



Otago cultural healing project improves mental health for girls

A new bicultural, strength-based healing project piloted in Otago has demonstrated compelling and positive outcomes for Māori, Pasifika and European-heritage girls who have experienced trauma and were considered vulnerable to suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Supported by a fellowship award of AUD10,000 from the Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia, the *Whaiora Pilot Project* was undertaken by Kirsten Taylor, Head of Guidance Counselling at Otago Girls' High School, to investigate the impact of culturally appropriate interventions for girls experiencing psychological distress.

The culturally responsive healing programme centred on bicultural counselling sessions for each girl and attendance at a three-day workshop led by cultural partners *Manawa Ora*. The workshop introduced girls and their families to traditional philosophy and practices, including *waiata* [song], connection to *tupuna* [ancestors], and *Mirimiri*, which Taylor describes as “a recognised Māori holistic form of bodywork and healing which assists the individual to release stress, tension, blockages and trauma that accumulate in the body over time and contribute to unwellness and chronic disease”.

Ms Taylor said she began the project as a response to the increasing need for an alternative solution to the suicidal vulnerability of young Māori and Pasifika students.

‘To support these students, I devised a solution that incorporated a cultural response that was centred in the body, rather than through talk therapy,’ said Ms Taylor.

‘This approach felt like a more appropriate adolescent intervention,’ she said.

As a result of the project, girls disclosed histories that they had not previously sought help for and were adding to their risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation, including domestic violence, sexual assault, physical assault and eating disorders. Nine of the twelve girls were empowered to seek help and ongoing support, as a result of which Taylor liaised with a range of external agencies including general practitioners, the local hospital, youth services and a private psychologist. In addition, through the involvement and cooperation of parents who participated in the project, the safety net for these girls was further expanded.

Ms Taylor said she has been heartened by the way the participating young women have become increasingly hopeful and empowered.

‘We’ve seen these positive changes throughout the process of learning about themselves and acquiring the tools to help themselves in the future,’ said Ms Taylor.

‘Our young people are a precious *taonga* [treasure] that deserve to be protected. This process has been a privilege and I am extremely happy with the outcome of the pilot project,’ she said.



Executive Officer of the Alliance of Girls' School, Loren Bridge, said girls' schools were particularly well placed to explore tailored wellbeing projects like the *Whaiora Project*.

'Girls' schools have a unique strength in their ability to support young women and investigate the needs specific to them, with every programme and every educator focused on what is best for girls,' said Ms Bridge.

'The Alliance Fellowship is awarded annually and prioritises original, creative and inspiring research that benefits the education of girls. Kirsten's innovative project and findings will be shared with all Alliance member schools across New Zealand and Australia, ultimately improving outcomes for girls.

'Never before has the mental wellbeing of our youth been more fragile or more important and so the findings of this project are incredibly important,' she said.

Detailed project results:

- Three students moved away from harmful caregivers.
- Four students transitioned into tertiary studies.
- Three students formed new friendships and discontinued harmful ones.
- Three junior students were each enabled to 'teach' four groups of 30 of their Year 9 peers how to care for their bodies using *rākau* [pressure releasing tools] by directly working on the body.
- The participants reported a reduction of post-traumatic stress symptoms, a reduction of depressive or anxiety related symptoms, improved self-management in relation to externalising behaviour problems, and improved self-esteem.
- 11 of the 12 students reported that their *Mauri* [life force] had increased.
- Common to all 12 *rangatahi wāhine* [young women] was a renewed sense of hope. All of them were able to articulate both present and future visions that were achievable and fulfilling.

Ms Taylor concluded that her dream would be to see to see a culturally responsive practice model being adopted by pastoral care teams in secondary schools in both New Zealand and Australia.

'The learning that comes from this approach has the capacity to build resilience for these young people's future selves,' she said.
