

Cultural activities to strengthen respect and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth

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

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Figure 1:

Harmony day



Figure 2:

Reconciliation Australia:



Figure 3:

Yirrkala School open day



Figure 4:

Do you think it is important to learn about Yolngu Culture at school?

Response	Percentage of students with response
Yes	90%
No	8.2%
Maybe	1.8%

Figure 5:

Would you like to spend time with Yolngu people at school?

Response	Percentage of students with response
Yes	81%
No	16%
Maybe	3.0%

Figure 6:

Is there anything in particular that you want to learn?

- Language
- Dreamtime stories
- History/background
 - Culture
 - Religion
- Tradition/way of life
- Bush Medicine/finding food
 - Bush Skills
 - Dance (Bungul)
- How to play the didgeridoo
 - Art
 - Weaving
 - Fishing
- How to make a canoe/spear

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for their support:

- Chief Minister Adam Giles
- The Minister for Young Territorians; Hon Peter Styles
- OYA
- Nhulunbuy High School Teachers and Students
- Nhulunbuy High School Cultural Centre
- Anglicare
- Yothu Yindi Foundation
- Miwatj Rapirri Rom Team
- Family members and friends

Abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
SRC	Student Representative Council
NT	Northern Territory
NHS	Nhulunbuy High School

Terms Used in this Report

Terms:

Youth: Individuals aged 12-25 years of age.

Young Territorian: A person aged between 12-25 years who lives in the Northern Territory

Yolngu: The Indigenous people of East Arnhem Land

Yolngu Matha: The traditional language spoken by the Yolngu people

Yidaki: Didgeridoo

Miwatj: The local Indigenous Health organisation

Raypirri Rom: The proper and right way of being

Executive Summary

Project objectives

Throughout this project, I set out to explore *the use of cultural activities to strengthen respect and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth*. With particular interest in the local Indigenous Yolngu culture, a topic I am interested in as I was born and have been raised in East Arnhem Land. I aimed to explore the various aspects of Indigenous culture that could be shared with the non-Indigenous people who live here to create a greater understanding and respect of the Yolngu way. I wanted to do this with the intention of building respect and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. I chose a number of different activities which would assist with cultural immersion at my school.

Research processes

There are a multitude of different ways that I managed to research and gather information. This included reading books like *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen, 2000) and *The Apology* (James, 2009) and additional sources. While websites were great at providing me with a general oversight, the information was not always relevant, that's where the book *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen, 2000) was found to be the most helpful, due to being specifically written for this area and even being published locally.

Anecdotal conversations with fellow students and adults made up a component of my research. Many people who live and work in the local area with Yolngu people provided me with interesting and relevant points to consider. As my research focus is unique to this area most my research came from local sources which includes surveys and interviews that I conducted since beginning this project.

Major findings

A key finding of this project was that language is a barrier between two groups of people and that learning language both ways allows for building and strengthening relationships (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Non-Indigenous students want to learn the local language and had difficulty accessing this information. Through providing a focus word each week, Indigenous students became the teacher and were able to proudly share aspects of their culture. The words have become a part of daily life at school and have formed the basis of a deeper cultural understanding. Youth have responded positively and conversations which start with the word, often develop into moieties and tradition. A greater sense of understanding has led to better respect and a desire to step out of comfort zones and experience other aspects of traditional Yolngu life such as excursions to communities.

The analysis

Through discussions, observations, interviews and surveys I found the most relevant information to my target group. Here in Arnhem Land, thousands of Yolngu people live a traditionally cultural life. They speak their own languages and most live in the many homelands communities. However there also exists the mining and service town of Nhulunbuy in which the non-Indigenous residents mostly come from other parts of Australia. Often there is an obvious segregation between these groups of people. I do not believe this separation comes from racism, I believe it stems from a lack of understanding and respect people have.

Recommendations

My recommendations to further this project would be that schools provide cultural awareness, training and immersion activities for their students. If there is a dedicated time and budget for schools to provide this, all students in this area would be able to gain understanding and respect towards the local Yolngu. It is valuable for activities such as Harmony Day and the youth forum at Garma to continue so students can celebrate and share culture and identity.

Within wider community I would like to see groups such as Anglicare continue in their work around Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. If they have allocated funds to run activities after school and in the holidays for all youth, this will create a bond between the young people of this region. Currently some cultural activities are occurring but it would be great to see these expand and run more frequently.

Introduction

The purpose of my project was to build respect and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. In the beginning I started with the question of how to strengthen the relationships between cultures but throughout my research and findings I refined my question. It now focuses on the immersion of cultural activities and the consequent positive impact on the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth of Nhulunbuy.

The reason that I chose this topic to focus on is because of where I come from. Being born in Nhulunbuy and growing up as a kid living here my whole life, this is a special topic to me. Living here for so long has allowed me to gain a special relationship with the land and people of this area. I have a great deal of respect for the Yolngu people, their culture and their way of life. However with my community being a mining town there are a lot of people that come and go and don't show respect to the local people and culture. When living in remote communities in Arnhem Land everyone should have a high level of respect towards the Indigenous people and their land that we are on. We should not live with conflict, discrimination or disrespect, and that's why I want to help do something about it.

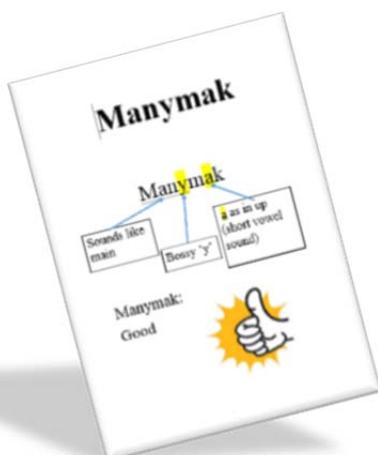
Discussion/Major Findings

Language

The traditional language spoken in East Arnhem Land by Indigenous people is Yolngu Matha. Throughout my research a key finding was that Yolngu Matha should be taught to the dominant culture who enter Arnhem land. A survey was conducted through Nhulunbuy High School to find out the students' interest in cultural activities, the results came back with 90% of students think it is important to learn about Yolngu culture (Trugen, 2000). Most youth want to learn the local language but have little opportunity to experience this. I have observed Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth refining and practicing the word and this interaction appears to be positively influencing the relationships and respect between students. This is a positive psychological effect which has occurred through the participation of this activity (Trugen, 2000).

Considering the idea of Yolngu Matha being taught at school, and this supported by the interest of the students/ youth, I then created an opportunity for all students at Nhulunbuy High School to learn a little bit of Yolngu Matha. A program called Yolngu Matha Word of the Week allows a word from the local Indigenous language to be taught in homeroom every week. The same word runs for a week allowing students the time to get their heads around one word at a time. This also allows for time to apply and practice and get confidence in the pronunciation. So far it has been a very successful program which is believed to benefit the youth of Nhulunbuy. Additionally, my goal is for this program to continue over future years.

When producing the activity Yolngu Matha Word of the Week, a challenge that came up was finding the time to produce and organise a word for consecutive weeks. Although the sheets themselves were simple, I had to prepare them and then run them through a language advisor for checking before distributing them to homeroom classes. Time was a big factor in what I struggled with the most throughout this project, keeping on top of everything and still maintaining my outer school commitments proved to be quite challenging. A thing that did help push me through this was the passion I have about closing the gap in my home town and making things right.



Cultural activities

I assisted the Cultural Centre to run a variety of cultural activities for a Harmony Day celebration. Many Yolngu came into the school and ran traditional activities with the students. This created a great opportunity to reverse roles of understanding and knowledge. Creating interpersonal transactions to be reversed allowed for true and equal relationships *“This is the ideal state for human to human communication”* (Trugen, 2000). Some of the activities included spear throwing, yidaki making, traditional dance and art. A comment from a student was “I never knew it took so much time to paint that cross hatch”. Many similar comments were noted and they reflect that students gained a greater respect and understanding towards aspects of Yolngu culture. This understanding is the basis for true cross cultural understanding, and these activities helped to create a cultural third space (McLaughlin, M. 2014).



Youth Forum

2015 Garma Youth Forum was an event held over five days at the Gulkula site in East Arnhem Land. Approximately 200 Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth came together from all over Australia. Issues were discussed and youth participated in special ceremonial activities such as the ‘smoking ceremony’. Elders prepared special fire pits and collected reeds from a sacred billabong. These reeds were laid on the fires as we knelt beside them under a cover. The steam that was created cleansed our hearts, minds and souls. This process took away negativity and allowed the future strong adult to grow (Raypirri Rom Team 2015). This experience was special for all involved and youth felt a closer bond between each other. This helped create a positive vibe which was held through the discussions of issues that youth face.



Healing a nation requires Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to move forward into the future together (James, R. 2009) and involvement in events such as this forum generated and strengthened this ideal amongst the participants.

Conclusion

A key finding of this project was that language is a barrier between two groups of people and that by learning language both ways allows for building and strengthening relationships.

Non-Indigenous students want to learn the local language and had difficulty accessing this information. Through providing a focus word each week, Indigenous students became the teacher and were able to proudly share aspects of their culture. The words have become a part of daily life at school and have formed the basis of a deeper cultural understanding. Youth have responded positively and conversations which start with the word, often develop into moieties and tradition. A greater sense of understanding has led to better respect and a desire to step out of comfort zones and experience other aspects of traditional Yolngu life such as excursions to communities.

Youth of today are not divided by the colour of their skin. Divisions occur due to a lack of understanding and appreciation of culture. Culture includes language, traditions, beliefs and activities. By experiencing some of these things first hand through involvement in activities, I personally found that I gained more respect for the intricate and significant nature and meaning of each thing. This sentiment was echoed in my fellow students and the comments they made. The overall response was positive and confirmed that youth developed more understanding and empathy when they learnt language and participated in cultural learning.

The opportunity to work alongside Yolngu people and practice acquired language created stronger bonds and more meaningful interactions between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous youth.

I believe that throughout this project I have developed my personal capability of intercultural understanding significantly. Through basket weaving with the Yolngu ladies, I now appreciate and understand the process and how much time, effort and patience it takes to produce a small basket. Additionally I learnt many new local words myself through talking with the Indigenous youth I was involved with in the youth forum. Through my project I have gained a deeper knowledge of some of the injustices of the past and now can consider topics such as closing the gap with true understanding.

Recommendations

My recommendations are:

1. For government funding to be allocated yearly to the implementation of cultural activities for youth in this region. This funding could be split in two directions: through the school, and through the community.

Schools: If schools have allocated funding available they would be able to pay for cultural advisors and other Yolngu people to come into the schools and run lessons on language and other cultural activities with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. All schools in this area should be running a basic Yolngu Matha program where the local language is taught and students can practice and gain confidence in applying this new language. This will help to break down the barriers between people that rise due to a lack of understanding and miscommunication.

Community: The wider community allocated government funding could assist groups such as Anglicare who run targeted youth programs. Anglicare have a youth drop in centre open to all youth and this would be an ideal place to run activities in which young people could share culture. Anglicare also run a variety of activities and programs over the holidays which celebrate identity and culture. It would be great to see these programs expanded and more inclusive of all youth of the area.

2. Have a representative from Office of Youth Affairs attend the Youth Forum at the Garma Festival to support the young leaders and participants.

Youth forums such as the one that is run at Garma each year is essential to maintain as it allows Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to explore topics of concern together. Ideas are shared and viewpoints are seen. Some really good ideas come up within these forums but due to a lack of support and funding, most of these things just stay as good ideas and cannot be implemented. I would like to see someone from Office of Youth Affairs in the NT Government attend the Garma Festival and support the young leaders and participants in their quest to build a stronger future.

Evaluation

I believe the reliability of my outcome for East Arnhem Land is positive. I feel that learning language has helped break down some barriers and initiate conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These conversations that start with language develop further and people start to get to know and respect each other more.

Although this topic has been specific for my area, I believe that if someone from somewhere else was to undertake this project with Indigenous people elsewhere in Australia, they would come across challenges such as, different cultural sensitivities, background and language. However these challenges might not be as extreme as most Indigenous people around Australia have grown up speaking English and are not as traditional as the Yolngu people of this region. They would still need to

consider these aspects and if they did, there is nothing saying that it wouldn't be possible for a project such as mine to work in alternative places. I believe that by learning about each other's ethnic background, including language, people will gain a greater respect and understanding of each other and this will promote better relationships.

The component I found the most difficult and which I feel was the least successful, was gaining data which measured the outcomes. As I am dealing with concepts and not things, it is difficult to gain clear data. I tried to overcome this through feedback conversations and surveys but it would have been good to actually have numbers and amounts to be able to use to show growth and change. Despite this the feedback comments and the results of the survey all supported my idea in a positive way. I like mathematics and it would have been good to produce some simple graphs that represented some of this project.

I feel this project was a very worthwhile activity. Additionally I feel as if I have caused a ripple which will continue to spread. This ripple will go on to have further impact and continue making a positive impact long after this project has been handed in. I believe the youth of Nhulunbuy will be open to further learning and continue to build good strong relationships which will go on to change society in the future.

My key findings from the research proved to be significant. It was evident in the literature that there is divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Initiatives such as Closing the Gap, identify and quantify, through statistics, the disparities which exist. There is extensive literature around the concept of reconciliation and the importance of addressing this 'gap' through reconciliation⁵. I found analysing *Its Time: The Apology* to be a valuable source of knowledge. For the former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd to acknowledge and discuss some of the terrible things of the past, and then go on to say sorry was a big step. I thought that the positivity of the message "It's time to move forward together", was motivational and supportive of my research project.

Challenges of the research:

Within my research project a few challenges arose which I had to overcome in order to complete my research project. Firstly the limitations in accessing information that discussed this issue in a local context was particularly significant in the early stage of my research due to its uniqueness. Initially I found this challenging but was guided to some more relevant websites and articles by people who are professional in this area.

Due to my topic being so unique and specialised to this area the research was mostly conducted by conversations and interviews. Next time if I was to conduct more interviews a tip that I would give myself is to record all conversations because when in the moment of the interview you forget to write everything down. It would be more effective to have the information recorded and consequently I could gain more information.

Another aspect that became challenging was the restricted time period, I found it difficult to prepare and run the surveys as standalone activities. The solution to this was to run these surveys through the Student Representative Council during homeroom class times. This meant that the survey had to be short and did not explore some of the things I had wanted to, however it also meant that all students present on the day contributed to the data, therefore giving a solid reflection of the views of students at Nhulunbuy High School.

Furthermore the cultural sensitivity that I had to be aware of made things a little more difficult and time consuming. Plans for activities had to be run by particular people for approval and often accessing these people was difficult. I also found because I was aware some cultural protocols I was a little nervous and often had difficulty questioning Yolngu people as I was taking cultural etiquettes into account. I found these people to be open and supportive of my ideas but often said very little.

Appendix

Appendix One

Survey

Do you think it is important to learn about Yolngu Culture at school?

Response	Percentage of students with response
Yes	90.0%
No	8.2%
Maybe	1.8%

Would you like to spend time with Yolngu people at school?

Response	Percentage of students with response
Yes	81.0%
No	16.0%
Maybe	3.0%

Is there anything in particular that you want to learn?

- Language
- Dreamtime stories
- History/background
- Culture
- Religion
- Tradition/way of life
- Bush Medicine/finding food
- Bush Skills
- Dance (Bungul)
- How to play the didgeridoo
- Art
- Weaving
- Fishing
- How to make a canoe/spear

Appendix Two: Yolngu Matha words of the week

Yolngu matha word	English meaning
Nhamirri	How are you?
Manymak	Good
Yow	Yes
Yaka	No
Yaku	Name
Yatj	Bad, evil, ill
Baru	Crocodile
Bapi	Snake

Appendix Three: Anecdotal comments made by students and teachers of Nhulunbuy

“It’s been fun learning some yolngu words, the yolngu kids laugh at me when I try but that’s ok, I laugh too.”

“This is the first time I’ve had the chance to learn these words.”

“I like it when them ngarpaki kids try speak yolngu matha”

“I like practicing the word in homeroom and then trying it out with one of the yolngu kids later. They usually tell me I got it wrong or try to get me to learn whole long sentences. It’s pretty funny”

I think everyone in my class has like learning the words. Our homeroom always starts with a Nhamirri.”

“I believe the students of the school have been enjoying learning the yolngu matha word, it’s good to see the Yolngu students helping the other kids get it right.”

“I’ve enjoyed having the word of the week in my homeroom and I have widened it out by asking the students to go home and teach their families the word too.”

Appendix Four

The person I interviewed was the ESL teacher at Nhulunbuy High School who specialises and works with yolngu students. She has lived in this region for 20 years and has a good understanding of the local people, therefore I believed that she would be an appropriate source to talk to.

Interview:

1. What are some of the limitations that we deal with?

Language and culture creates a divide between people from different backgrounds. This divide will cause limitations to the extent to which people form relationships, understand and communicate with each other.

2. Do you believe that the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth have become stronger over the past couple of years?

Yes. Youth of today and particularly those who live here in Arnhem Land, are developing a respect towards Australia’s’ first people. They understand and learn a lot more of the historical context and are more accepting of cultural and language differences.

3. What will be some cultural limitations that I will need to be careful about?

When talking with Yolngu people care needs to be taken with the choice of words and language used. Avoid complex and unnecessary academic language. Never discuss specific boys or girls business with the opposite sex.

4. Do you think that there is racism or discrimination between Indigenous and non- Indigenous youth?

I do not believe that either group of youth are actively racist towards each other. However there is a divide and I believe this is a culture and language divide. I have observed similar behaviour between people of different cultures.

5. Do you believe that there should be some sort of education given to the youth of remote areas?

Yes, I believe that all people who choose to live on Indigenous land should be firstly inducted in some cultural awareness training. This education will develop respect and understanding of the traditional owners of the area.

6. Would it be beneficial to widen this education to adults as well?

Yes. As above. Additionally beliefs, values and attitudes are inherent to families and to effect a change then any education needs to be supported by all members of a family to be truly taken on and those values lived.

7. What do you believe the Indigenous people of this area would have to say about running cultural activities?

The Yolngu people I know would say 'manymak', there has historically been emphasis on assimilation and one way learning. To have two way learning is important as it values the culture of the people whose land we live on. Cross cultural understanding is about recognising the differences unique to our own cultural backgrounds, acknowledging and respecting these differences but not placing a value judgement on them. Neither way is better than the other, simply different.

8. This is a two way process, what do you think can be done by both parties to help improve this relationship?

By showing interest in actively sharing and listening.

Spending time together in the third space.

Activities like Harmony Day and the Yolngu Matha word of the week.

9. Any cultural difficulties that I will face?

Sometimes Yolngu people will not elaborate very much on information. It is the yolngu way not to over talk things.

10. Would possible surveys to find out if students would be interested in participating in cultural activities, be a good idea?

Yes, it would be interesting to speak to students at NHS to see how they feel about things like special activities, Harmony Day, word of the week, Yolngu matha class and excursions to Indigenous communities. Try to keep it simple and to the point.

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