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Study highlights dimensions of resilience among remote Aboriginal middle school students

More than 1000 students and teachers from remote Northern Territory (NT) schools have assisted in implementing the Skills for Life resilience program with results now published in the highly regarded multidisciplinary journal *PLOS ONE*.

The innovative study by researchers at Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) is part of a program in partnership with five NT secondary/middle schools which sought to evaluate the implementation of Skills for Life, a program of social emotional learning (SEL) for remote Aboriginal students in years seven to ten.

Menzies lead author, Professor Gary Robinson says the Skills for Life program was developed in consultation with knowledgeable elders, community members and educators in remote NT communities.

“It aims to build students’ resilience as a contribution to youth suicide prevention, which is a critical concern of remote NT communities.

“It is a 12-lesson curriculum designed to be taught to middle school students in their classrooms over one - two school terms,” Prof Robinson said.

The Skills for Life research team worked with schools to provide information to parents about the program, and with the support of the schools evaluated the program using data gathered from the students and from the students’ classroom teachers.

Methods were developed to assist students to complete questionnaires detailing life stressors they had experienced, their psychological wellbeing, emotional and behavioural symptoms and resilience. The interview process was an important learning process for students.

According to Professor Robinson the results demonstrate that it is possible to use formal methods of data-collection using standardised constructs with remote students. However, they also point to significant questions about the different strengths that students use in response to the many challenges they face, and the need to undertake further research to improve our understanding of resilience across diverse communities and cultures.

“In implementing programs and building evidence for their effectiveness it is critically important to establish the reliability and validity of instruments designed to measure important outcomes. In this case, data were gathered from students whose first language was an Aboriginal language, responding to questionnaires in English,” Prof Robinson said.

“It was important to test the validity of the constructs of resilience used to measure outcomes for this program to ensure that results would be meaningful for students with different experiences of education and living in remote communities characterised by significant social and cultural diversity.”

Two measures of resilience were tested. One, the CDRISC-10 was a short measure of psychological (individual) resilience focusing on individual persistence, optimism and adaptability in the face of adversity; the other was the CYRM-12, a short measure of socio-cultural resilience which focused on availability of supportive relationships and resources from peers, family and community that help the person deal with adversity.

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for the two scales to establish construct validity for the two measures. Then further analysis was undertaken to see whether resilience, as measured in these ways, was associated with reduced psychological distress and emotional and behavioural difficulties, when life stress experiences were taken into account. In other words, is higher resilience associated with lower psycho-social risk?

Analysis demonstrated that the two measures of psychological and socio-cultural resilience are valid constructs. However, surprisingly, higher levels of psychological resilience was associated with higher psychological distress and symptoms. On the other hand, higher levels of socio-cultural resilience – supports among friends, family and community – tended to be linked with lower distress and symptoms.

Prof Robinson says the analysis suggests that, while psychological resilience is activated as students experience distress in dealing with the many challenges they face – teasing, bullying, exposure to violence, suicidal behaviour and other stressors – supportive social relationships and resources are critical for reducing distress and associated risks.

The article published in *PLOS ONE* can be read [here](#).

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, a leader in global and tropical research into life-threatening illnesses, with programs of research on child development and education, suicide prevention and mental health. Menzies translates research into effective partnerships and programs in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.