between sites on the same day in addition. While responding to community need is the priority of the SCMSAC, there is a need for more staff to enable the mobility and time factors to implement the program.

5.5.4 Addressing challenging behaviours in children

The program seeks to identify and address distressing experiences and potential externalisation of challenging behaviours which the children can at times display. This places an extra demand on SCMSAC staff as there is a need for program modification, with staff as there becomes a need for one on one support sessions for those children displaying these behaviours. Thus the program requires two facilitators for each session.

5.5.5 School staff and child behaviour management

The focus of the SCMSAC is to ensure that the children who participate in the program were actively engaged, supported and have an approachable relationship. SCMSAC believe having a disciplinary role may negatively impact the relationship with the participants. Some schools are unable to provide staff support, where there are disruptions, particularly due to children who displayed challenging behaviours, this became difficult to manage and affected the group delivery. School support staff would assist further if they were able to be included within the facilitation of program.

5.5.6 Participant reluctance to access school-based counsellors

Reports from students who participate in the Strong Foundations program stated they prefer to access the program and counsellor. This places a greater need on SCMSAC staff to provide personal and emotional support to participants. Additionally, this increased demand for support can become distressing for SCMSAC staff. Furthermore, as a result of the positive working relationship with between the schools and school staff would access SCMSAC staff, program workers and the counsellor, to provide support to students. A more formalised process was developed with referrals to the counsellor, consent forms to attend group sessions to address the ad-hoc responses to the support requested. This demonstrates the need for the program along with an increased need for more staff.

6 Findings

This section reports on the findings of the quantitative and qualitative program data collected during terms one and two in 2018.

6.1 Quantitative findings

Of the total number of 240 participants of the program, 231 (96.25%) completed the *My Feelings* and *Understanding Culture* questionnaires. While these data are a collective of the group it provides an indication of the social emotional health and wellbeing of the young people who participate in the program. Given that this data was not matched across time periods for each term, we cannot discern whether the participants are regular attendees.

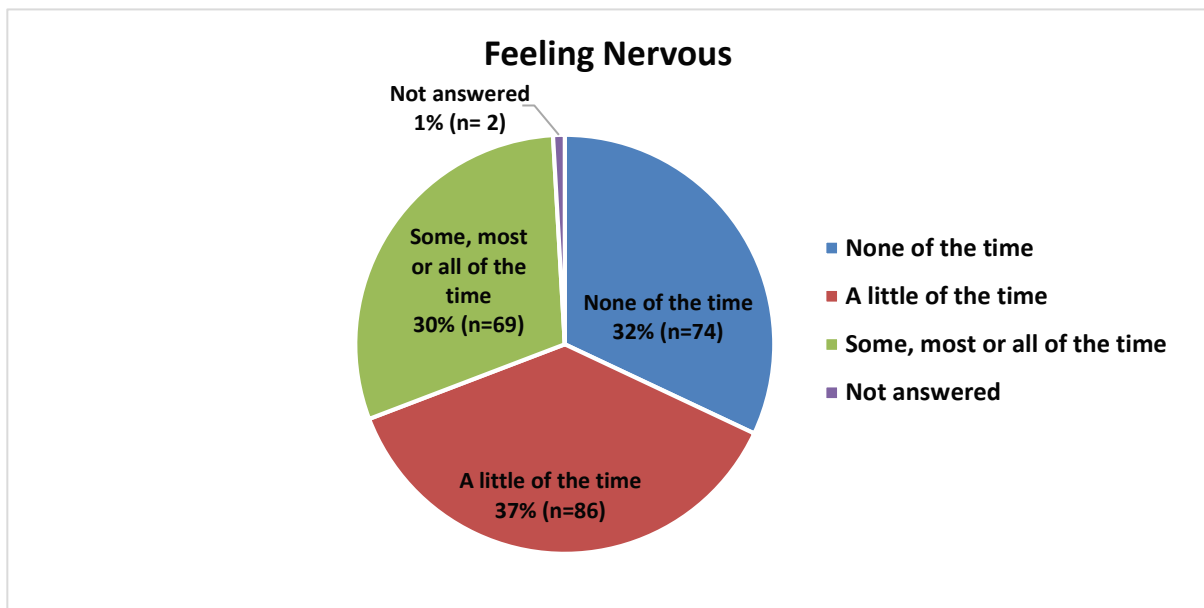
6.1.1 My Feelings Questionnaire

The *My Feelings* questionnaire identified many of the participants of the program had experienced feelings of nervous, hopeless, mad and sad.

Feeling Nervous

Of the 231 participants, only 1% (n=2) did not answer this question, 32% (n=74) reported that they felt nervous none of the time; 37% (n=86) reported they felt nervous a little of the time, with 30% (n=69) reporting they felt nervous some, most or all of the time.

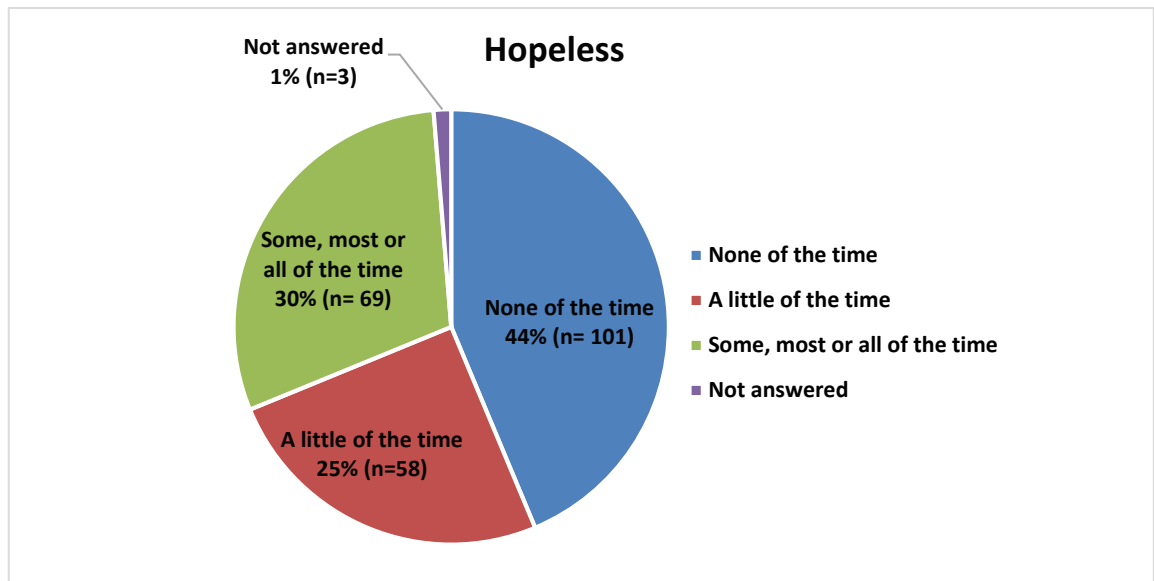
Figure 1: My feelings questionnaire – Feeling Nervous



Feeling Hopeless

Of the 231 participants, 1% (n=3) did not answer this question, 44% (n=101) reported that they felt hopeless none of the time; 25% (n=58) reported they felt nervous a little of the time, with 30% (n=69) reporting they felt hopeless some, most or all of the time.

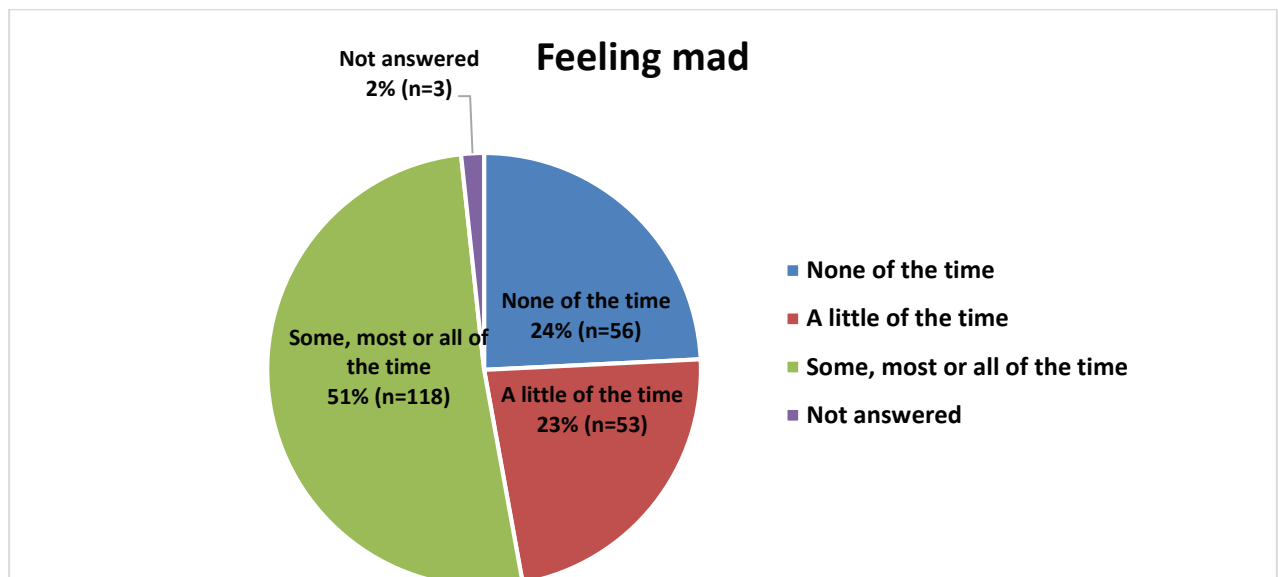
Figure 2: My Feelings Questionnaire - Feeling Hopeless



Feeling mad

Of the 231 participants, 2% (n=3) did not answer this question, 24% (n=56) reported that they felt mad none of the time; 23% (n=53) reported they felt mad a little of the time, with 51% (n=118) reporting they felt mad some, most or all of the time.

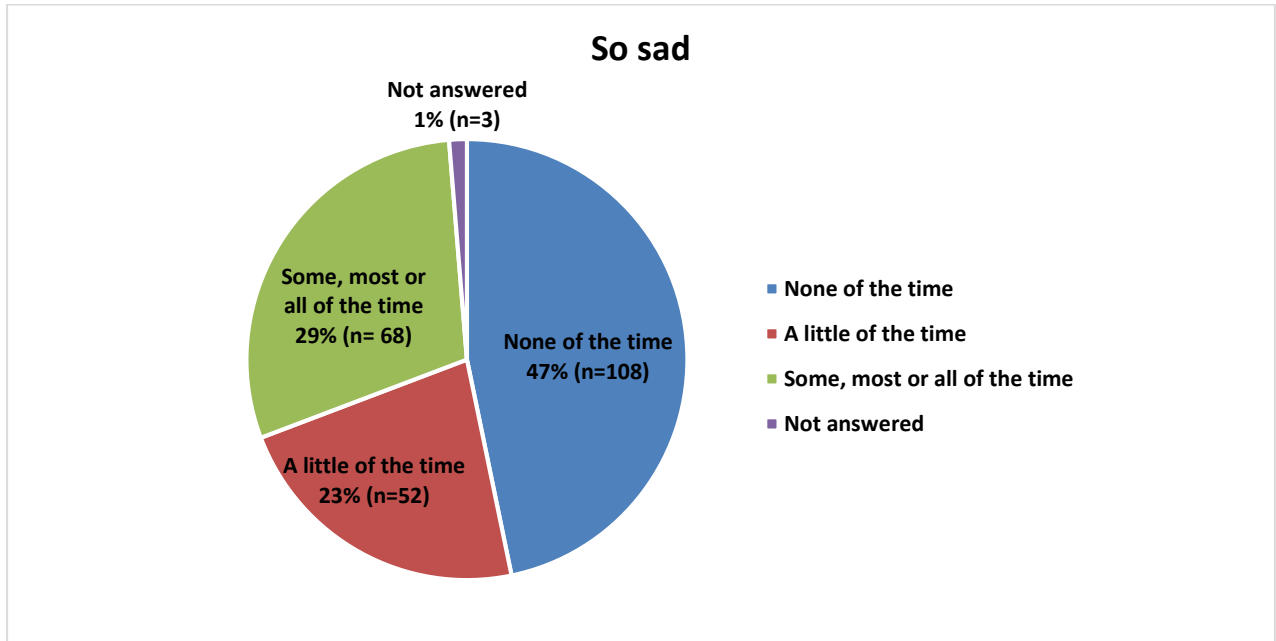
Figure 3: My Feelings Questionnaire: Feeling Mad



So Sad

Of the 231 participants, 1% (n=3) did not answer this question, 47% (n=108) reported that they felt sad none of the time; 23% (n=52) reported they felt sad a little of the time, with 29% (n=68) reporting they felt sad some, most or all of the time.

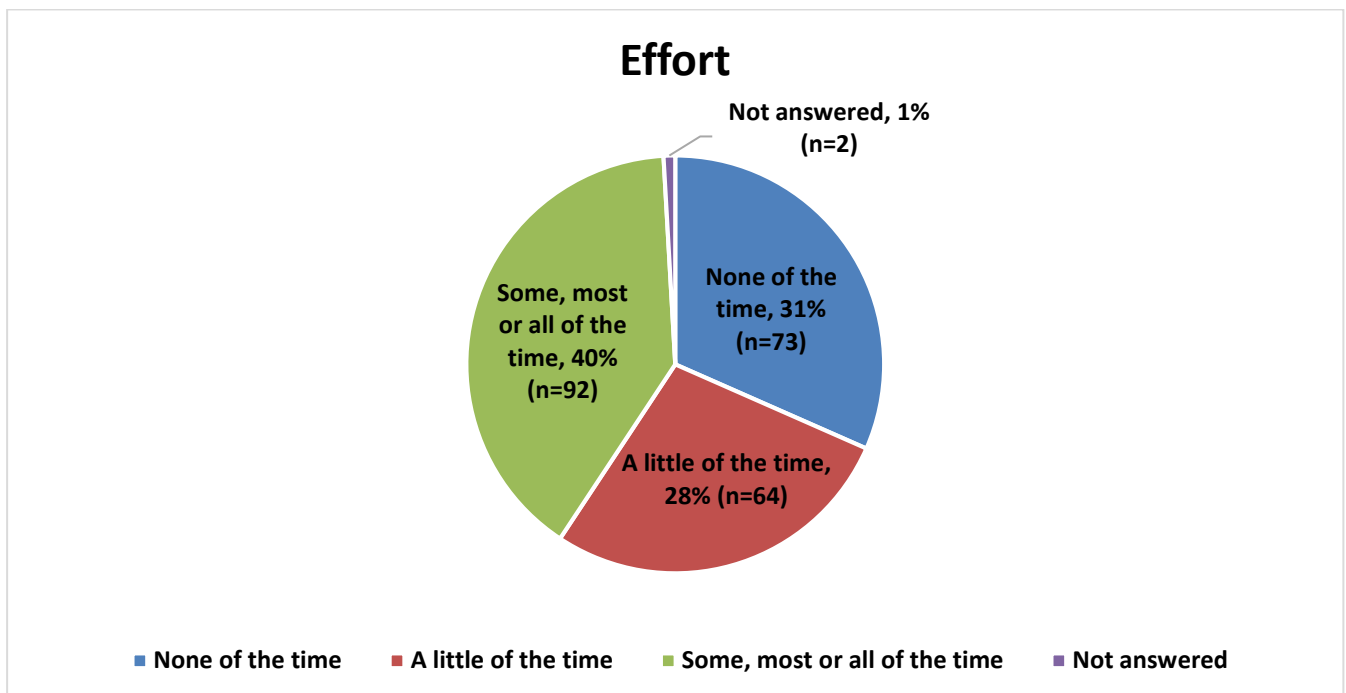
Figure 4: My Feelings Questionnaire: Feeling So Sad



Effort

Of the 231 participants, 1% (n=2) did not answer this question, 31.6% (n=73) reported that they felt everything was an effort none of the time; 28% (n=64) reported they felt sad a little of the time, with 40% (n=92) reporting they felt sad some, most or all of the time.

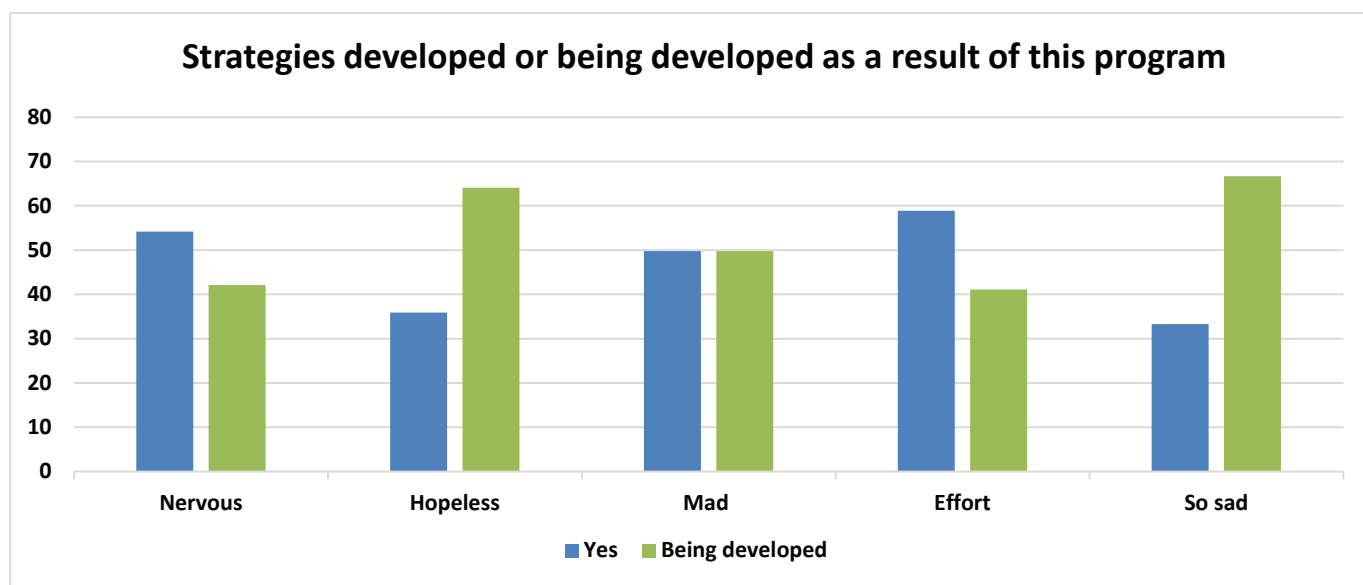
Figure 5: My Feelings Questionnaire: Effort



Self-regulation and developing strategies to cope in times of distress

A key component of the *My Feelings* questionnaire was asking participants if they could identify strategies that may assist in moments when these feelings of nervousness, hopelessness, anger, or sadness may arise. Figure 6 provides a breakdown of participant's self-reported use of these skills.

Figure 6: Strategies developed or being developed



6.1.2 Results of the *My Feelings* Questionnaire

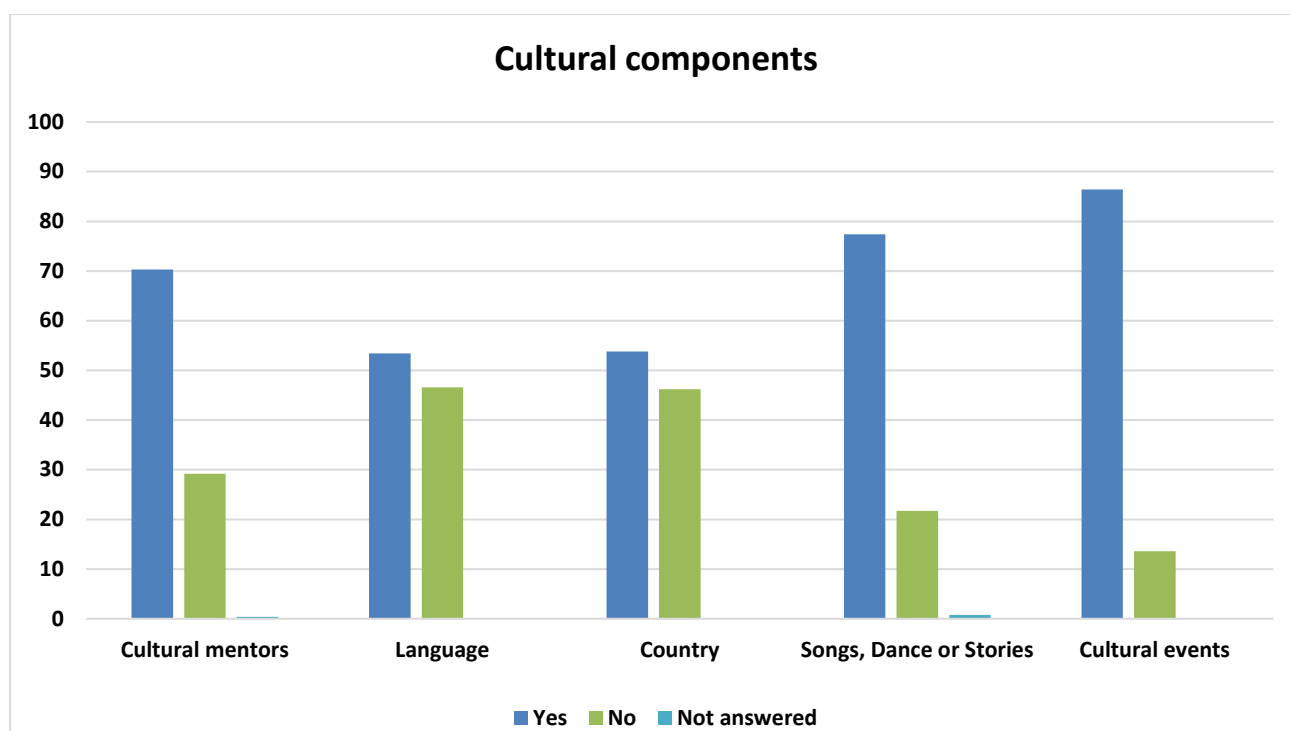
The findings from the *My Feelings* Questionnaire indicated that the young people who participated in the Strong Foundations program, experience moderate to high levels of feelings connected to possible emotional distress. This was highest for difficulties managing anger, where 50% of participants reported that they felt “mad” some, most or all of the time. However, over 30% of participants also reported feeling nervous, sad, hopeless or that everything was an effort some, most or all of the time. While many participants identified strategies to assist with their reported feelings (ranging from 33% to 50%), many were still developing strategies to address these experiences. This suggests that participants who are still developing these skills may benefit from ongoing programs to help promote skill development.

Although this is an exploratory study the findings reported above suggest that Strong Foundations may be having an impact upon the children's ability to self-regulate and develop strategies to cope in distressing situations. These promising results suggest that a more thorough and in-depth study of Strong Foundations is warranted.

6.1.3 Results of the *Understanding Culture* Questionnaire

The *Understanding Culture* component was designed by SCMSAC staff and community members in order to gauge the understanding of Aboriginal culture from the perspective of the children who participated in the program. Over time through the participation within the program, understanding and knowledge of culture was developed as a result of participating in the program. A key finding was that participants who experienced emotional distress were able to identify cultural mentors who they could access for support.

Figure 7: Strong Foundation Cultural Components



6.2 Qualitative findings

The qualitative data was collected by SCMSAC staff and was based upon program reports, detailed staff reflections and routine reporting of program activities.

6.2.1 Identifying and expressing feelings

As part of the Strong Foundations program, understanding recognising the origins of feelings and using feelings in a positive manner are part of the developmental factors and learning outcomes of the program. The sessions challenged the participants to work together, while also ensuring their personal safety and feelings are recognised, acknowledged and discussed during the sessions.

Staff session description 1:

"Today's session began with the yarnning circle, children were asked to express how they feel and what they are grateful for. The session today was a team building exercise, effective communication and identifying feelings. The children completed a hands on activity, connecting straws with blu-tak to build a sculpture with strong foundations. A few students identified feelings of frustration during the activity, but all participated well and it was a great success. Students today express feeling of being "stressed out" during the yarnning circle, when exploring it further, it was evident they were feeling frustration, they just didn't have the words to express feelings.

Session objectives:

- *Students to learn how to be resilient and how to change negative thoughts to positive and optimistic thoughts.*
- *Students to gain the ability to reflect constructively on their thoughts and learn how to cope and manage negative situation.*

Lesson learned:

Children learn best with interactive sessions & positive reinforcement" Staff activity report reflections.

Staff session description 2

"Today's group was learning more about culture and how feelings influence our behaviour. We started group with expressing our worries and placing them in the worry monster. We then created an art activity using Indigenous symbols known to the children, during art the students were asked different riddles as a way of distraction. The group was asked about how they felt being distracted and whether they were able to stay on task. The group identified the frustration of dealing with a difficult situation. Group closed with a game of charades using the theme "animals".

Session objectives:

- *Students to begin to understand different techniques and skills in regards to communicating effectively and problem solving when working with others.*
- *Students to explore the different communication techniques used by Aboriginal People.*

Lesson learned:

A smaller group allows for the students to gain a better understanding

6.2.2 Age appropriate activities

In a school with a large number of Aboriginal children, sessions were modified to ensure age appropriate activities were delivered. The quote below provides an overview of a session that included two different age groups. The session was interrupted by another visiting group to the

school, however some of the activities were completed. While the second group were able to participate in the session as planned, the session included discussions about the brain, sharing information about positive self-talk. The assessment of the activities provides an understanding of the knowledge gained by the students through their questions along with responses to questions posed by SCMSAC staff.

Session description 3

Group 1: Today students finished off the questionnaires, then took part in a yarnning circle. Students then had to go to the library for a short presentation from the Dragons, about wellbeing and footy.

Group 2: Group 2 completed the 'Understanding Culture' questionnaire first. Students then took part in a yarnning circle and moved onto the activity. Students discussed the challenges we can face in life and spoke about their positive brain vs negative brain. Project Officers explained that whichever one you feed more, will be stronger and more powerful, students were then asked "So how can we feed our positive mind", and created a silhouette animal artwork with how they are going to feed that animal.

Session objectives:

- Students to participate in a yarnning circle
- Students to discuss the importance of positivity and how it can affect our minds.
- Students to complete the 'My Feelings' & 'Cultural Understanding' questionnaires.

Did the activity meet the student's needs?

Yes students were able to understand the metaphors used to explain how our brains can be negative or positive, and how we can help make the positive one stronger. Students asked questions and answered project officer questions in regards to the topic and activity. Students had a great understanding of the concept.

What worked well?

Doing a hands-on activity.

What didn't work well?

Some students got quiet frustrated with the activity, as it involved cutting out their animal – but all students succeeded and completed the activity.

6.2.3 Students working effectively together

Team work and critical thinking were components of the program that sought to create an environment of working collaboratively and identifying strategies to assist when team work with other students is strained. Self-reflective skills of assessing where things went wrong or could have improved were discussed with the participants.

“Students were placed in teams with others that they would not normally have positive communication with and had to work effectively together. Some students did not work well together and their pyramid failed. However on completion of the activity and during the debrief students voiced their opinions on where they ‘went wrong’ and how they could’ve worked better as a team and listened to each other to achieve the task. Therefore these undesirable scenes had a positive learning aspect and helped the students understand the aim of today’s activities” **SCMSAC staff reflection**

Participants were provided with education around certain events that take place throughout the year and the meanings behind these events. For example, Harmony Day and the introduction of speaking about people from other racial backgrounds and diversity within the community. These activities were designed for the appropriate ages and where schools have a large number of Aboriginal students, the age groups were divided.

“Group 1: Today’s session started with a yarning circle where the students expressed how they were feeling and what they were grateful for. A discussion was initiated about Harmony Day – when it is held, what it means. The students identified different countries, different flag colours and what it meant to be harmonious and inclusive of all countries to stop racial discrimination. The students completed an activity where they were expected to colour in a silhouette of a person doing a different sport in different colours to represent diversity and inclusiveness of cultures within sports”. **SCMSAC staff reflection**

“Group 2: Today’s session started with a yarning circle where the students expressed how they were feeling and gratefulness. A discussion was initiated about Harmony Day – when it is held and what it was about. The students identified different countries from the pictures provided, different foods from different countries and different animals. The students completed an activity where they were expected to colour in a silhouette of a person doing a different sport in different colours to represent diversity and inclusiveness of cultures within sports. Then played heads down thumbs up. These students had a really good insight into what it meant to be harmonious and what Harmony Day was about without much information prior to the session”. **SCMSAC staff reflection**

6.2.4 Modifying the program for challenging behaviours with children

The program was flexible in working with the participants with changes to the program required as needed. The following staff reflection details this. The staff attempted to deliver the program as designed, however due to some challenging behaviours of some of the participants, the session on this day was modified to deliver a more active session.

“Today’s session was understanding culture, and identifying feelings and emotions. We began with a quick yarning circle, where students were asked how they were feeling and what they are grateful for. Following we attempted to have a discussion on culture and what that meant to the students, although they were very disruptive and didn’t contribute to the discussion. We made an attempt to have the children right down their bothers/worries and place them in the worry monster. Some students participated whilst others not. We attempted a “Story Art” activity where students were asked to use chalk and a black paper to draw a story about their family using known symbols used by indigenous persons. Some students really enjoyed the activity and tried to concentrate but were distracted by other students. A discussion was had about how students feel about their family, culture and friends. Again the students did not want to contribute. We had a few issues with the students not taking direction and showing respect for the group. We tried to instead do an outside game, “Frisbees” and “bull rush” to help the children wind down and participate. Some students participated well, although a lot of the students would walk off around the playground”. **SCMSAC staff reflection**

7 Mental Health First Aid Training

The SCMSAC has been providing capacity building activities since the early iteration of the KKWP. During the data collection period for this report from January to June 2018, mental health first aid was provided to the community by SCMSAC staff that included two training sessions in February and March. Both training sessions were completed over a two-day period a week apart. The locations of the training were held in Nowra and Wreck Bay. These training sessions included Aboriginal service providers and community members from the Shoalhaven region.

Location	Date of training	Number of participants
Nowra	5 th February	10
	9 th February	10
Wreck Bay	15 th March	16
	20 th March	11

The training was delivered by SCMSAC staff who have been trained in the facilitation of the Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid, through Mental Health First Aid Australia (Mental Health First Aid Australia. 2017, Day and Francisco. 2013).

The training feedback by participants included an increase in knowledge around the following areas:

- Use of and understanding of the ALGEE tool.
- Increased risk of use of drugs and alcohol.
- Further development and understanding of mental health conditions, such as psychosis, anxiety, depression.
- Responding to mental health crisis and ways to support people who may be displaying behaviours associated with being unwell.

Areas of improvement were related to the resources, group facilitation, location and time to carry out the activities:

- More case studies, more visuals.
- Group members speaking a lot distracted some of the participants.
- Deliver in smaller groups, some activities in outside setting.

Due to confidentiality, it was unclear to assess whether the participants of this training were parents of the young people who participated in the Strong Foundations program. However, this aspect provides a potentially important capacity building program to be included within the broader Strong Foundations program.

8 Conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Conclusions

The Strong Foundations provides a culturally based and trauma informed approach to a primary school based social and emotional wellbeing program. The evaluation of the program fills a gap in the body of knowledge that is currently missing; there are no evaluated programs within the literature (either published or in the grey literature) that focus on Aboriginal Australian children in the age groups targeted by Strong Foundations. The findings of the evaluation suggest that Strong Foundations has great potential to have a positive impact on Aboriginal children of primary school age.

The qualitative and quantitative data captured by the program staff over a 6-month reporting period, demonstrates that the children who participated were at risk of poor social emotional health and wellbeing. The program's strong grounding in Aboriginal culture along with the provision of intensive support; underlie the positive impacts which the program appears to be having with the children. The findings of this evaluation report is also consistent with the literature reported above.

Borrowing from the ATSIPIP report by Dudgeon et al (2016), this program meets multiple recommendations for upstream service delivery. The program provides a cultural framework that is trauma informed, it connects Aboriginal children to community and furthers their understandings of culture, all of which are important underlying factors in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children.

8.2 Recommendations

This report has found that the Strong Foundations program is having a positive impact upon the participants. There is a need to develop a body of work that includes an evaluation that uses multiple data collection methods (qualitative and quantitative). This report suggests the following recommendations for the ongoing evaluation of the program:

1. Ensure the evaluation and research proposal is assessed by a Human Research Ethics Committee, as great care and consideration is required particularly if considering the inclusion of capturing the children's experiences.
2. Adopt a study design that utilises a pre and post data collection method over a longer period of time (12 months) to assess impact of the program at the individual level.
3. Collect qualitative data such as feedback from school staff, parents of the children and possibly the children.
4. Evaluate the counselling and therapeutic support provided within the program, including the appropriate referral pathways.

5. Include an evaluation of the impact and use of the Understanding Culture and My Feelings component of the program, exploring the validation of these tools.
6. Assess the need for program scale up to further expand the program to other parts of the region, including the key partnerships that are required in order for scale up to occur.

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Appendix A – Example of activity Reports

SOUTH COAST MEDICAL SERVICE ABORIGINAL CORPORATION			
Social Health Services			
Activity Report Form			
Activity Name		Activity Number	(e.g. Forum day 2)
Venue / Location		Activity Date	
Staff Name		Target Group	
Activity Type (mark with x in one box only)	☐ Tobacco Treatment / Prevention Group	☐ Living Skills Groups	
	☐ Alcohol Misuse – Treatment & Prevention Groups	☐ Cultural Group	
	☐ Physical Activity / Healthy Lifestyle	☐ Men's Group	
	☐ Chronic Disease, Client Support Activity	☐ Women's Group	
	☐ Sexual Health / Blood Borne Virus Activity	☐ Youth Group	
	☐ Social Emotional Wellbeing	☐ Koori Kids School Activity	
	☐ Other Activity: (List activity type)		

Was this activity part of a recurrent program?	☐	Yes ☐
No		
Did you conduct a survey/questionnaire for activity evaluation?	☐	Yes ☐
No		

Participant Information			
Gender (mark with x in one box only)	Male ☐	Female ☐	Mixed ☐
Total number of participants involved in activity?			
Total number of Indigenous participants?			
Total number of participants with a disability?			

Please provide a brief description of the delivered activity

What were the activity objectives?

What were the activity outcomes or specific targets that were achieved?

--

Did the delivered activity meet the participant's needs? Please specify(<i>Refer to evaluation</i>)
Level of satisfaction expressed by participants in the delivered activity?
(Provide participant numbers against the level of satisfaction expressed as well as percentage. E.g. 17 people expressed 7/10 with 3 expressing 4/10 -

What worked well?

What didn't work well?

Did any issues arise?

What was the issue/s and how did you overcome the issue/s?

How could you improve the planning and delivery of future activities?

What have you learnt from this experience?

The students were all very excited and it's great to see.

What other agencies / staff were involved in the delivered activity?

**Please attach follow
supporting documents for
program reporting
purposes.**

1. Promotional Flyer ☐
2. Attendance Sheet ☐
3. Collated Evaluation from Survey Monkey ☐

Managers Signoff

Staff Member
signature

Date

___ / ___ / ___

Managers Signature

Date

___ / ___ / ___

Manager Comments

Appendix B - Strong Foundations Data Collection Tools

My feelings

Think back to the last four weeks and how you have been feeling. Answer the following questions:

	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
 How often did you feel nervous?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How did you stop this feeling? _____

 How often did you feel without hope/hopeless?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
---	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

How did you stop this feeling? _____

 How often did you feel mad?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
--	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

How did you stop this feeling? _____

 How often did you feel everything was an effort?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
---	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

How did you stop this feeling? _____

 How often did you feel so sad nothing could cheer you up?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
--	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

How did you stop this feeling? _____

Understanding Culture

1. Do you know your traditional country/Nation?

Yes

No

Please list _____

2. Do you know any Aboriginal languages?

Yes

No

Please list _____

3. Do you know your totem?

Yes

No

Please list _____

4. Do you know any traditional songs, dance or stories?

Yes

No

Please list _____

5. Have you been involved in any cultural events? (e.g. NAIDOC Week or Sorry Day)

Yes

No

Please list _____

6. Do you have any cultural mentor(s) who shares cultural knowledge with you? (e.g. an Elder)

Yes

No

7. Do you identify as:

Koori

Murri

Goori

TSI

Other

Not sure

8. How much do you know about Aboriginal history?

A lot

Some

Not much

Nothing

