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‘Healing through culture’: Aboriginal young people’s experiences of social and emotional wellbeing impacts of cultural strengthening programs

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ABSTRACT

Background: Cultural connection for Aboriginal young people promotes wellbeing, resilience and healing. There is little research on the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) impacts of cultural strengthening programs for Aboriginal young people, especially research that includes the perspectives of young people. There is even less research that includes the experiences of Aboriginal young people who have been in out-of-home care.

Objective: The current study sought to address these research gaps by exploring the SEWB impacts of cultural strengthening programs by amplifying the voice of Aboriginal young people, including those who have been in out-of-home care.

Participants and setting: Aboriginal young people involved in an innovative cultural strengthening program, the Narrun Yana art collective, established by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). Also participating was VACCA’s Team Leader of Children and Youth Programs, thus providing both experiences of participating in and of organising cultural programs.

Method: A qualitative phenomenological approach was taken. Data consisted of semi-structured interviews with the team leader and two young people and written responses to the interview questions from one young person.

Results: Lived experience provided evidence that cultural strengthening programs; help strengthen SEWB, including connection to self, relationships, community and culture; contribute to building resilience in the context of intergenerational trauma, cultural loss and racism; and encourage help-seeking, both informal support and accessing mental health services. Young people also viewed participating in the research as worthwhile.

Conclusions: Findings highlighted the importance of Aboriginal young people having opportunities to; connect to culture through participation in cultural strengthening programs, and engage in the design of these programs.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Cultural connection and Aboriginal young people's social and emotional wellbeing

Cultural connection for Aboriginal young people promotes wellbeing, resilience and healing (Bourke et al., 2018; Butler et al., 2019; Salmon et al., 2019). The devastating impacts of cultural disconnection are most powerfully demonstrated in the Bringing them Home Report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission HREOC, 1997); the culmination of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission national inquiry into the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents, communities, cultures and lands between 1910 and the 1970s (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission HREOC, 1997), known as the Stolen Generations. Subsequent to the landmark Bringing them Home Report, national and state-based inquiries have continued to demonstrate the negative impacts of cultural disconnection, reinforced the importance of cultural connection, and highlighted that Aboriginal children in out-of-home care remain at risk of not being connected to culture (Commission for Children and Young People CCYP, 2016; Davis, 2019). Today, many Aboriginal young people in Australia experience intergenerational trauma, adversities and associated mental health challenges stemming from the ongoing impacts of the past racist laws, policies and practices of the Stolen Generations combined with the broader context of invasion, ongoing colonisation and systemic and institutional racism and ever-expanding child welfare intervention (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022a; Dudgeon, Derry, Mascall, & Ryder, 2022; Krakouer, Wise, & Connolly, 2018; Murrup-Stewart, Whyman, Jobson, & Adams, 2021a).

Considerable research outlines increased levels of psychological distress among Aboriginal youth compared to non-Aboriginal youth (Azzopardi et al., 2018; Dudgeon, Milroy, & Walker, 2014) and provides an understanding of the determinants which contribute to these higher levels of distress (Dudgeon et al., 2021). Aboriginal young people experience racism in schools (Moore, Bennett, & McArthur, 2007), mental health services (State of Victoria, 2021), health services (Paradies, 2018) and child welfare services (Commission for Children and Young People CCYP, 2016; Davis, 2019; Moore et al., 2007). Aboriginal young people experience higher levels of trauma and out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal young people (AIHW, 2022a, 2022b), which contributes to poorer mental health. In addition, Aboriginal young people in out-of-home care often do not have the protection of consistent family relationships and cultural connection (Commission for Children and Young People CCYP, 2016; Davis, 2019; Mendes et al., 2020; SNAICC, 2021). Aboriginal young people also have less access to resources, including culturally-safe mental health care, which can mitigate mental health challenges (Azzopardi et al., 2018; State of Victoria, 2021).

There is also significant research on social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) from Indigenous worldviews and how this differs from western conceptualisations of mental health (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Within Aboriginal cultures, SEWB is a holistic, multidimensional concept broader than reflected in the concepts of mental health or mental illness. Aboriginal SEWB honours connections; connection to body, mind, emotions, family, kinship, community, spirituality, Country and culture (Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart, & Kelly, 2014). Thus, SEWB is intricately linked to and can not be separated from the concepts of cultural connection and cultural disconnection. There is also strong connection between individual wellbeing and community wellbeing. Intergenerational trauma continues to affect the SEWB of Aboriginal young people, families and communities (Menziés, 2019). Aboriginal experts in healing programs for Aboriginal people impacted by intergenerational trauma, state that Aboriginal trauma-specific programs that incorporate Aboriginal concepts of SEWB are vital to support wellbeing (Atkinson, Nelson, Brooks, Atkinson, & Ryan, 2014; Peeters, Harman, & Kelly, 2014). The inability of mainstream programs and services to incorporate or accommodate Aboriginal concepts of SEWB has long been recognised (Peeters et al., 2014).

There is little research exploring how Aboriginal young people make sense of their SEWB or how they connect to culture, let alone how they experience the interconnections between SEWB and culture (Bamblett et al., 2012; Murrup-Stewart, Searle, Jobson, & Adams, 2019). The research of Murrup-Stewart and colleagues with Aboriginal young people living in Naarm (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia) is an exception (2021a, 2021b). The research found that perceived connection or disconnection to culture significantly influences Aboriginal young people's wellbeing. The current research complements Murrup-Stewart and colleagues' research by examining the role of participation in cultural programs on the relationship between SEWB and cultural connection. Exploring young people's understanding of the SEWB impacts of cultural programs is a vital part of informing practice and policies designed to support SEWB and mental health among Aboriginal young people. Including Aboriginal young people with experience of out-of-home care is critical, given that it is acknowledged that this setting threatens cultural connection (Commission for Children and Young People CCYP, 2016; Davis, 2019; Krakouer et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2020) and the increasing numbers of Aboriginal children and young people removed from their parents and placed in out-of-home care (AIHW, 2022a).

1.2. Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency's cultural strengthening programs and the creation of Narrun Yana

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is a state-wide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation and the lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation in Victoria, Australia. VACCA is committed to ensuring the cultural rights of Aboriginal children and young people, including through cultural strengthening, regeneration and prioritisation. VACCA has significant expertise in designing, developing and delivering cultural programs. Programs include cultural healing programs for Stolen Generations and adult survivors of institutional child sexual abuse (Black, Frederico & Bamblett, 2019) as well as a range of cultural

strengthening programs for children and young people in out-of-home care. These include Koorie Tiddas youth choir, Koorie youth leadership, possum-skin cloak-making, art mentoring, film making, Books in Homes, cultural camps and Return to Country¹ (Bambllett, 2014; VACCA, 2015; VACCA, 2017).

Building on its knowledge and expertise VACCA launched Narrun Yana, an art collective, in 2017. Narrun Yana is an innovative cultural strengthening program, designed by young people for young people. With the approval of the Wurundjeri Council,² the young people named the collective Narrun Yana, which translates as *Spirit Journey* in the Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people. The young people shared what the name means to them: ‘*We feel this is fitting for our Collective because it reflects our journey from out of home care and high school into adulthood. It also reflects our journey as artists and contributors to our community* (Black Dot Gallery, 2021).’ In 2019 a formative evaluation of Narrun Yana was completed, with input from the collective members (Clear Horizon, 2019). The collective aims to provide wellbeing support, artistic training, mentoring, and business skill development. Collective activities include workshop sessions with both Aboriginal art mentors and Aboriginal business mentors, progressing visual art practices, creating art, learning cultural practices (such as possum-skin cloak-making), learning new artistic techniques, and building capacity in business and marketing. The collective has created a variety of artworks across different mediums, led cultural programs for children, been invited to participate in First Nations arts festivals, created street art, and received commissions to create public art. The collective members have also sold their art online and at markets. To date the collective has held two exhibitions, in 2018 and in 2021.

1.3. The current study

This paper, focuses on the role of cultural strengthening programs in supporting SEWB as understood by three Aboriginal young people who are a part of the Narrun Yana art collective, and VACCA’s Team Leader of Children and Youth Programs. This research explores the role of cultural strengthening programs in contributing to positive SEWB and does this by privileging the voice of Aboriginal young people sharing their experiences of Narrun Yana, as well as VACCA cultural strengthening programs they participated in during childhood and adolescence. There were two aims of the research: (1) to explore the contribution of cultural strengthening programs to improved SEWB for Aboriginal young people and (2) to amplify Aboriginal young people’s experiences and voices.

2. Method

2.1. Research design and approach

The research design, approach and ethical processes were informed by and consistent with Indigenous research principles (Martin, 2003; Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999, 2001) and included that the research was of value to Aboriginal community, Aboriginal oversight, and privileging Aboriginal voices. The research utilised a phenomenological qualitative design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014). The primary focus was on the nature of the young people’s experiences of cultural strengthening programs and how they believed their experiences shaped their SEWB. Particular attention was given to understanding the meaning they attach to lived experiences; giving voice to the young people’s SEWB journeys within the context of participation in cultural strengthening programs in childhood and adolescence, and currently. A phenomenological thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022) was employed as the methodological approach because it privileges the lived experiences of young people and the meanings they attribute to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014). This approach is based on the examination of reflective personal accounts of how people make sense of life experiences (Smith, 2015), capturing both richness and diversity of accounts.

The researchers committed to and complied with the principles of the National Health and Medical Research Council (2018) and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2020) research ethics frameworks. Ethical approval was provided by La Trobe University and VACCA.

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. The Narrun Yana collective members

Three current members of the collective participated. The three young women are aged in their early to mid-twenties and living in Naarm (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia) on Wurrundjeri Country of the Kulin Nation. Their Countries are from around Australia; for two of the young people their Countries are in the state of Victoria, and for the other young woman, her Countries are interstate. Two young people had out-of-home care experience. Participants’ names have been changed, and identifying information is not included to maintain anonymity.

¹ Return to Country is a program for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and Aboriginal adults who grew up in out-of-home care to visit the Country of their language or clan groups, (VACCA, 2017).

² The Wurundjeri Council is the representative body of the Traditional Owners of Melbourne (<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au>). It is cultural protocol to engage with Traditional Owners to seek permission and guidance to use their language. Language use protocols ensure the cultural integrity of language use.

2.2.2. Team leader of children and youth programs

VACCA's Team Leader of Children and Youth Programs has nearly 20 years experience working at VACCA, firstly in education support and then 15 years with cultural programs. The team leader is non-Aboriginal, has been a foster carer and respite carer for Aboriginal children is strongly connected to Aboriginal community and has known the participants for between 5 and 15 years.

2.3. Data sources and data collection

The four current members of the collective were invited to participate. All four agreed, however, this reduced to three participating when data collection needed to be modified from in-person interviews to online videoconferencing due to the Covid-19-related restrictions in place at the time. Anderson et al. (2021) found that the use of web conferencing was an acceptable and feasible alternative to in-person methods to engage Aboriginal young people in research. Their findings included that it was experienced as less intimidating and the quality of data elicited was at least as rich as in-person methods (Anderson et al., 2021). For any young person who did not feel comfortable participating in an online interview, the option of providing written responses to interview questions was offered. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded with two members of the collective and the team leader of VACCA's Children and Youth Programs. One young person provided written responses to the interview questions. Using this flexible approach reflected the commitment to giving the young people who had agreed to participate in the research a way to be heard in a format that they felt comfortable with.

All authors developed the interview questions, and the first author conducted the interviews. Each participant was given the questions in advance. The topics of the questions included: (1) experience participating in cultural strengthening programs; (2) cultural strengthening programs and SEWB impacts; (3) racism, trauma and cultural loss; (4) anything else that is important about culture, cultural healing and cultural strengthening programs that they would like to share, and (5) how they felt about contributing to the research. At the conclusion of the interviews, young people were asked for feedback on the questions. The first interviewee added a question about the role of community and this question was included in the subsequent interviews. Interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes and were conducted between October 2021 and April 2022. All participants were given a \$50 gift voucher to an Aboriginal social enterprise clothing store, *Clothing the Gaps*, as acknowledgement of their time and commitment to participating in the research. The choice of voucher reflects the commitment to promoting Aboriginal values in all aspects of the research.

2.4. Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were imported into NVivo. Each data source was analysed in detail (Smith, 2015). Prior to the commencement of coding, the first author familiarized herself with the data by reading the interview transcripts and survey responses several times. Following this, coding involved the notation of initial thoughts and ideas (Smith, 2015). Codes of convergence and divergence were highlighted within and across data sources. Coding was verified by the second author and where necessary, codes were revised following discussion between the first and second authors. The themes were organised from collating the codes and were deliberated and explored by the two authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The narrative includes quotes to illustrate themes and amplify the voices of those involved in the cultural programs.

3. Findings

The findings are presented first from the Team Leader of Children and Youth and then from the young people. The interview with the team leader was developed into the themes of the establishment of Narrun Yana and the program elements contributing to SEWB benefits for the young women involved in the collective. The data from the young people was developed into the interconnected themes of; the essential elements of cultural strengthening programs, young people's SEWB journeys, young people's experiences of cultural strengthening programs in childhood and adolescence, young people's experiences of Narrun Yana, the importance of culture, and involvement in research.

3.1. Team leader of children and youth programs

3.1.1. Establishment of Narrun Yana

The impetus for the collective was to give young people the opportunity to 'grow and learn' while staying culturally connected and supported in that 'really troubling time' between late adolescence and early adulthood. Initially, the idea of Narrun Yana was to support young people who had been in out-of-home care. The team leader reflected: 'I could see a gap that these young people left care and then didn't have anyone or anything consistent to link into that was not just around case management'. The collective also attracted young women who did not have an out-of-home care experience: 'I saw the value of that because, even at 18 and with family support, you can still be vulnerable... there are not places where there's a physical place for them to come weekly and yarn³ and spend time with community members and aunts and yarn about all sorts of different things, not just art.' From the team leader's perspective having the collection accessible to both young people with and without out-of-home care experience is beneficial: 'I think the beauty is the peer mentoring that comes through

³ Yarning is an Aboriginal cultural practice of conversation and knowledge sharing (Besserab & Ng'andu, 2010).

really strongly'. According to the team leader, the key feature of the Narrun Yana model development stemmed from its uniqueness; it provided support but was not limited to case management and it differed from other cultural programs in that it gave the young people who were the participants of the program the opportunity to 'design and develop and create' the program.

The big shift with Narrun Yana, was that the young people who were part of the beginning of it really led the creation and development of what they wanted and what it needed to look like for them. So it was a real departure from going in and anticipating things for children and young people and listening and being guided by Aboriginal workers or Elders or cultural facilitators. We actually listened to these young women.

The team leader explained that the young people led and she guided, supported and organised. As a non-Aboriginal person she saw her role as: 'being an advocate for self-determination' and that 'it's not my place to share or be a facilitator of any cultural knowledge or practice'. The foundations of Narrun Yana were based around the young people's nominated requirements of being grounded in culture, respect for cultural protocols and establishing cultural safety ('We very quickly developed something where they all felt very safe'). Unpacking what these concepts meant to the young people and how they would be prioritized was a process. This included being clear on who they wanted coming into their space and how they safely share their stories. Early in the development of the collective, they invited an Aboriginal communications consultant to guide them in the sharing of narrative ('We looked at guidance on not just arts practice, but the whole understanding of narrative; What's my story? What am I happy to share?').

3.1.2. Program elements supporting SEWB

Improved SEWB was a goal of the program. The team leader identified that all the young women had mental health challenges and all experienced positive SEWB impacts through their involvement with the collective. The SEWB benefits included: safety and security ('It gave her a space to learn from others and grow in herself and feel very safe'), increased self-esteem and self-worth, security and growth in relationships ('It gave her a place where people understood her and held her'), and empowerment and increased confidence ('I think a really amazing outcome is the confidence it's given these young women... their confidence to be able to create and feel comfortable to have a narrative and to talk. In the beginning, no one would talk.'). SEWB impacts also included: connection to community, opportunity to strengthen connection to culture and cultural practices, and a secure sense of cultural identity ('To feel comfortable and understand what it means to be an Aboriginal artist was huge. She really fought against that [prior to Narrun Yana]').

The program elements identified as contributing to the SEWB benefits were: cultural safety, connection to culture, the prioritisation of relationships and a trauma-informed approach. The team leader discussed the vital role of cultural safety in contributing to the young women's mental health journeys including allowing the young women to be vulnerable and supporting them to seek out mental health support.

Narrun Yana to outsiders might look like an art collective but inside was a safe space for them to not only learn and blossom and grow in their arts practice and cultural protocol understanding and cultural practice. But it was also a place where they could be vulnerable and reach out for help and support.

The team leader witnessed connection to culture directly supporting young women's SEWB. She shared by way of example; a weekend away with an Elder who gifted them with cultural knowledge and the empowerment this provided.

She [Elder] as a cultural facilitator and an Elder to the young women was passing on her cultural knowledge... What was beautiful, was seeing what everyone got out of that generosity. They felt empowered because they knew that they're being taught by someone whose [cultural] protocols were really clear and strong. I think there's that direct example of the power of culture.

The team leader reflected on the power of being entrusted as cultural knowledge holders ('it was being passed on to them to then be able to pass on to others'). This passing on of culture was an area where the team leader felt the collective could be doing more and was stymied by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated stay-at-home restrictions. In unpacking the concept that culture heals, the team leader described the program elements as interconnected ('I think culture heals... I think the layers of what's happening is what heals. It's the relationships and the learnings and the sharing of knowledge, being with each other and the empowerment that brings'). The team leader also raised the need to address the complexity of needs for young people who have been in out-of-home care, including attachment issues and impacts of removal, and that this requires a holistic response: 'It's powerful, but it's not the only answer... I don't want to put that onto culture as being the answer to everything.'

The team leader provided evidence of the centrality of relationships ('It's 100% relational'), including the benefit of nurturing by Aboriginal mentors and Elders, and her own strong, trusting and lasting relationships with the young people ('I've got not only good relationships, but I've got longevity in those relationships'). Also significant was the support of each other ('this really genuine endorsement of what each other brought'). These supportive peer relationships provided the safety to discuss both their mental health challenges and the mental health services they were accessing ('They have been very vocal about discussing their mental health journeys and the treatment they're seeking and sharing that with each other. This really beautiful opportunity to yarn about that and not feel stigmatized'). The team leader described the program as based on trauma-informed practice and principles. Providing tailored and holistic support dependent on what is needed for each young person, a flexible approach, and the longevity of the program were crucial. There is no end date to the program and the young people can come in and out: 'It's definitely a set up without a rigid criteria or expectation'. The team leader demonstrated these trauma-informed principles in action by providing an example.

There was a point when she decided she was ready to seek help for her mental health. A lot of these young people don't have significant Elders, adults in their life. And she asked if I'd take her to her first doctor's appointments to get a referral to a psychologist. I think this wouldn't happen necessarily in any other program; I did it on a Saturday. I would make myself available because I felt that those were such important steps young women were making. And if I didn't support that or they couldn't talk about it, it would be such a lost opportunity.

3.2. Young people

3.2.1. Exploring what is a cultural strengthening program: 'safe spaces for mob'

Revealing consistency in ideas, young people described critical elements required of cultural strengthening programs and these were; Aboriginal-leadership, community involvement, cultural safety and sharing of cultural knowledge and practices. Being Aboriginal-led was a non-negotiable requirement for a cultural program (*'If not Aboriginal led... then it's just a program'*) and this included that the program was Aboriginal-designed, delivered with community, driven by self-determination and all cultural knowledges were shared by Aboriginal people. The need for community endorsement, engagement and involvement was also seen as critical. The concept of vouching, of needing community support to attract participants was important (*'If community don't want a bar of it [program], then they won't send kids to it'*). Cultural strengthening programs were described as spaces where young people felt culturally safe, empowered, nurtured and that their voice was heard (*'programs that are safe enough for kids, young people, even adults, to be able to open up about their struggles in life'*). Sharing and broadening cultural knowledge and cultural practices was seen as important, with one young person defining cultural strengthening programs as: *'Healing through culture is probably a way to put it; cultural knowledge and practices that enable mob to strengthen and heal themselves'*.

3.2.2. Young people's SEWB journeys: 'it is hard to talk about your trauma, your pain'

Young people shared lived experience of a range of adversities, traumas and mental health challenges. The range of challenges and experiences included; grief and loss, including the death of family members; cultural loss; the loss of family growing up in out-of-home care; and mental health issues. Other challenges included experiencing significant racism and bullying particularly pronounced at school, on social media, and around specific dates such as the 'Australia Day' public holiday which is marked on the anniversary of the invasion of Australia.

Cora shared: *'Due to growing up in foster care I definitely felt culture loss... Growing up I struggled a lot with my identity due to being fairer'*. She also shared: *'I'm someone who lives with severe social anxiety.'* Aida experienced mental distress in the context of significant bullying and racism in the school setting, with concurrent mental health decline in adolescence resulting in an admission to hospital in an inpatient mental health ward. For Bindi, growing up in out-of-home care, her mother's experience of intergenerational trauma, her mother's early death and not having family in Melbourne where she lives and grew up meant; *'I didn't have much family here. My mum was down here but, I guess she was quite absent quite a lot of the time... she was going through her own trauma and her own grief'*.

3.2.3. Young people's experience of cultural strengthening programs in childhood: 'proud of who I am'

The SEWB impacts of attending a variety of cultural strengthening programs provided by VACCA in childhood and adolescence was profound, in particular around the development of cultural pride and strengthening of cultural identity, something all three young people experienced (*'Without them [cultural programs in childhood] I don't think I would be as proud in my culture and as sure of my identity'*). Young people also gained a sense of belonging, and connection to peers who were Aboriginal and who were in out-of-home care (*'Not only did I learn about my culture, and my history, I met other kids that were like me'*). For one young person, she described that she *'needed culture to continue going to school'*.

For me, because I wasn't culturally safe at school and there was a lot of racism particularly targeted at me, coming back to something where I felt culturally safe and I could learn about my culture... That was something for me that empowered me and my voice, which also made me want to stand up to the racism at school. I think that in itself encouraged me to continue at school.

One young person shared that without engagement in cultural strengthening programs in childhood they would now be *'very isolated and very alienated'*. Involvement in cultural strengthening programs from a young age had lifelong benefits of access to community and a sense of belonging and support in this connection.

Since I was put into those programs from an early age, now I know people, know their parents... It's because they [VACCA] connected me in with the Victorian community, to the point where this community down here is my family. This is my home, even though I'm not from Victoria... this community is all I've ever really known. And there's people in this community that I love dearly, that I will go to whenever I need some help or some guidance.

Cultural strengthening programs helped to build young people's resilience; to cope with racism, understand intergenerational trauma, sit with loss and grief, and address the resultant impacts; the lack of transmission of culture (*'I think for a while I felt like I had to be an expert on everything Aboriginal. But didn't have the space to grow and to learn about myself. For me, these programs really nurtured that. And helped me want to learn more and felt comfortable to be able to do that, safe enough'*).

For one young person, the involvement in cultural strengthening programs while in out-of-home care was not enough to overcome the experience of cultural loss: *'Although I was exposed to programs, I feel at times it doesn't make up for the cultural connection you could achieve being surrounded by family'*.

3.2.4. Young people's experience of Narran Yana: 'my safe space, for me'

Two young people joined Narran Yana following their involvement in VACCA's art mentoring program. Both were inaugural members of the art collective and are still current members. One young person joined later, left, re-joined and is also a current member. She had been feeling overwhelmed with schoolwork and uncertainty about the validity of her artistic contributions. The significance of trusting relationships and needing a creative outlet were critical to her returning and remaining with the collective; *'After a while I rejoined after having a chat with [team leader] about how I could be involved as I needed a creative outlet and was in a better headspace.'* Strong and lasting relationships with the manager were important to engagement and ongoing involvement in Narrun Yana as were the supportive peer relationships and the shared interest in art practices. Creating and spending time with peers who have shared interests and experiences allowed relationships to build, trust to develop and connections to strengthen. Young people experienced a sense of belonging; *'I've done Narran Yana with people that I was very close with, that were basically like friends, basically like family. I knew that if I was ever feeling flat, I could have a yarn with them about it.'* This creation of an informal support network extended beyond the group structure, with a young person describing how they could also go to others in the group for support outside of the group activities. Being part of the collective contributed to the development of a positive sense of self and identity and increased confidence. For one young person, their involvement in Narrun Yana has been a journey of self-belief and self-worth, aided by supportive peer relationships with the collective members.

There are times where I don't feel good enough or like I belong in the collective. I'm surrounded by such incredible women with extraordinary talents. Some are a lot more connected to culture and their roots so at times I feel a bit insecure... Other than this though, I am very appreciative of the collective as it has made me start to realise that I am just as important and that my art is also worthy. Also being surrounded by such strong women, it's hard not to be inspired to do better.

The establishment of cultural safety allowed for learning, strengthening of identity, safe sharing of feelings and the gaining of empowerment (*"Sometimes people say, 'oh, yeah, we're listening'. But this is a space where I actually felt like my voice was being heard and that whatever I contributed was valuable."*). Young people experienced a sense of ownership over the collective, it was not something they participated in, in a passive sense. Rather it was theirs and it developed and evolved because of them.

Connection to community was central, with purposeful, deliberate engagement at the community level. This included learning about, respecting, and adhering to, cultural protocols. Mentoring from Aboriginal artists and Elders was highly valued. Young people also reflected on involvement in cultural strengthening programs as a way to help others. One young person believed Narran Yana could be running more cultural programs for community to increase intergenerational impacts: *'I think that sometimes we look for ways to learn and to be immersed in culture, but then there's not always an opportunity to jump at. And I think that Narrun Yana definitely has the opportunity to be able to teach other young mob and children.'*

Young people experienced interconnections between the practicing of art, storytelling and empowerment. The opportunity to advocate and amplify through their art was described as important; both for themselves and on behalf of their Elders who did not have the same opportunities (*"I think it's so important that now with Narran Yana we have that platform to amplify voice, our voice, but also when I do my art I like to tell the stories of my grandmothers as well, because they didn't have that platform"*). Young people shared their story through their art. Art practice as a mechanism for truth-telling and storytelling was experienced as healing (*I think when we are able to tell those truths and share our story, we're able to heal ourselves. That's another way of healing that we don't always think of, that is just telling that story. And I tell mine by painting or by digital art*). Connection to culture through art practice and continuing cultural practices provided empowerment and healing.

Looking at the different symbols that I would use. That in itself was empowering, knowing that this is something that my people used... Knowing that I was living that, that I was creating that. That's also why it was so healing, I was able to connect myself to my artwork, connect myself to my people and my culture even when I wasn't on my Country.

The practice of creating art helped the young people experience a range of SEWB benefits including relaxation and emotional regulation (*'it refocuses my energy'; 'it sets the mood for the rest of the day'; 'sometimes just doing art was more beneficial than actually talking'*). One young person shared that since discovering the impact on her wellbeing from practising art she regularly prioritises artwork in her life; *'I'm always doing art now, every week'*.

So I'm not a very patient person, so I thought I wouldn't be able to sit, wouldn't be able to do that [create art] for so long, but it really just helped calm me... it also took my mind off things that I didn't need to focus on in that time. It gave me a break from all that emotional stress.

Young people shared examples of mastery and learning; of a range of life skills developed as well as skill development in arts-based practices. An example shared demonstrated increased confidence in skills; *'we were all really awkward when we first started out doing markets... in the end I kind of learnt to be a little bit more confident.'* Involvement in Narrun Yana has impacted the young people's life trajectories; they have become successful artists, receiving commissions for their artwork. One young person has started work in an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation as a cultural support worker and case worker and reflected: *'I'll be looking at having programs there as I know how much impact that culture has on our wellbeing and our health... the fact that it's helped me is why I want to be able to have it out there for other mob to be a part of.'*

3.2.5. Importance of culture: 'it's our way of connecting, sharing, healing'

Young people described the importance of connection to culture ('culture in itself can be healing'; 'culture is grounding'). Young people connected to culture in a range of ways, in addition to cultural programs, and this led to healing and positive SEWB benefits. Being on Country, yarning with Elders in their family ('Having a yarn with my nan sometimes is just something that I need to just get back on track'), learning language, 'connecting with mob', connecting with community organisations and attending community events were all ways young people connected to culture.

Young people discussed the uniqueness of each person's healing journey ('Everyone has different trauma, different issues and different backgrounds'), stigma and shame that can be connected to trauma ('Some people still can't even talk about theirs [story]') and the role of cultural connection and truth-telling for trauma recovery.

I think there is a general idea that healing; once you're healed that's it. Like it's just a wound and you put a Band-Aid over it and it's all better. Then you think of the scars. You think about if the Band-Aid slipped off. Everyone's journey is completely different. I think that's important when thinking about culture as well, because people are on different journeys, learning about culture, learning about themselves.

When developing cultural strengthening programs, one young person expressed the importance of listening and developing programs around young people's needs and interests: 'Listen to what they want and what they're interested in'. Young people spoke with passion of the importance of Aboriginal children being engaged in cultural programs from a young age so that culture is something they are immersed in rather than introduced to. One young person described the reassurance she gained from witnessing the transmission of culture for her young son; 'Seeing him immersed in culture and how much that's strengthened him as a little boy who is real confident in who he is. I think that in itself is also reassuring and empowering, knowing that the future generations have that culture immersed in everyday routine.' Young people believed cultural strengthening programs were particularly needed for children who have experienced trauma and children in out-of-home care to ensure cultural and community connections. Challenges in adulthood if not connected to community during childhood were identified; 'There's people now that are trying to come into community and find out who they are. And because people might not know who they are, they're alienated. Which is sad.' One young person highlighted the need for readily available access to cultural programs for the sake of Aboriginal cultural continuity ('Our young ones are going to grow up and they're our next generation. They're the future. And if we don't support and nurture them and teach them, then our culture's just going to disappear').

3.2.6. Involvement in the research: 'it could potentially influence'

All three young people reported enjoying the process of engaging in research and the resultant reflections on their experiences ('I really enjoyed our yarn and it had me reflecting'). Young people believe that it is vital that Aboriginal young people's voices are heard in research that is about them ('People cannot speak about the lives or experiences of those they have not lived. It makes no sense'). They appreciated the opportunity to have their voices heard ('It's been good to be able to engage in this conversation because they're not always ones that are being told'). For one young person this was important as a way to contribute to reducing shame for others ('I think it often gets hard trying to talk about your journey, but... you want to be able to share and eliminate any kind of shame that goes with it'). For another young person, it was important to amplify on behalf of others.

I really liked talking about my experiences in care as a Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman and being able to have my voice heard. I think it's important because there's other kids that didn't get the same opportunities that I did growing up in care; that weren't connected in with culture.

4. Discussion

The young women joined the Narrun Yana collective in adolescence and emerging adulthood and continue their involvement as young women. According to both the team leader's and young people's accounts key SEWB benefits were in the areas of self-esteem, self-worth, confidence and emotional regulation. Also experienced was a strengthened understanding of themselves including strong, secure relationship to their Aboriginal identity. Participation strengthened their connections to each other, culture and community. This included sharing of culture, mastery of cultural practices and arts, respecting cultural protocols, obligations and reciprocity and thereby exercising their cultural rights and responsibilities. In addition, young people provided evidence that Narrun Yana increased empowerment and agency; they developed capacity for self-expression, were empowered to influence and impact, and had an increased sense of purpose and fulfilment. Young people learnt life skills including improved interpersonal skills and the acquisition of vocational and creative skills.

Importantly, the benefits of Narrun Yana followed participation in VACCA's cultural strengthening programs in childhood and adolescence. The SEWB successes of these programs were life-altering and included strengthened connection to community and culture. Program involvement resulted in a strong sense of cultural pride and identity, not felt prior to involvement in the programs; and belonging, not available in the outside world of school and other settings. For the two young people who grew up in out-of-home care, it was only through involvement in VACCA's cultural strengthening programs that they learnt of their culture, experienced cultural pride and connected to community. Community members are now a source of ongoing guidance, support and love and they experienced belonging by being with other young Aboriginal people. This wide range of reported SEWB benefits from both childhood cultural strengthening programs and Narrun Yana reflects Aboriginal conceptualisations of SEWB which include connections to self, community and culture (Gee et al., 2014) and was described in Murrup-Stewart's research exploring the relationships between cultural connection and SEWB (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021a).

Cora, while describing multiple significant positive impacts of cultural strengthening programs, also reflected that *'it doesn't make up for the cultural connection you could achieve being surrounded by family'*. This is a reminder that more must be done to support families so that children are able to be raised by their parents and support connecting children to families when children need to be in out-of-home care. Supporting families and strengthening family relationships need to be prioritized both to strengthen cultural connection and to privilege reunification (Krakouer et al., 2018; SNAICC, 2021).

Engagement in cultural programs strengthened young people's resilience in the face of intergenerational trauma, racism, cultural loss and other adversities. This aligns with Murrup-Stewart and colleagues' research which found that culture provided young people with a buffer from difficult experiences associated with being Aboriginal in a white-dominant society (2021b). Aboriginal gathering places have also been found to be important in linking Aboriginal people in to positive social, emotional, and spiritual experiences that increased resilience (Kingsley, Munro-Harrison, Jenkins, & Thorpe, 2018). A striking example in the current research of increased resilience gained to handle adversities in their lives was Aida sharing that without cultural strengthening programs she would not have finished high school.

VACCA's Team Leader of Children and Youth cautioned that cultural strengthening programs cannot be weighed down with the expectation of being a single solution to the complexity of Aboriginal children and young people's experiences including adversities, intergenerational trauma and racism. This highlights the importance of access to a broad range of services and programs. In addition to cultural programs, VACCA has a wide array of services young people can be connected to, including education support, leaving care and homelessness support. As evidenced by Narrun Yana, engagement in a safe cultural strengthening program, with supportive peers and trusting relationships can be the stepping stone to accessing mental health services. Similarly, Aboriginal gathering places, cultural hubs and healing centres were found to provide connection to place, Aboriginal culture, and healing as well as connection to mainstream health services (Kingsley, Munro-Harrison, Jenkins, & Thorpe, 2021). These findings are significant as Aboriginal young people, and particularly Aboriginal young people leaving care have poor mental health (Mendes et al., 2020) and are also less likely to access mental health services than non-Aboriginal young people. The recent Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System elucidated many of these reasons, building on the earlier findings of the Victorian Auditor General Office's audit on the accessibility of mainstream services for Aboriginal Victorians (State of Victoria, 2021; Victorian Auditor General's Office, 2014). Cultural programs cannot make up for these deficiencies, and the mainstream mental health system has been identified as needing transformational reform (State of Victoria, 2021). Mental health services need to be accessible, effective, trauma-informed, culturally responsive, culturally safe and available when Aboriginal young people seek them out. A reformed mental health system is needed to take full advantage of this benefit of cultural programs as an access point to mental health care.

The program elements required to achieve the identified SEWB benefits, strengthening of resilience and help seeking were identified. Cultural safety, Aboriginal-led, involvement of community, sharing of cultural knowledge and cultural practices and upholding of cultural protocols were identified as key elements of cultural strengthening programs. The findings highlight that cultural connection is relational and mediated through relationships. This supports the findings of Murrup-Stewart and colleagues who found that relationships was a key theme in describing culture in the yarns conducted with Aboriginal young people living in Naarm and that culture was understood as embedded within relationships (Murrup-Stewart, Whyman, Jobson, & Adams, 2021b). Critical to the success of Narrun Yana was the centrality of relationships; trusting, lasting relationships with the manager, secure, supportive relationships with each other and the two-way involvement of community; being taught by Elders and mentors and as cultural knowledge holders being entrusted to share this knowledge with community. The collective supported the young people's shared interest in art practice and allowed for sharing of culture and storytelling through their art. Key also was the trauma-informed model of Narrun Yana, based on values of strengths-based, holistic, flexible, ongoing, and promoting empowerment through co-design.

Young people experienced *'healing through culture'* by engaging in cultural strengthening programs and more broadly; young people connected to culture outside of organised cultural programs. Young people with an out-of-home care experience needed the introduction of cultural strengthening programs to develop cultural pride, and connections and security in community, to seek out broader opportunities to connect to culture. All three young people wanted cultural programs to be readily accessible for all Aboriginal children and young people and especially for children and young people in out-of-home care or having left out-of-home care. Young people spoke of the need for children and young people to be supported to connect to culture for their SEWB benefit and for the ongoing transmission, sustainability and survival of Aboriginal cultures. This aligns with Murrup-Stewart and colleagues' findings that being strong in culture was often difficult to attain for Aboriginal young people living in Naarm (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021b), reinforcing the value of accessible cultural programs. It is Aboriginal children's right to know and practice their culture (Blackstock, Bamblett & Black, 2020; United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 2007). Survival of culture is essential, and the future of culture relies on youth participation, engagement, and intergenerational sharing of culture. Bamblett highlighted this: *"The importance of culture and the protective and healing power culture provides for Aboriginal children is not fully understood or appreciated. In Victoria, cultural regeneration must be acknowledged as a priority as a state without culture is a diminished state"* (Blackstock et al., 2020). It is hoped that this research can contribute in a small part to the healing power of culture being understood and appreciated beyond Aboriginal communities. Cultural strengthening programs, such as those discussed here, contribute to cultural regeneration and support transmission of culture to the next generation. Supporting, resourcing and funding cultural programs can contribute to this needed cultural regeneration and could contribute to building both individual resilience and community resilience.

4.1. Implications for practice and policy

The young person led art collective Narrun Yana, followed involvement in a range of cultural strengthening programs during childhood and adolescence, all managed by a consistent, committed worker; thus, engagement privileged time, trust and relationships.

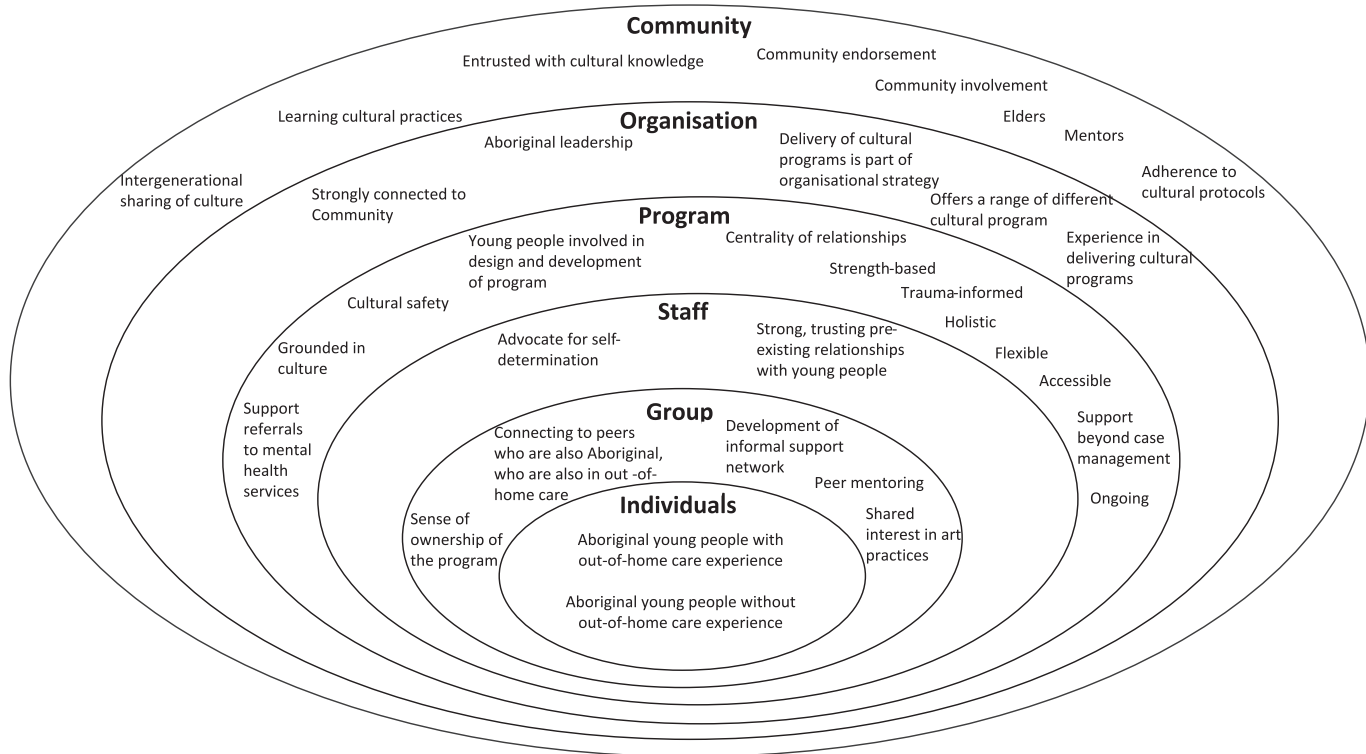


Fig. 1. Critical elements of Narrun Yana.

Young people explained that trauma is experienced differently, healing journeys are different for everyone, and cultural programs need to reflect this diversity. VACCA's practice of aiming cultural strengthening programs at children and young people with out-of-home care experience while being accessible to Aboriginal children and young people more broadly has been a successful model. This research highlights the benefit of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations providing a suite of cultural programs to Aboriginal children and young people so that there is a range of programs on offer and to cater to different needs and interests so that young people can experience cultural and community connection over time. Design, development and delivery of cultural programs need to be part of organisational strategy to have longevity and impact. The successful delivery of cultural programs needs support from the organisation to provide the time, commitment and resources required: time to build relationships, time to co-design the model, and time to engage with community.

Resourcing community and community organisations to lead the design, development and delivery of cultural programs is needed. The voices of Aboriginal young people with lived experience are critical to developing programs and shaping policies. Critical elements of cultural strengthening programs identified in this research could be considered, translated and adopted by other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to develop locally-based cultural programs privileging lived experience and community leadership. Fig. 1 illustrates elements that were critical to successfully supporting the young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and includes elements at the individual, group, staff, program, organisation and community level.

Narrun Yana does not have ongoing funding, rather it is funded via sporadic philanthropic funding, which is a resource intensive process to secure. Access to cultural strengthening programs needs to be available for all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and all Aboriginal young people who have left out-of-home care and this requires a significant change to secure ongoing and non-restrictive funding from governments.

There needs to be strong commitment to protecting, promoting, reviving and celebrating Aboriginal culture. Cultural strengthening, improved SEWB, and reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care are newly introduced indicators in the Commonwealth Government's Closing the Gap policy commitments (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Embedding cultural strengthening programs across the child and family welfare, mental health and education sectors so that all Aboriginal children and young people have access to cultural connection and strengthening would be a strong, practical implementation of these commitments and should also be seen as a form of restorative justice; restoring what was deliberately damaged by successive governments' laws, policies and practices (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission HREOC, 1997).

4.2. Limitations

A limitation was the hybrid approach to data collection, where two young people participated in interviews and one young person provided written responses to the interview questions. Less data was available from the written responses compared to the interviews and there was not the option to ask additional, prompting questions. Another limitation was the small sample, meaning the findings cannot be generalized. However, the findings do offer a valuable contribution to understanding the experience of participation in cultural strengthening programs, an area where there is limited research and the research design and approach allowed for a focus on depth rather than breadth.

4.3. Suggestions for further research

The young people reflected positively on being involved in the research. This is an important reminder; young people can be committed to participate and being heard when the research is experienced as safe, respectful and meaningful. This was also the experience of young people who had been in out-of-home care, including Indigenous youth, involved in participatory research in Canada (Doucet, Pratt, Dzhenganin, & Read, 2022) and Aboriginal adults participating in Aboriginal-designed empowerment programs (Gee et al., 2022).

This research centered the voice of young people. Research led or co-designed by young people themselves is needed. A stand-out example from Australia is the Koorie Youth Council's *Ngada-Dji* (hear me): *Young voices creating change for justice*; a research project highlighting the experiences of Aboriginal young people connected to the youth justice system. The research was led by Aboriginal young people and had a strong policy and advocacy focus (Koorie Youth Council, 2018). An overseas example, which was not specific to Indigenous youth but included Indigenous young people, was a Canadian participatory art-facilitated research approach with young people who had been in out-of-home care as co-researchers (Doucet et al., 2022). An impactful research design is the research-as-healing approach powerfully used by Andrews (2020) where Aboriginal women created possum-skin cloaks as part of the research sharing their experiences of family violence. Research needs to prioritise participation, advocacy and self-determination and embrace innovation and creativity. The present research and other examples discussed amplified the voices of Aboriginal young people and adults. Research is also needed that amplifies the voices of Aboriginal children.

5. Conclusion

The voices of Aboriginal young people can educate. Much is written about the need to hear the voices of young people in research. When we do hear their voices we need to respond, to advocate, to act. Hearing is a two-way process; to be heard and to hear. Aboriginal children and young people have the right to their culture, to an Aboriginal childhood and are the hope of the future for Aboriginal cultures. It is important to ensure Aboriginal young people are strengthened and empowered, that they see themselves as positive contributors and cultural custodians, learning, sharing and passing on culture; for the future of culture and for young people's SEWB.

This research highlighted the importance of privileging Aboriginal young people's voices. In research, this promotes policy and practice that is informed by lived experience and is meaningful to those it seeks to benefit. In practice, this contributes to countering the impacts of intergenerational trauma; empowerment via truth-telling and storytelling.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Further reading

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). Return to country framework. Melbourne: VACCA.