

Overcoming the “shame” factor: Empowering Indigenous People to Share and Celebrate Their Culture

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Abstract

This paper explores the tenuous relationship between Indigenous perspectives and educational institutions. It discusses the importance of developing respectful dialogue between the two, along with the fundamental necessity of working within a community as opposed to upon it. These principles are demonstrated through the creation of a joint community cultural celebration involving local Indigenous communities, schools and their University. An evaluation of the event demonstrated how knowledge was enhanced and respectful relationships developed. The project “birrbam burunga gambay” – to play and learn together, involved over 350 people who participated in a shared cultural experience, where Indigenous perspectives were showcased by people within the local community. The project stimulated a sense of pride within the Indigenous people because their traditional knowledge was valued and respected by the local community. The result was a sense of connectedness for Indigenous people with the university and local schools, which arose from the close communication and consultation the project embodied. Respect for Indigenous people and their traditional knowledge and skills were shown by the local community at the cultural event. By overcoming the shame factor, birrbam burunga gambay has empowered Indigenous people to share and celebrate their culture with the wider community.

Keywords:

Indigenous perspectives, education, culture, connectedness, cultural celebration, sharing culture, reconciliation

Introduction

As the need to embed Indigenous perspectives grows within our educational institutions (Queensland Government, 2008), the practicalities of achieving this have not yet begun to emerge. The effect of embedding Indigenous perspectives at a local level, rather than as an “add-on” to policy, on the educational achievement of Indigenous children is yet to be explored. In addition to this, the effect of embedding Indigenous perspectives on the educational achievement of Indigenous children requires a meeting of cultures within and outside of the classroom. For many years Indigenous people have been seen as underachievers in school and this has led to a limited number of career choices after formal secondary schooling.

To change this outlook for Indigenous people, government policies to embed Indigenous perspectives have been put into place in schools (Australian National Curriculum Board, 2009; Queensland Government, 2008). The onus has been placed on the classroom teachers to provide opportunities for children to learn about Indigenous culture in order to recognise Indigenous

perspectives and foster respect for Indigenous people and knowledge (Australian National Curriculum Board, 2009).

Many teachers have the appropriate pedagogical skills and attitudes to embed Indigenous perspectives, but are hesitant to do so as they feel they lack the knowledge needed to do this effectively (Cummins, Gentle, & Hull, 2008). The solution maybe, is to encourage Indigenous peoples to share and celebrate their culture with educators to increase understanding and enhance the future health and well-being for all. This leads to the next question of “how Indigenous knowledge is shared sensitively and respectfully within local communities and what effect will this have on the educational aspirations of young Indigenous children?”

Literature Review

Learning to value one’s self is a critical tool in enhancing self-esteem and raising one’s aspirations for the future (Bandura, 1977a). This may be of a personal or professional nature, in an academic or social context. Children and adolescents develop their sense of self based upon a range of perceptions they amass from others and their experiences. Self-esteem is affected by the social context and social comparisons an individual makes (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). When the terms ‘race’ and ‘culture’ are used as a form of social comparison, it can typically marginalize some people, whilst providing others with power and control (McMaster & Austin, 2005).

The post-invasion history of Australia’s Indigenous peoples is chequered with racial discrimination, oppression and marginalisation which have occurred across several generations. The long-term negative impact of this on Australia’s Indigenous people can be seen in the areas of health and education (Andersen & Walter, 2010). Poor health impedes attendance at school, which in turn inhibits learning and educational achievement (Harrison, 2011). This then perpetuates the cycle of poverty and disadvantage within the Indigenous population. As self-esteem is affected by the social context and social comparisons available (Bandura, 1977b), it should come as no surprise to understand how both individual and collective self-esteem of Australia’s Indigenous peoples is low.

Self-esteem, self-confidence and self-concept are all words that are sometimes used as inter-related terms or synonyms to describe the same phenomena. However, these terms possess fundamental differences; hence a clear definition of these terms is required. This study determines self-concept as one’s perceptions of one’s traits as a person, while self-esteem as one’s evaluation of one’s worth as a person (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Self-confidence relates to how assured one feels about particular abilities, so this can change depending upon the ability under examination, and the group in front of whom the ability is to be demonstrated (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953).

Self-esteem is related to self-confidence, which also affects motivation to improve performance (Woods, 2001). The McClelland-Atkinson Model of Achievement Motivation (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), means for Indigenous people that their behaviour in educational settings is often driven by the motivation to avoid failure rather than seek success. This extends to dodging embarrassment caused by making a mistake in front of a group of people. This is often referred to as avoiding ‘shame’. This greatly influences self-confidence and self-esteem, as it “dominates how many Aboriginal children think, talk and behave in the classroom” (Harrison, 2011, p.54).

For Indigenous people, the avoidance of shame is often exhibited in their behaviour (Hughes, More, & Williams, 2004). For example, they may be hesitant to have a go at something in public unless they know they have got it right. They may appear unenthusiastic to cover their fear and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, how they behave in an educational context is very much dependent

upon who is looking and listening to them (Harrison, 2011). Contemporary education theories rely upon the learner taking risks and evaluating the outcomes (McGee & Fraser, 2011). Indigenous people will approach these gradually and can often get left behind as a result. The lower educational achievement of Indigenous students then perpetuates the cycle of decline in their educational attainment.

Many educational institutions within Australia have made policy changes to curriculum relating to Indigenous perspectives, in an effort to heighten awareness of Indigenous culture in our society. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) has made a commitment to improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The Queensland Government has similarly pledged to embed Indigenous perspectives within the curriculum (Queensland Government, 2008) in order to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples. Other bodies under government auspices, for example the Australian Law Reform Commission and Reconciliation Australia also work towards heightening awareness of Indigenous culture and knowledges.

A study by Thompson (2010) found several strategies recommended by Indigenous elders, social-epidemiologists, psychiatrists and sociologists to assist in developing greater knowledge and understanding of Indigenous culture within the community and are outlined as follows: create opportunities to strengthen connections with country; establish cultural activities; legitimise traditional systems; recognise the need for connectedness, hope, efficacy, safety, calm, dignity, responsibility, truth, empathetic listening and working together (Thompson, 2010). Earlier studies have identified similar strategies to share Indigenous culture in schools (Garnett, Sithole, Whitehead, Burgess, Johnston, & Lea, 2009; Kreig, 2009; Spencer, 2000).

Thompson's strategies (Thompson, 2010) may offer a blueprint upon which to work towards sharing and celebrating Indigenous culture. Federal, state and regional governments have moved legislatively to close the gap and overcome Indigenous disadvantage in Education and Health in Australia. The players at the grass roots level have been called to take up the challenge. This has caused the community to ask themselves many questions. How can districts heighten awareness of Indigenous culture and knowledges at local levels to support a more culturally aware community? How can respect for Indigenous culture and knowledges be generated within the whole community? How can communication and collaboration be nurtured within the community? How can community-based activities be a building block to give power back to Australia's Indigenous people? Will this enable Australia's Indigenous people to improve their education and health prospects? If self-esteem is crucial to motivation and performance, then recognising and celebrating Australian Indigenous culture and overcoming the 'shame' factor is imperative to improving educational outcomes. What type of community project can promote respect, generate connectedness and develop pride and a strong sense of self within the local Indigenous community? How can this be showcased to the wider population whilst retaining respect for Indigenous people and their culture?

To begin to answer these questions it was crucial to nurture respect for Indigenous people and their culture, in order to generate positive self-esteem. Several studies have drawn positive connections between self-identity for Indigenous students and school outcomes (McRae, 2002; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Gunstone, & Fanshawe, 2000). Developing community-wide respect for Indigenous culture can lead to enhanced self-esteem within the Indigenous community. This is supported by Garrett & Wrench (2010) in their study on inclusion where they found affirmations of respect for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people fostered a positive sense of self-efficacy (Garrett & Wrench, 2010).

Birrbam burunga gambay sets out to cultivate respectful relationships between the University, the Indigenous community and schools within the local community. The project aimed to:

- Generate respect for local Indigenous leaders within the community by providing a platform for them to showcase their knowledge and expertise.
- Celebrate the history, culture and achievements of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the region.
- Run a festival which brought all participating schools together and replaced the many smaller disparate events currently run by individual schools.
- Empower teachers within schools to foster networks with local Indigenous people and resources, so they could run similar events to share and celebrate Indigenous culture.
- Raise Indigenous students' motivation to complete their high school studies and aspire to tertiary education.

Methodology

Permission and support of the Community Education Advisory Council (CEAC) at the Fraser Coast Campus of the University of Southern Queensland was sought and given to organise and conduct a Naidoc Celebration on campus. To give further respect to the Indigenous community, the event was named by the traditional custodians of the land, in the language of the Butchulla people, "*Birrbam burunga gambay*" – to play and learn together. Discussion and support for the event was also gained from the local primary schools, along with funding from the University of Southern Queensland.

A design-based research approach (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006) was used in this project primarily for the purpose of refining the organisation of the festival so that it could be conducted on an annual basis. This research design enabled educators to solve problems while also creating design principles that may guide and inform future practice in that area" (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006). In the context of this study the principal challenges being addressed are as follows:

- What type of community project can promote respect, generate connectedness and develop pride and a strong sense of self within the local Indigenous community?
- How can this be showcased to the wider population whilst retaining respect for Indigenous people and their culture?

As part of a design-based approach it was also essential to identify design principles that would enable future events involving the celebration of Indigenous culture and people to be successfully organised and run collaboratively, and these events should be sustainable over time. These design principles involve both quantitative and qualitative actions to bring about respectful inclusion and celebration of culture. The design-based research approach has four clearly identifiable phases (Reeves, 2000)(see Figure 1).

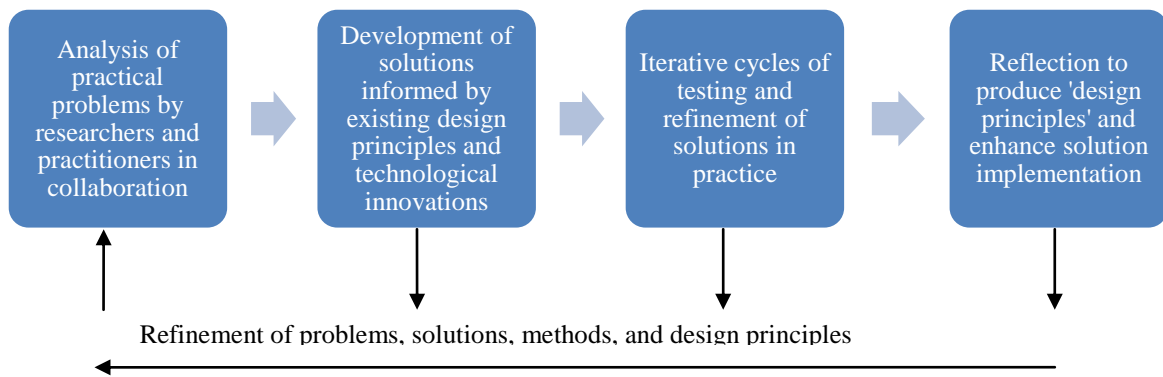


Figure 1: *Design-based approaches to research*

Phase 1 of this project developed as a result of discussions with several disparate groups within the community, those being practising teachers; Indigenous support workers, Elders, CEAC and children. Practising teachers who were interviewed identified a lack of knowledge of Indigenous culture as a key barrier to embracing and embedding Indigenous perspectives in their classroom. Indigenous support workers raised feelings of frustration as they felt their role was valued only in the school during Naidoc week. They wanted to have a more consistent role in assisting teachers to embed Indigenous perspectives throughout the year. Community Elders wanted to encourage Indigenous children to value education and complete school so that they could access further education and “get good jobs” to “do better for themselves and their mob”. The CEAC identified a need to bring higher education to the community and for Indigenous children to “open their eyes” to what is possible for their future. Non-Indigenous children wanted to learn and understand about Indigenous culture, whilst Indigenous students loved Naidoc as they felt “deadly” that week, because they did activities which were meaningful to them.

In order to draw together all of the information relating to local community needs regarding Indigenous perspectives and education, a SWAT analysis was conducted. Several key issues were identified as a result, which then enabled the researcher to move to the second phase of the research design methodology.

After conducting a SWAT analysis through interviews and discussion, a search for solutions to these issues through an extensive literature search ensued. In this second phase of the research design process, the researcher identified two major factors in celebrating Indigenous culture. The first factor was “respect”. Sharing and celebrating Indigenous culture would only be possible if the local Indigenous community was willing to communicate their knowledge and skills to others. It is also only possible if respect for Indigenous people is actively nurtured and cultivated by the power brokers in educational circles. No longer can educators demand respect, for this is something that must be earned, especially within the Indigenous community. The second factor is “within” community. Any celebration or sharing of culture must come from within the community, not thrust upon community by an external source. If any showcase of culture comes from sources outside the local community, then it leads to further frustration and resentment by all parties. Hence, any sharing and celebration of culture in a community must arise from an identified need within the community, not an external group wanting to act upon it to achieve their own goals. For a project to come from within the community, a sense of ownership by the community needs to develop, which brings with it commitment by the whole community to the program objectives (Garrett & Wrench, 2010).

A plan was developed to address these needs in the form of a Naidoc cultural celebration involving over 350 Yr 7 students from the local area. The events within the celebration reflected the diversity

of knowledge and skills within the local Indigenous community. Over 14 local facilitators assisted on the day, whose knowledge and skills were shared with local school children and their teachers. In addition to the facilitators, approximately 12 secondary school Indigenous students acted as chaperones for the children on the day.

The third phase of the design based methodology involves interactive cycles of testing and refinement of solutions in practice. To develop a program that generates respect and is owned by the local community, several solutions were put into place. Teams of facilitators were set up for each area of culture that would be shared and celebrated in ways that are conducive to Indigenous ways of learning (Hughes, More, & Williams, 2004). The activities selected also aligned with areas of strength identified by McRae et al(2000). These areas included language, music, dance, art, story-telling and careers. The facilitation teams consisted of Indigenous community members with specific knowledge of the culture area, along with an experienced teacher who possessed the skills to help construct meaningful educational experiences for children.

Respect was generated through many meetings and discussions with facilitation teams to ensure attitudes to the project were consistent with the overall aim of the project – “Birrbam burunga gambay” – to learn and play together. Respect for all facilitation teams was further enhanced with a grant which enabled payment for the services of all people within the facilitation teams. This demonstrated a respect for Indigenous knowledge by attaching western values associated with respect, those being time and money, to the facilitators and their expertise. Throughout the testing and refinement stage of this project, observations and interviews were conducted with chaperones, facilitators and participants to allow for ongoing modification of the activities throughout the day. Observations were conducted through participant observation and researcher bias was checked by listening to the community about what had happened during the organisation and implementation of the birrbam burunga gambay project.

The fourth phase of the design-based approach was to reflect on the project to enhance further applications of it. All participants in Birrbam burunga gambay completed evaluations of their cultural experience. Facilitators, teachers and students all engaged in feedback on the event. A debrief with facilitation teams was also held subsequent to the event, where reflections were gathered and ideas formulated for future events.

Results

From discussions and interviews with local community stakeholders, a SWAT analysis was conducted which identified needs and outcomes required by the community (see Figure 2).

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible Indigenous community • Very talented individuals within the local Indigenous community • Local school community open to Indigenous input because of the government legislation involving embedding Indigenous perspectives within classrooms • Local schools respectful to Indigenous perspectives • A number of young Indigenous role models within the University community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous people feel alienated from educational institutions • NAIDOC not celebrated at the University • Indigenous people feel they have no voice and no power within education systems • Indigenous people asked to volunteer their time over Naidoc, and this is the only time they feel they are needed by schools. • These volunteers do not feel valued by community, and exist on the fringes of the community, and hence feel they are not respected • Always asked to do "volunteer" work by

	schools who try to get things "on the cheap", leads to further feelings of diminished self worth, which contributes to the cycle of poverty and powerlessness
Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Indigenous peoples with a platform to demonstrate and showcase their culture in an environment that commands respect • Use the collaborative power of the local community to develop a cultural festival to showcase Indigenous perspectives • Obtain funding for an event which can develop local community Indigenous perspectives within educational institutions in the area • Assist local schools to learn more about Indigenous culture and create new networks of support in schools • To demonstrate to the local community the extensive prior knowledge of the facilitators, and the significance of culture and place in Butchulla country • To develop a sense of respect for Indigenous knowledges amongst the local community • To develop a sense of connectedness to the University with local Indigenous peoples 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational structures seen by Indigenous peoples as being the "source of unequal power" and perpetuating social inequalities • Gaining the trust of the Indigenous community to maintain respect for Indigenous culture and addressing the needs of their community • Funding to generate support for the project • Logistics of holding an event of such magnitude

Figure 2: *SWAT Analysis of Community Indigenous Education Perspectives*

As a result of this analysis, some key needs were identified, and are as follows:

- Schools and teachers within the community need knowledge and skills to celebrate Indigenous culture, thereby empowering local schools and teachers to embed Indigenous perspectives in their classroom.
- Local Indigenous community need to see University as a welcoming and viable option for their future learning pathways, thereby developing a sense of connectedness to further education.
- Whole community need to understand and respect Indigenous culture in order to raise self-esteem and educational opportunities for Indigenous people, thereby enhancing pathways to reconciliation.

Observations made by the researcher during the event of the Indigenous students and chaperones reflected marked differences in attitudes and demeanour during the course of the day. Initially Indigenous students and chaperones were hesitant to join in activities, especially dance, as they thought it was “shameful”. These students stood at the back of the small activity groups, which consisted of approximately 30 students, with their heads down and shoulders slumped forward. They were reluctant to participate in the dance activities. At the end of the festival, the local Indigenous dance group concluded events with more dancing and asked the whole group for volunteers to dance with them. All Indigenous chaperones and students came forward to dance in front of over 350 people, along with some non-Indigenous students. Their body language communicated confidence and pride in their culture, for example, their heads were held high, shoulders were back and there were smiles on their faces. This change in body language is evidence of an increase in a sense of self worth and confidence in their abilities. When interviewed at the conclusion of the day, Indigenous chaperones all commented on how it was a “deadly day” and they were “proud to be part of it”. All asked if the event would be conducted again next year and offered

to be involved again in the running of the event. Further discussions relating to how they felt about the University and their study aspirations revealed that most felt more confident about working hard at school so that they could attend a University like this.

At the conclusion of the event students and teachers were asked to complete an evaluation on the Birrbam burunga gambay event. Frequency distributions were conducted on responses to the questions, and the results are summarized in Figures 3 & 4.

When participants were asked if they enjoyed the activities, over 96% liked most, if not all of the activities (Figure 3).

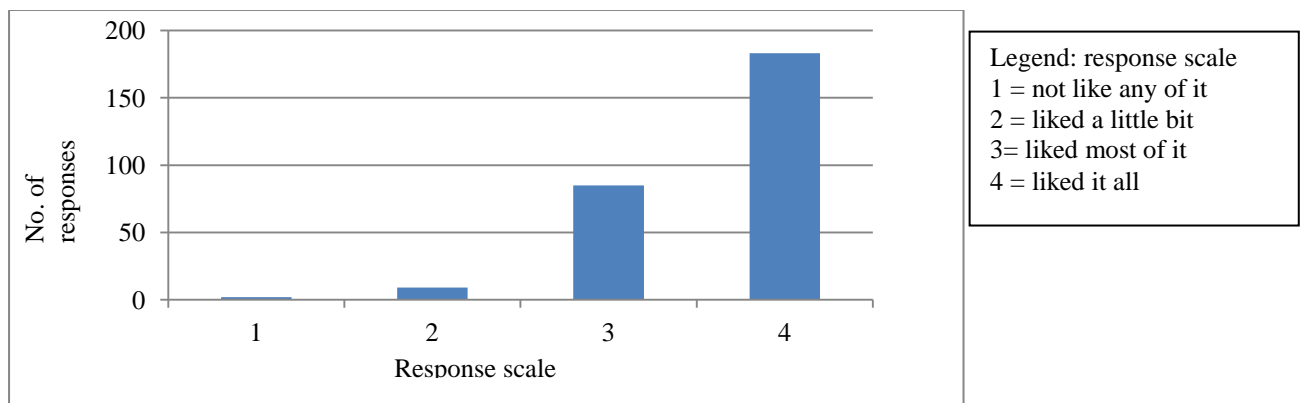


Figure 3: Question: *Did I enjoy the activities today?*

When participants were asked if they learnt much about Indigenous culture, over 92% learnt a “fair amount” if not “loads” (Figure 4).

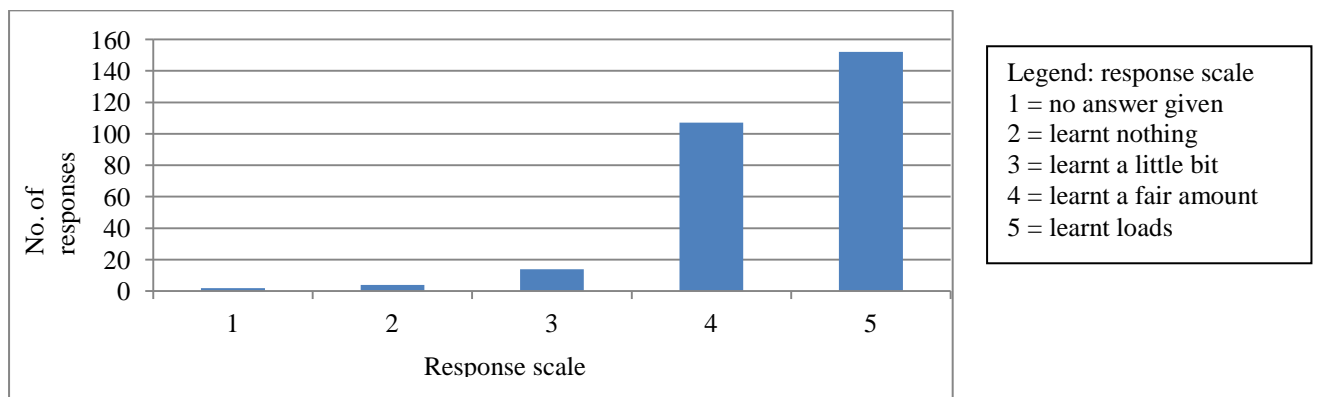


Figure 4: Question: *Did I learn much about Indigenous culture today?*

Facilitators were asked to reflect on the event and to share these at a debriefing meeting. All facilitators felt this had been a very positive event for all participants and facilitators and expressed a commitment to be involved in future events involving the University and schools.

Discussion

The results of the evaluations collected and analysed from all participants, along with observations and interviews with Indigenous children and chaperones, coupled with discussions and reflections on the event with facilitators, all indicate the project achieved the intended outcomes. The “Birrbam burunga gambay” project celebrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture through showcasing and sharing their knowledge and skills in language, music, dance, art, story-telling and careers to the school community in the area.

The impetus for the project grew from listening to the needs of disparate groups within the community and synthesizing ideas and activities that addressed these needs. The project established sound links within the community by enhancing communication and developing relationships built on trust and respect between the University, schools within the surrounding community and local Indigenous community groups. This supports the findings of McRae et al (McRae, Ainsworth, Cumming, Hughes, Mackay, Price, Rowland, Warhurst, Woods, & Zbar, 2000) who found that positive partnerships were a crucial element in success. The planning and delivery of activities occurred in conjunction with Indigenous facilitators and Indigenous chaperones. Their contributions were recognised by incorporating specialist Indigenous tutors to deliver activities to children at the festival. This established ownership, pride and a sense of belonging to the University, which gave rise to a sense of connectedness within the community.

The project empowered schools, teachers and undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Education program to embed Indigenous Perspectives in their classrooms by providing them with hands on activities, resources and personnel, to increase their knowledge, understanding and experience of Indigenous culture. In this way Birrbam burunga gambay has helped to pave the way for reconciliation by raising the awareness of the participants’ knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples.

The sense of connectedness the project generated within the community can be attributed to key principles upon which birrbam burunga gambay was organised. Primarily, that it is developed from an identified need from within the target group, and members of this group are actively involved in the planning and delivery of the event. Secondly, that value is given to Indigenous knowledges by formally recognising the specialist skills and knowledges that people within the community possess. In taking this approach, a level playing field is developed, where respect and value is cultivated, and gives rise to empowering Indigenous people to share and celebrate their culture. These circles to success should underpin any event whose outcomes involve establishing credible pathways to embedding Indigenous perspectives and promoting reconciliation within a community.

Conclusion

Overcoming the “shame” factor to empower Indigenous people to share and celebrate their culture relies heavily on cultivating a two-way respect between Indigenous people and the education community. A crucial factor in overcoming the shame factor is the need for such an event arises from within the community. This resulted in a sense of ownership by local Indigenous people and commitment to the project. This engaged the local Indigenous community in the event as they had identified a vested interest in sharing and celebrating their culture. By also addressing the needs of the local school community in the project, it ensured schools were prepared to commit time and resources to the event.

Many in the community have suggested Birrbam burunga gambay become an annual event and one that incorporates people from neighbouring areas within the region. Further to this, several government and non-government agencies within the region have asked to be included in future projects and pledged to contribute future funding towards Birrbam burunga gambay.

Birrbam burunga gambay showcased Indigenous perspectives to the wider education community and developed a deeper understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. This stimulated a sense of pride for Indigenous people and their knowledges, whilst developing a sense of connectedness with the university and schools. By overcoming the shame factor, Birrbam burunga gambay has empowered Indigenous people to share and celebrate their culture with the wider community.

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