



Empowering Youth

A Report on Bullying and Mental Health in the community and how it affects young people's daily lives

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Please note: The Youth Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians is an independent advisory council. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Office of Youth Affairs or the Northern Territory Government.

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1. The Office of Youth Affairs (OYA) for their support and guidance. In particular thanks to Vicki Schultz for keeping me on track.
2. All the parents and young people who participated in my interview, your time and effort is much appreciated.
3. Thanks to Peter Bourke at Headspace for assisting me with all the help I needed.

Abbreviations

OYA	Office of Youth Affairs
NT	Northern Territory
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Executive Summary

The Empowering Youth Project is aimed towards young people of all cultures in the Alice Springs community to examine adolescent changes and the way these changes and attitudes affect young people's emotional wellbeing.

To complete this project, I used the processes of examining current literature and distributing surveys, to find out exactly how to assist, support and encourage young people who may be experiencing difficult times.

Further to researching current literature, a participative element to the project was developed. A two-day pilot workshop/camp was created to give young people an opportunity to really connect with each other.

The aim of the camp was to raise young peoples' awareness of how they can help themselves and others to make their lives a bit easier and have a more open minded perspective and attitude in the future.

From research and the participative element of the project I have formulated the following recommendations:

1. The workshop to be run every six months and some of the previous young people to participate letting others know what they gained out of the camp and how they found the different services that can help improve their everyday living.

Ways that parents and education staff can work together to reduce the amount of stereotyping, bullying and raise awareness of supports available for young people are:

2. Schools to host performances and information workshops on bullying and awareness of what happens around them in school, where young people can be assisted by professionals on issues that young people are currently facing.
3. Parents to be updated at parent/teacher interview nights of what their child/ren are being taught in class and what parents can do at home to complement their achievements.
4. Schools to offer a workshop once a term for each class of students to talk to each other about what they are finding hard at school.
5. More information needs to be provided to students and parents as to the different stages student will go through during adolescence and how parents can support the young people through these changes that could be difficult at times.

6. Information packages provided to all parents of students entering middle and senior school, outlining the life stages the young person will be entering throughout adolescence, the impact of bullying, stereotyping and mental health issues the young person may face over their final years at school and how parents can be proactive in helping the young person make good choices in regards to their activities and relationships.

To increase and improve respect in each student:

7. Schools need to provide sessions for students to get to know each other before a term starts to give each student the chance to really know everyone rather than simply to judge them without knowing what kind of person they really are. This will be provided at the school rather than an external workshop.
8. All teachers should be role models to the younger generation so students can be more mature and act responsibly towards each other.

2. Introduction

As a member of the 2009 Youth Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians, the Empowering Youth project aims to provide recommendations to the Northern Territory Government on different issues that young Territorians face today and explain a possible camp/workshop model to assist young people in accessing support to work through some of these issues.

Background

I decided to pursue a project about mental health and bullying issues amongst adolescents because this is a huge issue amongst young people in schools and work places in the Alice Springs community.

I believe this issue to be important because it affects young people's social and emotional wellbeing.

To make sure that the project was a good idea, I conducted some background research. This included interviewing parents and young people in the community and using the internet to research the issues.

I spoke with a number of people about the possible project and they supported me by helping to run the trial workshop and assisting with supporting young people over the weekend.

When considering what services are already available to young people in Alice Springs, I noticed that there are a lot of services but not much in the way of face-to-face workshops with other young people to share and learn together. This is why I decided to include the participative workshop element in my project.

Aims

The aim of the project is to help young people move towards healthy and positive life choices into the future and to increase their knowledge of where they can go in the community for social and emotional support.

The desired outcomes are to have young people be youth leaders in school and have support groups running in schools, facilitated by the youth leaders.

Definitions

Stereotype is defined as *an image or idea of a particular type of person or thing that has become fixed through being widely held*, Word Power Dictionary.

Stereotyping seems to be a normal part of everyday life for many young people, and it has both emotional and psychological affects on young people's lives.

Mental health is defined as *a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community*, World Health Organisation.

Cultural differences, subjective assessments, and competing professional theories can affect how the term "mental health" is used in everyday settings.

Bullying is defined as *an act of deliberate intimidation or persecution of those who are weaker*, Word Power Dictionary.

Adolescence is defined as *a process of development from a child into and adult*, Word Power Dictionary.

Virtue is defined as *a behavior showing high moral standards, a quality considered morally good or desirable*, Word Power Dictionary.

3. Surveys

The surveys were constructed to find out information about what young people and parents thought about bullying and its effects on mental health and also to gather their ideas about the 48-hour workshop.

Responses were received from 70 young people. Results from the surveys are considered in the Major Findings section below.

Many of the significant considerations I needed to make in the research process were directly related to the surveys.

The survey was complied with the following requirements:

- Confidentiality - no names were recorded against any survey results. This is an essential aspect of research that deals with sensitive topics such as mental health, bullying and self-esteem.
- User friendly - only basic questions were asked in the survey so people from all levels of education could participate.
- Non-confrontational - sensitive issues are better researched by being able to be flexible and respectful. If someone doesn't want to answer, that is his or her right.
- Private - sensitive issues are better responded to if the respondent is alone, reducing social pressure.
- Time friendly – questions were quick and easy so that it didn't take up much time to respond. By using questions that were just yes and no, there were no participants who perceived that it was a difficult task to answer questions.

Survey Challenges

Distance - the amount of effort involved in getting to each destination to meet up with people to have an interview was a time consuming factor.

I also had to conduct a second round of surveys and interviews as not enough evidence was gathered the first time around.

4. Workshop

Through background research, consultation and analysis of local services, I decided to include a participative element to my project – a workshop.

Proposed workshop:

The “Empowering Youth” workshop would aim to provide assistance in connecting young people to support and development services and recovery programs if needed in the future, so they can achieve their goals. The proposed workshop could provide support to 20 young people in Alice Springs, who may have mental health and/or alcohol and drug related issues. The workshop would provide information and advice from professionals about pathways for future development, goal setting and the young person’s wellbeing.

Pilot workshop:

A pilot workshop was run in conjunction with Peter Bourke from *headspace* Alice Springs on 4 September 2009. Ten young people from *headspace*’s youth advisory group attended the workshop which gave them the opportunity to get to know each other better.

5. Major Findings

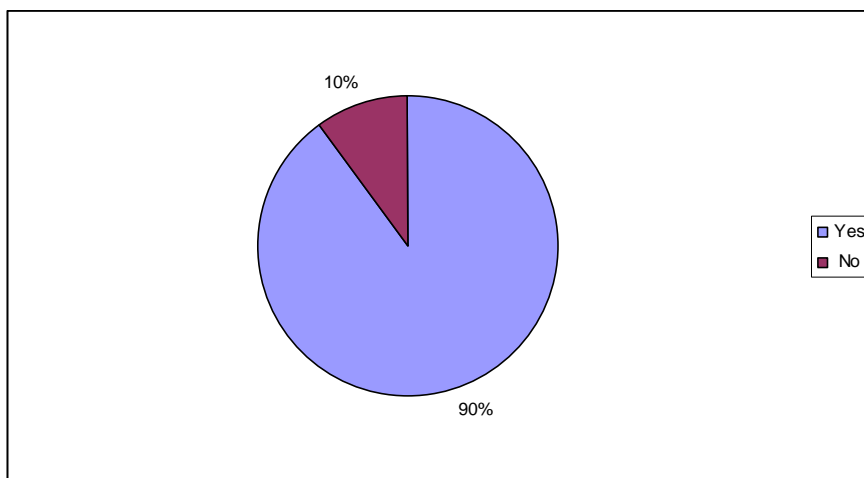
Surveys

Age: 16 - 18

Gender: 30 Female 40 Male

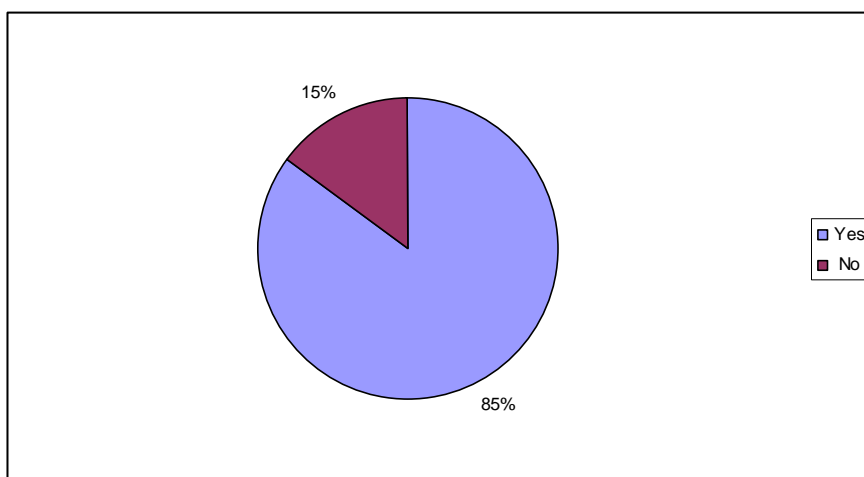
Location: Alice Springs

Graph one: Has stereotyping affected your social wellbeing?



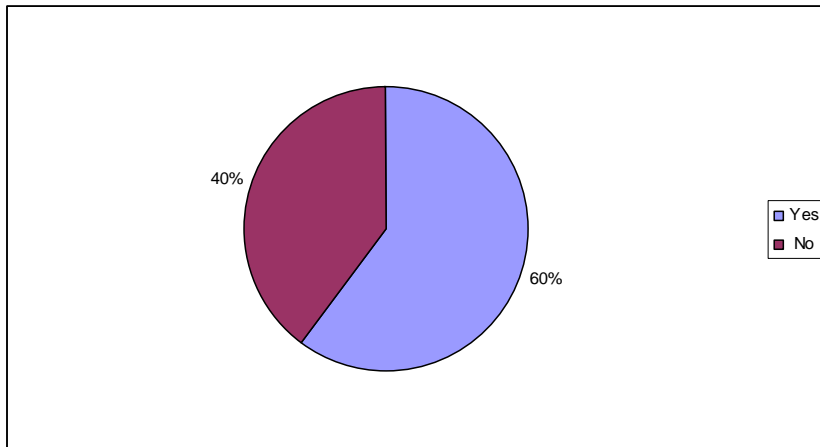
90% of respondents said that they have been stereotyped and that this has affected their emotional and social well being.

Graph two: Having been stereotyped did you develop any mental health issues?



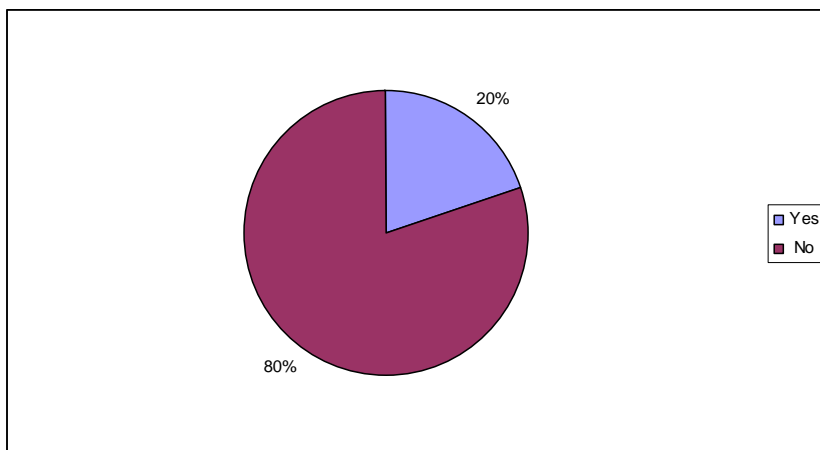
85 % of respondents developed mental health issues such as low self esteem, depression, anxiety or even suicidal thoughts as a result of stereotyping and its associated results.

Graph three: Do you think bullying is a problem in your school?



60% of respondents believe that bullying is an issue at their school.

Graph four: Do you think schools are doing as much as necessary to stop bullying?



Only 20% of respondents believe that their schools are doing enough to combat bullying.

When asked for some suggestions as to how schools, parents and students can do more to limit the impact or prevent bullying at schools, the following was noted:

- workshops where students open up among peers (School Student at Braitling School)
- schools to encourage tolerance and non-judgmental attitudes (Headspace Youth Advisory Group)
- teachers should be role models to students (Year 12 student OLSH).

Workshop

The running of the 48 hour pilot workshop gave 10 young people between the ages of 12 to 18 the opportunity to learn with others going through the same troubles as themselves, to know that they are not alone. The workshop was a 'trust zone' at all times and nothing left the workshop, so young people felt free and comfortable to disclose information about their personal issues if needed.

There was one youth worker and two counselors who volunteered from *headspace* assisted in this weekend workshop to provide professional social and emotional support to the young participants. Teachers and school counselors from local schools were also involved in the preparation and running of the workshop.

The workshop provided food and accommodation, at Living Water School hall, to let young people stay overnight under adult supervision at all times. The participants who stayed overnight were able to gain more from the workshop experience.

We started the weekend by watching a movie called *Freedom Writers*. *The movie is a gripping story of inner city kids raised on drive-by shootings and hard-core attitudes - and the teacher who gives them the one thing they need most: a voice of their own. Dropped into the free-fire zone of a school torn by violence and racial tension, teacher Erin Gruwell battles an uncaring system in a fight to make the classroom matter in her student's lives. Now, telling their own stories, and hearing the stories of others, a group of supposedly "unteachable" teens will discover the power of tolerance, reclaim their shattered lives, and change their world.*¹ The movie provided participants with a better understanding of stereotyping and how this affects others' lives.

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998/synopsisshow>

After the movie we had a discussion about stereotyping and how it can affect our lives. Then each young person had to choose a virtue that he/she would focus on over the weekend.

Police also attended the workshop to provide information about bullying and violence towards young people.

Further topics that were addressed in the workshop were communication, trust, depression, adolescence, relationships, drugs and alcohol abuse and suicide. These issues are all linked with mental health issues and discussion of them highlighted some possible consequences if mental health problems take over your life.

After the workshop:

In the proposed model after the workshop occurs, it is hoped that the main person running the workshop will keep in contact with the young people who attended the workshop to see how the workshop has affected their lives and will do this by holding a meeting every three months to catch up with everyone.

Evaluation of the workshop:

The workshop went well over the weekend. There was a lot of free time that would need to be filled in any future workshop. All who attended the workshop caught up the following Friday to talk about the camp and there was very positive feedback about it. The subject of stereotyping really affected everyone and seeing how it affects others as well has helped them to see other young people in a different and more respectful way.

Feedback from the professional support workers was also positive and one suggestion for future workshops was that the workshop should be run every six months and previous attendees should promote the workshop and explain how it positively affected their lives (*headspace* worker).

The next time the workshop is run, it should be supported by 10 professionals including school teachers, counselors, nurses, social workers, *headspace* staff, Holyoake staff and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress staff among other relevant volunteers. These people should be involved to provide professional social and emotional support over the weekend and to assist the young participants to move towards healthy and positive life choices. Also, for future workshops, young people should be able to be referred from the Alice Springs Hospital, school counselors, youth workers and other health and mental health services.

When asked how schools, parents and students can do more to limit the impact or prevent bullying at schools, the following was noted:

- performances and information workshops on bullying and awareness of where help can be found (Teacher at Centralian College)
- parents updated about their child/ren's classes and what they can do at home to complement school work (School Nurse and mother of two)
- information given to students and parents about adolescence (School Counselor and mother of two)
- information packages about the impact of bullying, stereotyping and mental health issues young people might face over final years at school (Student Support Officer Flinders University and mother of three).

6. Recommendations

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