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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reconnection Project Evaluation Report

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reconnection Project Evaluation Report

Abstract

The Australian Museum, in partnership with The Street University Mount Druitt, Fairfield Museum, Juvenile Justice (Cobham and Juniperina centres) and ICE (Information and Cultural Exchange) Parramatta, facilitated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reconnection Project from 2014 to 2015, which sought to address the potential link between the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in Juvenile Justice alongside the possible cultural dislocation which may lead to a compromised sense of self identity. The project, which took place within the Museum and as outreach programs at Juvenile Justice centres, community centres and events, were held as one-day workshops/events or as a series of workshops spanning several weeks. They explored Aboriginal cultural expressions, such as dancing, painting, storytelling and music making, for young people to explore their Indigenous identity in a safe place; where questions could be asked of Indigenous and Pacific museum staff, and encouraged young people to inquire further into their own cultural identity with family and tribal group leaders. This report highlights the impact of this project upon facilitators of the project (Thelma Thomas and Chris Reid), participants (Aboriginal young people in the Juvenile Justice system, totaling 22 participants from 2014-2015) and stakeholders (Juniperina, Cobham, Street University and ICE). These reflections took the form of interviews with the facilitators and stakeholders in person or via email, and surveys and personal reflections by student participants. Important themes emerged from all three groups, which are reflected in this report. The final section considers the highlights of the program and recommendations from all groups, and how the project's impact can be increased in future manifestations of the project.

Keywords

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AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Reconnection Project Evaluation Report

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Pictures of people in this report have given permission for their image to be used, and are not participants of the Reconnection Project.

Western Sydney University and Australian Museum respectively acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands in which we carry out this work, and pay respect to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Elders both past and present.

Background

In 2009, a working partnership was established with the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice Fairfield Office, enabling at-risk young people from Pacific communities to interact and reconnect with culturally significant artefacts. Statistics revealed that in 2006, young people from Pacific backgrounds made up 1.1% of the NSW population but constitute 7% of juvenile offenders on community based orders. As custodians of one of the world's most significant Pacific cultural collections, Australia Museum aimed to encourage cultural awareness amongst young people from Pacific communities in NSW. This project built on the work of Dion Peita, Thelma Thomas, Logan Metcalfe and the cultural collections team, and we acknowledge their pioneering of this vision for the project. This project was funded by the Vincent Fairfax Foundation and the Australian Museum Foundation, and commenced in September 2012, aiming to address the over-representation of young people from the Pacific diaspora in the NSW Juvenile Justice systems, through initiatives which connect Pacific young people and their communities to the cultural collections. Thelma Thomas was the youth worker for this project, working with the team to design and facilitate workshops. A focus of the project was to explore how it could contribute to holistic intervention programs, and facilitate access to its extensive collections and other cultural resources to young people within the Juvenile Justice system.

Aboriginal young people too are overrepresented in the Juvenile Justice system. Of the 929 young people in youth detention on an average night in June, half will be Aboriginal. Despite extensive evidence that risk factors for Aboriginal young people include not only substance abuse and poverty, but also issues related to cultural dislocation and compromised cultural identity, there is a growing need for more culturally specific education programs for Aboriginal youth in detention in NSW. The Australia Museum has, in the past, had Indigenous young people from detention centres enrolled in the Pacific Youth Reconnection Program, due to the need for culturally appropriate alternatives. This is not regarded as ideal when striving to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal young people in the Juvenile Justice system.

As a result of the success of the Pacific Youth Reconnection Project, in December 2014, an Aboriginal Youth Worker was appointed to the Australian Museum's Cultural Collections and Community Engagements team to work on a project that sought to engage Aboriginal young people in a similar way, drawing on Aboriginal artefacts at the Australia Museum. Chris Reid is a Maleurindi man from the Dunghutti Nation, with extensive experience working with young people faced with issues around cultural/self-identity, resilience and life skills. He also has a background in visual arts and dance and is passionate about sustainable and empowering opportunities for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander young people. Together with Thelma Thomas, they designed and facilitated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reconnection Project.

Overview

The Australian Museum, in partnership with The Street University Mount Druitt, Fairfield Museum, Juvenile Justice (Cobham and Juniperina centres) and ICE (Information and Cultural Exchange) Parramatta, facilitated the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reconnection Project from 2014 to 2015, which sought to address the potential link between the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in Juvenile Justice alongside the possible cultural dislocation which may lead to a compromised sense of self identity. The project, which took place within the Museum and as outreach programs at Juvenile Justice centres, community centres and events, were held as one-day workshops/events or as a series of workshops spanning several weeks. They explored Aboriginal cultural expressions, such as dancing, painting, storytelling and music making, for young people to explore their Indigenous identity in a safe place; where questions could be asked of Indigenous and Pacific museum staff, and encouraged young people to inquire further into their own cultural identity with family and tribal group leaders. A key feature of the project, alongside these creative expressions, was an exhibition of cultural artefacts from different clans across Australia. These artefacts contained within them stories that resonated with the clans that these young people belonged to, and as reported by facilitators and participants alike, resonated deeply with aspects of cultural identity and selfhood. These artefacts were also displayed at community events, where non-Aboriginal Australians were exposed to a deeper understanding of their significance. It is important to note that before any cultural material or images were shown to the young people, permission was sought from the

Museum's Collections manager, Phil Gordon and the team. As custodians of one of the most significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural collections in the world, the Australian Museum aims to encourage cultural awareness and knowledge amongst young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within NSW.

The Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and the Australian Museum Foundation, from September to December 2015, funded this innovative project. Over 230 young people were engaged throughout the Australian Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Reconnection Project. These workshops were presented in partnership with Cobham's cultural workshops program, Juniperina's cultural workshops program, Street University's Deadly Dreaming program, Information and Cultural Exchange's 'Kasey is Missing' project, Fairfield City Museum's 'Talk the Change' project and other stakeholders.

This report highlights the impact of this project upon facilitators of the project (Thelma Thomas and Chris Reid), participants (Aboriginal young people in the Juvenile Justice system, totaling 22 participants from 2014-2015) and stakeholders (Juniperina, Cobham, Street University and ICE). These reflections took the form of interviews with the facilitators and stakeholders in person or via email, and surveys and personal reflections by student participants. Important themes emerged from all three groups, which are reflected in this report. The final section considers the highlights of the program and recommendations from all groups, and how the project's impact can be increased in future manifestations of the project.

WORKSHOP CONTENT

The workshops were run to cater to the needs and cultural groups of the youth participants, which often depended on the knowledge of local elders shaping the content of the workshops. Chris Reid and Thelma Thomas worked collaboratively with the community centres (such as Cobham and Juniperina) to explore the most relevant and helpful modes of delivery for the young people that took part. This sense of negotiation and collaboration was highlighted as a significant contributor to the success of the project. Figure one shows the different modes of delivery for the workshops with the stakeholders.

The workshops themselves facilitated discussion around place of origin, mob, family and language connections. Further topics of discussion included totems, the meaning of totems and connection to people. Young people were asked to point out the areas that they are from across Australia. This activity encouraged young people to talk about themselves but also to ask questions of each other and to learn more about their peers. Other activities included painting boomerangs, creating murals, songwriting, recording and producing new songs that explore Aboriginal identity, and presentations on Aboriginal history. The exhibition of the cultural artefacts further encouraged these discussions, and was one of the most empowering elements of the workshops, as it highlighted the ingenuity of Aboriginal tribes, and instilled a sense of cultural identification, pride and self-esteem within the young participants.

FIGURE ONE: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER RECONNECTION PROJECT WORKSHOPS



Feedback from the Project

There were three groups that provided feedback on the Project: the facilitators, Thelma Thomas and Chris Reid; the Juvenile Justice participants and young people, 22 in total; and stakeholders, namely the Juvenile Justice Centres of Cobham and Juniperina, the Street University, and Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) Parramatta. The issues discussed by all three groups are shared below, and their perspectives highlight the effectiveness of the program, as well as the experiences of the young people themselves. Some of the issues were spoken of by only the facilitators, though they are important to raise, as they highlight the many ways and people groups that this project has impacted. So as to allow the stories of those involved in the project to emerge, we have quoted them at length throughout this report, showcasing their narrative, and thereby capturing a 'story' of this project that is consistent with the cultural practice of storytelling that is important in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

BREAKING STEREOTYPES

FACILITATORS

Chris and Thelma spoke about how this project challenged the perspective of what a museum was for many of the community members and young people that took part in the project:

Within the Aboriginal communities too, a lot of the young ones didn't quite understand what museums were about, but the more contact we had with them...the young people – and also, the older people as well – built that greater understanding and appreciation of the role of the museum in our community (Chris).

Chris went on to describe how the process of acquiring and preserving these artefacts was done in a "very respectful" way, which is important when considering the value of the cultural objects that were being showcased throughout the project. Chris also discussed how some Aboriginal community members had misgivings concerning the former handling of human remains by the Australian Museum; this project, however, was a means of redressing some of these past concerns, and Chris hopes that his position within the Australian Museum can show that the organization and this project particularly is concerned with the preservation and maintaining of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in a respectful manner.

In terms of outreach programs, the Aboriginal artefact collection has been used at the Yabun festival at Redfern on Australia Day (2015) amongst many other community events. At this event, non-Aboriginal interest was aroused, and this encouraged storytelling of the artefacts and their importance in Australian history and culture. Chris reflects on this event:

Being a very big, a significant day towards the Aboriginal history, so it was a day of survival and a day of awareness... They wanted to know how could that fit into survival? And we know that the Australian Museum are preserving a lot of our artefacts and objects for the future generations. So we know that the Australian Museum is a tool in the survival of our culture as well.

The project was important for Aboriginal young people to engage with their culture, as well as educating non-Aboriginals of the importance of the history and cultural identity of its First Peoples.

For Thelma, this project highlighted how forward thinking the Australian Museum is, and its role in social justice and community engagement:

I think it's the first for a museum to go into detention centres and to be working in that environment for such a long period of time... But to have young people that were incarcerated or at risk or on community services orders be allowed to access the collections. It's a major privilege...The museum actually sits in the justice cluster, when you look at the NSW Government and the different sectors, and that's only happened in the last few months. So we're ahead of our time.

She further discussed how this process of becoming a part of the NSW justice cluster adds to the sustainability of the Museum as a vital community outreach and information tool.

STAKEHOLDERS

Aaron and Julie from Street University Mount Druitt considered it valuable that the Tedd Noffs organization and Australian Museum worked together with them for this project. The high profile of both organisations encouraged community participation within the Mount Druitt community, and the Museum itself was considered a figurehead of knowledge and history within the community:

That's the way I think they [young people] would relate to the Museum. Like, these guys [at the Museum] know all about the history, and, you know, these are the ones with the answers, more or less. So yeah...it showed that they [young people] showed more interest (Aaron)

Shannon from Cobham reflected on the presentations that were conducted by Chris and Thelma at the Museum:

All presentations that were delivered to the young people of Cobham from the museum were both educational and engaging – something that can be difficult to our target group.

It was not only the reputation of the Australian Museum that encouraged participation, but the culturally relevant and effective manner of delivery by Chris and Thelma that truly engaged with the young people that took part in the project that broke down stereotypes of the role and relevance of the Museum.

CONFIDENCE, SELF-ESTEEM, AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

The most discussed topic from all parties was the effect the project had on the confidence, self-esteem and bolstering of personal and cultural identity that took place within the youth participants. Many of the young people that took part were initially shy and hesitant to participate in any of the aforementioned cultural activities. Over the process of time, however, noticeable shifts in attitude and engagement could be seen in those who took part. Both the facilitators and the stakeholders reflected on this process.

FACILITATORS

Chris shared how important it was to spend an extended amount of time with the young people in order to see the project have its maximum impact. The one-day workshops still delivered important cultural identification and had "a lasting impact" for those involved, though the workshops that ran over several weeks were most effective:

The more time we spent with them, we found that again it wasn't these young ones were, not so much the confidence level, it was just that they didn't have that understanding or that knowledge of who they were, and where they come from (Chris).

Chris further described how the project unearthed some issues of young peoples' self-identification as Aboriginal. Some wrestled

with the idea of being 'half' or 'a quarter' Aboriginal, which led to feelings of inferiority and feeling "that they were less Aboriginal than a darker skinned Aboriginal person". These workshops provided the opportunity to confront these kinds of self-assessments directly, and encourage these young people to identify with their Aboriginality as a source of pride, and not confusion or shame:

So I tell them again that there's no such thing as a half Aboriginal or a quarter Aboriginal. So I ask them to touch me, if I'm real or not. And they say, "Yeah, but Chris, you're only half Aboriginal". I look at myself and I look back at them, and I say, "Hey, but which half is Aboriginal, and which half is not Aboriginal?" So in Aboriginal culture you're either Aboriginal or you're not. And see in our hearts, I know who I am, and I know where I come from. And that's what makes me a proud Aboriginal person. And this is where we tell the young people that you need to be proud of who you are and where you come from, because we may look different on the outside, but we are the same on the inside (Chris).

Many of these young people do not have an opportunity to discuss their fears and insecurities in any setting within mainstream Australian society; this project has created a safe place where they are able to engage with the reality of their cultural identity through the artefacts and other cultural practices, and therefore bolster their sense of personal identity. This has had flow-on effects, such as a noticeable increase in confidence, self-esteem and awareness of their cultural identity. Chris mentioned how the project affected the young peoples' lives beyond their engagement in the workshops:

Those young people were at risk, and they were disengaged from school. So we found that by presenting workshops that were aimed and based at resilience, and building skills such as self-esteem. So whether it was through the painting, through the dancing, just telling them a story, allowed them to sort of build into their own identity and grow as a person. So we found that when they did go back to school, that they were a lot more confident at a lot of things.

Some of the students that took part in the project attended school more frequently as a result of participating, whereas others were connected with local community

centres, which they had not engaged with previously. Chris highlighted how some Aboriginal youth are unlikely to become involved with community centres due to a sense of shame or disconnectedness with the people that run them; completing this project has encouraged these young people to "come out of their shell...they're...asking questions..." and are generally more engaged with the communities. This collaborative approach to working with communities has led to "breaking down their barriers". The space created by this project has fostered a "place to belong" for these young people, and has deeply established a sense of pride and identity in their Aboriginality.

For those young people that did have an acquaintance with their cultural identity before coming into the project, Chris and Thelma gave them a leadership / reference group role, where they were able to actively contribute to discussions, sharing information of their tribal groups and practices, and develop their sense of leadership and ownership:

And so it was actually good to see that some of the young people stand up and take ownership of that. Where such as one group we worked with, they started to become a like a reference group. So anyone within the school or in the community had an issue or had something that needed to be done culturally, they would refer to this group, and they would be able to share that load within the group. So it sort of empowered that as well (Chris).

One such issue that was highlighted by Chris and also Aaron from Street University was the rivalry that was leading to fights between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Islander youth at Street University. Chris as an Aboriginal man and Thelma as a Fijian woman were able to present a workshop within this tense situation, and provided an environment for mutual sharing and respect, and promoted a spirit of inclusion between these two groups of young people. This project has, therefore, assisted in bridging the gap between young people of the different communities.

The project has also increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attendance at this organisation, improving their access to workshops and youth services,

Thelma reiterated the impact of engaging with the artefacts, and the effect this had on some of the young people:

It's like they have this connection. They recognise something, or they see something that they've heard about, but they've never seen. They get to pick up an object, they get to feel what it's like, what it's made of. You know what I mean? And that can have like a really positive effect on them. Because, you know, they've found one more thing or something that they can connect with that belongs to them, belongs to their culture and tells them a bit more about who they are. So that's very powerful, you know.

'Cause these young people are constantly being told by the media or by their peers or by school, you know, you're not going to amount to anything, this is all you're going to be, this is what you're supposed to be. But then to be told that you know, this is what you built. Your family, your peoples built this, before Bunnings, you knew how to build this. Before Google, you knew how to track across the continent. And for them to hear that from us, but then to hear that from non-Aboriginal people as well, I think that has to do something positive to a person, you know? And you feel them. They walk out with a better sense of...they feel a bit more positive about who they are, and you can see it in how they walk. You know, the change in behaviour.

Thelma further highlighted how these young people may not have the opportunity to explore these realities in mainstream society, reiterating the importance of this project for not only the participants but their communities. This lack of spaces for Aboriginal young people to connect with their cultural identity is part of the reason why such a project is vital to the wellbeing of participants and has such a strong impact.

While she was facilitating one of the workshops alongside Indigenous choreographer Kerry Johnson, Thelma describes the experience while at Juniperina:

But sometimes we'd be in the workshops, and it's like we'd be transported. It feels weird, but it's a very spiritual, tribal thing that you're involved in, you know? Even though we were in a detention centre and we're all locked up, you know, for those two hours, you actually feel like you're involved in this spiritual ceremony, that there's something going on. And you can see that

in the girls as well. As soon as the teacher rocks up, that's it – they're in line, they're in formation, there's no mucking around, straight to it, you know. And you see them growing, and the group grows. And then they present their performance, they're in costume, they're painted up. You know, you can see the lasting impact, what it does to their self-esteem and their confidence to be able to perform in front of the whole centre and all their special guests, so it's very powerful.

These workshops impart more than information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth – they are addressing their spiritual, cultural and personal identities in powerful and uplifting ways that foster tangible change in the psyche of those who take part. These same experiences were shared in the mural painting workshop at Juniperina, where girls that normally were very reserved and did not speak at all would open up, to the point where they had to be forced to stop painting at the workshop's end. Thelma considers what life is like without this sense of connection to cultural identity:

It's like, no one knows who they are. As a young person you are still trying to figure out who you are anyway, you know...and if you don't know who your family members are, you don't know who your parents are. I mean, you still function in society, but there's a chunk of you that's missing, do you know what I mean? You can go through life looking for that in all these negative areas of life, you know what I mean? Which I think a lot of them are doing, looking for it elsewhere, because they don't have it, or they don't feel that connection.

This project has tapped into a part of these young peoples' identities that some have never connected with. Thelma shared that for some of them, "it's like they come alive".

STAKEHOLDERS

Similar sentiments were shared by stakeholders, who emphasised the importance of creating a safe place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in their communities. This was most felt at the Street University Mount Druitt, where young people that took part in the very first program (at the beginning of 2015) are still asking to come back: "So I think it's touched them, big time" (Aaron). For Street University Mount Druitt, the project started as a one-day event held on Tuesdays, and

saw Chris and Thelma come in to deliver the workshops. As a result of the one-day event, there has been a noticeable increase in Aboriginal young people finding their own space at Street University, and not only on Tuesdays – their attendance levels at this community centre have never been higher.

Cobham and Juniperina representatives commented respectively on how the project allowed "an opportunity to our Indigenous young men to reconnect with culture" and "that it provided a level of cultural learning and resources that Juniperina cannot easily provide". Those involved in the project at Juniperina would organize themselves to rehearse for their dance workshops outside of workshop time, highlighting the fact that the project was something that was personalized and engaged a sense of agency within participants. Michael from Juniperina stated:

The impact on the young people was enormous. A major part of the programs delivered were not just in connecting with Aboriginal culture but in connecting with the areas the young people are from. As such, the young women were able to connect with their traditional lands through artefacts brought in by the Museum and through the art and dance programs.

The Museum's involvement with Juniperina's NAIDOC celebration was fantastic. The young women learnt traditional dance and were able to perform for their peers and Elders. The young women incorporated their own written and recorded music and lyrics into part of the dance routine. These elements gave the participating young women a sense of ownership and pride in the performance.

The sense of ownership and cultural pride that this project developed for Aboriginal youth was tangibly felt by participants and evident to its facilitators and stakeholders.

PARTICIPANTS

When asked what they enjoyed most about the project, Aboriginal young people highlighted the importance of learning about the cultural artefacts and the weapons, and how these objects revealed elements of their culture and identity. When asked what they learned from the project, participants responded by stating that:

→ I learned lots of things – totems can't be hurt and they're symbols of ancestors

→ I learned a lot about other people's culture
→ I learned about my mob
→ Culture, totems are a special symbol
→ What I learnt is that totems symbolize your ancestors, and you can't hurt your totems
→ I learnt that we have 3 different totems
→ About our culture and what our totem means
→ There's a lot of history about our culture

Others stated "it makes me happy seeing the objects, and it reminds me of my heritage" and they benefited from "knowing [that] the artefacts are preserved in a respectful way". Four of the participants liked the fact that the workshops were run in such a way as to facilitate "talking as a mob", and others emphasized the importance of "listening to Dreamtime story" and seeing "specific objects related to personal country". Again, this project has created a powerful learning and engagement space where Aboriginality has been celebrated and fostered, and has encouraged personal journeys within the young people to discover more of their personal identity within their Indigenous communities.

INTERGENERATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL BRIDGE BUILDING

FACILITATORS

Thelma stated that this has been "a project of many bridges", which was testified by many involved with the program. Perhaps the most significant bridges have been established between the young people and Elders who lived within the same community, but had never been in contact with each other. In this way, the project proved to be a catalyst to bring these members of Indigenous communities together.

Creating a space where Elders' stories and experiences were valued and listened to was something that Chris described as "empowering" for leaders he personally dealt with. Although some of them had initial hesitations over whether the young people would listen to them, they were very well received, and much of the young peoples' feedback, to be discussed shortly, highlighted how much they enjoyed hearing from the older members of their communities.

The Elders that took part in the project proved an invaluable resource, as some of the young people were unable to identify their tribes. By the young people writing down on paper their town names and "skin names", as described

by Chris, the Elders were able to find out the areas of these young people. Once this information was gathered, Elders had input in the content that made up the workshops, which further instilled a sense of pride and cultural awareness for the young people that took part in them.

Partnerships between young people, Elders and community centres were therefore established, especially where the Elders or young people were not aware of the community groups that surrounded them. Chris stated how important this was for those involved:

So we actually by working with the community groups, we sort of broke down those barriers and opened the doors to a lot more wider community.

This sense of collaboration between Elders and the facilitators has been emphasised as one of the most fruitful aspects of the project by Chris and Thelma, and is indeed a vital resource for the sustainability of the work of the Australian Museum, as it sets in motion community networks that have far-reaching and unanimously positive benefits across generations. These networks and relationships encourage positive role model mentoring for Aboriginal young people who might not otherwise receive such input. Chris further highlighted the importance of having Elders collaborate with the Museum in this context:

Elders had a very important part within this project, because it empowered them and it also allowed them an opportunity to share some of their skills, and also to be valued within a professional, formal setting as well.

As a result of these young people engaging with the Elders in their community, they will set trends of positive cultural identification to their younger siblings and family members as the “future leaders” of their families and communities.

Thelma discussed how this project has created a space where the artefacts’ stories could be told through the eyes of the Elders and other community members, as well as allowing issues that pertain to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to be voiced in a safe place. Another aspect that she considered essential to the success of the program was its holistic approach, in that it partnered with other essential services such as housing and counselling:

The project works because we’re linking with existing services that

are addressing other needs. So it’s a holistic approach. It’s not a stand-alone... So you know, we were like a cultural component next to all these other services that they needed... And then linking in with JJ [Juvenile Justice] in the centres, because they’ve got access to everyone. So if something is brought up, or we touched on, you know, sensitive issues, there were staff there that could address that and could follow up... So I think that’s important to always make sure it’s always delivered alongside other professionals that can address the health side, or the other issues that they need to work on.

Again, this sense of collaboration between the young people, Elders, community centres and service providers is one of the essential facets of the success of the program. This project has been a link between these services, and has been of great benefit to all involved. As a result of the effectiveness of the program, many of the young people sought out more information from their family regarding their tribal names and totems. When the young people were able to identify particular artefacts or items as belonging to their tribe, Chris described that

It was that connection straight away... And that was a really good way to sort of entice the young people to want to learn more about it.

These flow-on effects were felt within the community centres as well. Chris described how the centres themselves, once exposed to the content of the workshops, were eager to facilitate them:

We found that we only had to be present within the first couple of workshops within the community centres. Once they felt confident enough in presenting their workshops, we pretty much stood back and they just ran it. So it could be a bit touch and go sometimes, but again it goes back to how important this project is, being flexible, working within the centres.

Again, the sustainability of such a project is seen here, as the communities themselves are able to continue the work that has been started by Chris and Thelma, and therefore continue to promote cultural identification amongst their young people.

STAKEHOLDERS

This project has further affected staff members that were involved – those from Juvenile Justice and Street University Mount Druitt alike. Thelma describes how sharing these experiences with Aboriginal young people highlight areas that “the young people are responding to”, which in turn influences how services are delivered by providers like Cobham and Juniperina, who are often unable to provide these kinds of interventions. Workers from the Street University have also become more aware of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth that they serve, which has helped them become more culturally relevant and competent with their Indigenous clientele. Ian from Street University stated that the content shared by Chris and Thelma

Is not mainstream, but it’s as important as anything else, to educate, not just the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, but Australians in general.

When exhibiting the Aboriginal artefacts at community events, much interest was generated in non-Aboriginal audiences, who asked questions about the use of the objects and where they were able to purchase them. This project, then, has bridged many different peoples together – young people to their Elders, community workers and service providers to a better understanding of their clientele, and non-Aboriginal Australians to their Aboriginal neighbours.

PARTICIPANTS

When asked of their experience of the Museum and its artefacts, youth participants stated that it was “exciting” for them, and that they wanted to hear Elders come in and tell stories. They suggested a welcome dance as part of the proceedings, and were developing a growing enthusiasm to find out more about the history of the objects, their uses, and the different painting patterns found on different objects.

ABORIGINAL WAYS OF LEARNING

FACILITATORS

Chris repeatedly mentioned the importance of Aboriginal ways of learning throughout this project. He connected this to a lack of learning that can take place within a classroom setting, as this is a non-Aboriginal means of learning. He stated that

Everything's taught to younger people by our elders, so we found that within this project, we were able to link and include everyone within the community group to get involved in working towards that outcome, and just allowing the younger people to have a better future, and gain more cultural knowledge and more identity as well.

Speaking specifically of how learning takes place in Aboriginal culture, Chris demonstrated how the cultural relevance of the project bolstered the young peoples' ability to learn effectively:

Within Aboriginal culture, we don't learn by writing in a book, or reading out of a book. The way that the young people learn is through painting, is through dancing, is through stories, and this is done by the elders, the elders or the older people of the tribe. And see, in today's life, there aren't many people, or older people out there, who hold the cultural knowledge and who are respected within the community groups, and who are happy to share that with the younger people too.

This project, then, filled something of a void within some Indigenous communities, as it connected Elders with cultural knowledge to young people who were, for the most part, without this self-understanding and awareness. The significance of this bridging between generations cannot be overemphasised – it is a vital link to the maintenance and flourishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, particularly within urban Aboriginal contexts.

Chris further described how the act of being in a circle formation as a dance group was very significant, as it shows that no one is the centre, but all members are equal. This physical symbol of collaboration reveals deeper truths of the potency of dance as an expression of Aboriginality:

Within our dancing, it's about us standing up together, standing next to each other, side by side, and moving

forward – no one above us, no one below us, and all of us within that circle.

It was identified that where a sense of shame and a lack of cultural identification are present, this can inhibit young people from taking their place within that circle, thereby reinforcing a sense of non-belonging. A sense of togetherness, being “as one mob”, has already been highlighted as significant by the participants, which was reinforced in the artistic manifestations of this project, as they were all collaborative in nature.

RESTRAINTS

FACILITATORS

Chris and Thelma highlighted the restraints they felt when they were only able to share a one-hour workshop with some groups, though even this small amount of time imparted a sense of cultural awareness and personal identity. They both identified the need to monitor the participants in a more meaningful way, so that they could better understand their needs and shape future manifestations of the project accordingly. Chris and Thelma repeatedly highlighted how the young people wanted to keep coming back for more workshops and to experience more of what this project offered – there is an undeniable desire for this project within the communities it engaged with. Chris lamented the vast need within such communities, and his aspiration to expand the project's reach and effectiveness:

And we know that we got a good response because they keep on asking us to come back. But because of time we can't really. We have to prioritise a lot of these workshops, which can be sad, because I don't want any kid to miss out. And sadly it is the ones that sort of cruise along that aint quite at risk, or that aint quite talented that always get forgotten about. And they're the young ones that we would sort of like to do more for as well. So not just the kids at risk, but also across the board.

There were further considerations around how effective the program might be if someone could work four or five days a week in Chris' current position, as he currently works 2.5 days per week. Thelma highlighted her desire to track the participants to “know where the girls are in six months or twelve months from now”, which would bolster the impacts of the project and provide support and follow up for those that have been impacted by it.

It was challenging to obtain feedback from the young people in detention mainly because of lack of time. It takes time to engage the young people in the session then before you know time is up and they have to go back to their units. Most of the session goes into the workshop activities and the feedback is not usually a priority. In regards to workshops at the museum or at other community centres, there was more time for the young people to provide feedback as the sessions were longer. In future, consultation with the workers should be considered in regards to how to best gather feedback from the young people, as it differs in each session.

STAKEHOLDERS

Similarly, Aaron from Street University emphasized the need for more funding for this project, as there are many young people in his locality of Mount Druitt that are “missing out” on the richness that this program provides, and that more funding means “more people that you can reach out and touch”. He suggested that there be more facilitators present within the project to meet this need.

Highlights of the Project

This project has connected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Juvenile Justice with their cultural identity in a personalized and deeply impacting way. Elders from Indigenous communities within Western Sydney had their role and knowledge validated through this project, bridging together generations that were previously unknown to each other. Intercultural conflicts have been resolved as a result of this project in the Mount Druitt community, and an Indigenous space has been created within Street University as a result of the workshops that have been facilitated there. Both the facilitators and the stakeholders have noted the changes in participants' self-esteem and confidence as a result of attending the workshops, which have resulted in a stronger sense of individual and collective agency and increased participation in mainstream schooling, amongst other benefits. All three participant groups – facilitators, stakeholders and participants themselves – have emphasized the overwhelmingly positive outcomes of this project and strongly advocate for its continuance in the future, as it is touching the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and affirming a sense of cultural and personal identity that is not offered to them through mainstream intervention programs. Should the program continue in the future, a list of the three groups that took part in the project have suggested the report's final recommendations.



Recommendations

FACILITATORS

- Engaging with a greater diversity of community Elders, such as mothers and aunts in the consultation stage, so they can influence the direction of the project.
- Having a female Aboriginal worker, as there are gender-sensitive issues that Chris found difficult to address within female youth detention.
- Extra time with each group, which would significantly increase impact.
- More cross-cultural performances and presentations at the Museum, which could be a showcase for Aboriginal young people to display skills learnt at the project (didgeridoo playing, dancing, painting). This would reinforce the aspirations of the project in building pride and self-respect in young peoples' Aboriginality and further educate non-Aboriginal audiences.
- Hiring an experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social worker with community development experience and an academic background, cultural knowledge and an understanding of the NSW justice system in a supervisory role to assist the facilitators.
- Worker's training for those that will take part in the project (cultural training).

STAKEHOLDERS

- Street University suggested creating a second video at the end of the workshops to provide a stronger conclusion to the project.
- Increased frequency of the visits, as per availability of staff (Cobham)
- Having a young woman from Juniperina who could have day leave to attend the Museum for a tour.

PARTICIPANTS

Young people that took part in the project suggested the following improvements:

- Having a longer period of time in workshops; as participants become more comfortable to ask questions throughout their time together, they then wanted to keep learning more
- Five respondents highlighted the importance of having Elders in the project
- Watch Dreamtime stories about our culture
- Have dances
- Welcome all nations and cultures to the workshops
- A welcome by aunts, sisters to share dreamtime stories and more about our culture
- Learning about individual tribes

There were also suggestions by the young people about other kinds of workshops that could be developed. They suggested that these focus on:

- Traditional Language
- Making eel traps, making shields
- Mob group talks
- Bushfood
- Sports, games
- Cooking, damper
- More about Aboriginal art
- Music, dancing, rap
- Inviting non-Aboriginal kids to learn our culture

The final word of this project is given by Chris; who underscores the importance of this project for future generations:

*Imagine if we did all band together
and if we all did want to look towards
the future, then this is the way we're
moving forward – we're preserving
culture and we're looking at the young
people. And our young people are our
leaders. They're tomorrow's leaders.*

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