



Supporting workers in an Indigenous boarding school program

An APS Interest Group volunteer partnership

*The APS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Psychology (ATSIPP) Interest Group recently entered into a volunteer supervision partnership with Yalari, a Queensland-based Indigenous organisation which places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in boarding schools throughout Australia. Members of the APS Interest Group have provided voluntary supervision to Student Support Officers whose role is to facilitate the students' school experience and personal growth. In this article, the co-convenors of the Interest Group, **Stephen Meredith MAPS** and **Kelleigh Ryan Assoc MAPS**, describe the partnership that was created between the ATSIPP Interest Group and Yalari.*

Yalari is a Queensland-based non-government, not-for-profit organisation, which has as its stated aim to “bring about long term generational change by giving Indigenous children the opportunity for a first class education through full boarding scholarships at some of the highest achieving secondary schools in Australia”. Yalari currently has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children placed in boarding schools in many States across Australia. Yalari employs Indigenous or non-Indigenous Student Support Officers in each of these locations. Their role is “to sit between the school, the family and community, and the student to ensure that lines of communication are kept open” and “to mentor and support the students” in their academic, social, physical and spiritual growth.

This role is both rewarding and challenging for the Student Support Officers (SSOs). They provide support for many common issues such as cultural differences, homesickness and school work, which are often experienced by any youth and adolescent children who are attending boarding schools. The SSOs also provide support and advice for the students, schools and parents around more complex and challenging issues. They are often required to respond out of working hours to incidents involving the students they are supporting and their families and communities.

Genesis of the volunteering project

The volunteering project grew out of a request by the then Yalari coordinator of the SSOs, Nicole Tujaque, who identified a risk that the SSOs may experience ‘burnout’ as a result of this challenging work environment. Her view was that the risk of burnout would be less if the SSOs were able to receive quality supervision of the type received by psychologists in the course of their clinical work. As with most NGOs, there was no available funding for such supervision, so she approached the ATSIPP Interest Group with a request to send out a call to its members to consider offering monthly supervision for one or more SSOs on a voluntary basis.

The request was sent out to all ATSIPP members in time for the project to commence at the start of the 2013 school year, and a large number of members responded with interest. Some lived near the schools concerned while others were prepared to offer supervision remotely if necessary. Within a month, all SSOs had

been matched with a volunteer psychologist from the APS Interest Group who was able to provide face-to-face supervision at least once a month. The volunteering project is supporting SSOs working in schools in NSW, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia.

Experiences of the volunteering partnership

The partnership is still in its infancy and its future is uncertain because, at the end of 2013, there was a change of coordinators of the SSOs and a number of the SSOs have moved on for a variety of personal reasons, not least being the casual and part-time nature of the work.

However, a number of useful lessons have been learned already by those involved on both sides of the partnership, who were asked for feedback after about six months of the project. These lessons are captured in the quotations below.

Student Support Officers' feedback

- “ I have found the peer support very helpful in **assisting me to 'remove' myself emotionally** from a work situation and to concentrate more on the action needed to support, and assist the student/s to develop their coping strategies and thought processes. ”
- “ As a Student Support Officer I have recognised the importance and **correlation between my own wellbeing and the wellbeing of my students**. Having the opportunity to meet with someone regularly and discuss how I am feeling and tracking along has been worthwhile and assisted me greatly in my role. It has also offered me a great opportunity to discuss some things out and get the advice from someone else who also has great experience in the field. ”
- “ I have met with [supervisor] once and she was brilliant. She offered to meet once a month and I can contact her via phone when I need to. She gave me sound advice which I have used with some of the girls. She made my head explode with her knowledge about

selective mutism. She **gave sound advice** regarding talking to [student] about how amazing her coping skills are. ”

- “ As I am working in a location that is geographically distanced from colleagues and head office, I have found that meeting with the peer support person **makes me feel less isolated**. Some of the guidance offered has made such a difference to the wellbeing of the girls that I look after, and has given me some great tools to use in the future with other students.

Student Support Officers' Coordinator feedback

- “ When I first thought about the need for supervision, **I had no idea how beneficial it would be**, for the individual students who have specific challenges, that in turn, the SSOs struggle with. ”
- “ I think the project is **incredibly valuable to this team**. **We have been able to share things learned in our workshops as well**, so the benefits are not just to the individual SSOs, although **keeping them emotionally safe has been the biggest goal**. I did expect that the meetings would happen more readily, there always seems to be some reason why someone cannot connect, so it is taking longer to establish strong relationships than I anticipated. I suppose that is a sign of how busy everyone is. ”

Volunteer supervisors' feedback

- “ I'm **impressed with the commitment of the SSOs** in juggling the complex and sometimes conflicting needs of the young person, the family, the school and the boarding house. The two SSOs that I've worked with have also been prepared to go well beyond their time allocation to deal with these needs, including being available to the young person and their family on weekends, not only by phone but sometimes also in person. I can understand why Yalari was keen for them to have some support! ”
- “ The SSO and I had talked on the phone initially about each of our understandings of my role. One thing coming out was my being available for her to discuss things in her work situation which may be complicated or even uncomfortable in some "inner" way. **I feel sensitive to assisting her to keep balance** as she prioritises things in her life. ”
- “ For me the experience of supervision **keeps me in touch with what's happening on the ground** in schools for Aboriginal students. As a community psychologist I'm really interested in the systemic factors that impact on students and staff in schools. ”

- “ The most valuable aspect of my supervision has been a **deepening of my understanding** of the everyday issues which Aboriginal children and young people face when they are away from Country. Their connections to their community may be both a strength and a strain when they are far away. ”
- “ I have also learnt how much work needs to be done in schools to prepare the way for a program such as Yalari. **The extent of unthinking racism** from well-meaning students in good schools **has shocked me**. ”
- “ **I have been amazed at the amount of casual racism experienced by the students** my School Support Officer sees. I wonder what teaching materials the schools could be directed to in preparation for taking students. ”
- “ **The issue of racism** only surfaced as we talked – but it certainly **was/is something in the background**. She is not able to bring it to the foreground (but was able to in our sharing time) because of the need for diplomacy in her position in the school. ”
- “ The most valuable aspect of the Yalari supervision experience for me has been knowing that I am supporting a process in the community in which I live, that will benefit young Aboriginal students. In this rural town there is still racism and a general lack of acceptance, but with organisations like Yalari we can make a change. I am committed to walking through life and work with my fellow Aboriginal colleagues and **I feel a part of the process of change** in doing so. ”

From our experience of the Yalari partnership, the ATSIPP Interest Group would encourage other APS Member Groups to look favourably at any similar volunteering opportunities that might come their way. The voluntary contributions of our members have been outstanding, and they have clearly been enriched by their contact with the Student Support Officers, to the point that it has really been a source of professional development for them over and above the contribution they have been able to make to the program.

We have also learned some valuable lessons in terms of managing the expectations of the volunteers as they navigate the complexities of their roles alongside those of the SSOs and the lives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students themselves. In addition, we are also learning that ensuring sustainability for the long term is perhaps the biggest challenge of all for a project like Yalari (and other such organisations working in this important yet complex area) and a partnership based on the good will of volunteers and over-stretched, under-resourced workers. ■

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