



Engaging and working with Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Communities:

A Case Study

“More than making music”

The Mingaletta and Interrelate
Young Boy’s Didgeridoo and Cultural Group



All about relationships

Introduction

Mingaletta and Interrelate Young Boys Didgeridoo and Cultural Group was established in mid-2011 after a local Aboriginal man, Bob Williams, had an idea to establish a group for the young boys on the Woy Woy Peninsula on the NSW Central Coast. In turn, Bob spoke with Matt Stubbs, the Area Manager from the Central Coast Interrelate Family Centresⁱ about his idea. From this conversation, the Young Boys Didgeridoo and Cultural Group formed, with an initial ten week program envisaged and agreed upon. Interrelate Family Centre would provide funding and other support for the group, such as a counsellor, and Bob and Mingaletta Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation would offer cultural and other supports such as linking in families with the group. But without prior relationship building strategies having been undertaken, the likelihood of that conversation even occurring was low. This article demonstrates that with a deliberate and culturally sensitive approach to working together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations can deliver programs with positive outcomes for all concerned. The outcomes emanating from this initiative had significant impacts on the boys' lives and their families, the relationships between the organisations, and the services available through Mingaletta to the local Aboriginal community.

Behind the scenes

Central Coast Interrelate Family Centre was providing services in several locations across the Central Coast, but there was concern at the recognition of how few services were being provided to the Aboriginal community. One of the challenges that non Indigenous organisations often face is how they develop relationships with Aboriginal people, and why Aboriginal people do not access mainstream services that are potentially 'available' to them. It is suggested that methodsⁱⁱ that child and family services can use to support Indigenous families and communities include:

- working with (rather than working "on") Indigenous communities;
- ensuring your service is culturally competent;
- focusing on attracting and retaining the right staff;
- cultivating networks and relationships; and
- adopting an action research approach.

As Area Manager, Matt set about trying to actively develop relationships in order to remedy the situation. He began attending the Central Coast Aboriginal Interagency Network meetings to listen and increase the opportunity for him to meet and develop relationships with Aboriginal people involved in the Central Coast community services sector. He also became involved in the Central Coast Men's Interagency where a number of key Aboriginal men also attended. The Interrelate staff were also involved in local and regional NAIDOC week events where possible. This deliberate engagement with the Aboriginal community was happening simultaneous to Interrelate Family Centres embarking on developing an organisation-wide Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), which was formally launched in March 2012.

Interrelate was undertaking outreach work on the peninsula but reaching very few Aboriginal people. Matt also began visiting Mingaletta and having conversations with staff, volunteers and community members. This relationship-building continued without any direct program development until Interrelate co-organised a successful Family Fun Day with Mingaletta Aboriginal Corporation. Subsequently Matt was invited by the Mingaletta Aboriginal Corporation to make the speech at the Sorry Day Ceremony held at the Peninsula. To Matt this invitation was a significant step in the cementing of the relationship between the two organisations, and between him personally and the Aboriginal community on the Central Coast.

The story unfolds

Bob's commitment and motivation for starting a program for the young lads was from his concern for their futures. This arose from several sources- one being Bob's involvement in visiting young offenders who lived in a nearby Juvenile Justice facility. The majority of young men in these facilities are young Aboriginal boys from all over NSW, reflecting the horrendous statistics relating to young Aboriginal people – for example, the detention rate for Indigenous juveniles is 397 per 100 000, which is 28 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous juveniles (14 per 100 000). In 2007, Indigenous juveniles accounted for 59 per cent of the total juvenile detention populationⁱⁱⁱ. Bob was concerned to try to break this cycle for some of the young local people. His other key motivation arose from talking to local boys' parents, grandparents and carers who shared their concern for the boys' futures with Bob. There were few other relevant programs in the geographic area for the boys, and concern regarding boredom and potential poor outcomes was high.

Bob's vision was to create a group through which Aboriginal boys would be mentored and taught a stronger sense of respect for self, culture and community and connection to culture. Developing a program which also met Interrelate's program goals was a key to Interrelate being able to offer its resources. Moreover, the arrangement represented a focus on each partner's strengths and resources^{iv}.

Interestingly, this program was a perfect example of how the Interrelate organisation could put its emerging RAP into action. Interrelate was involved not only to provide support to the boys and their families but because the organization has a strong commitment to reconciliation and making a contribution towards 'closing the gap' between our peoples.

Thus the original stated aim of the group was:

Through this process Interrelate and Mingaletta hope to help connect young people to their culture and community and by so doing increase their level of respect for self, culture and community. We also hope to increase young people (and their families) awareness and access to services provided and points of assistance in the community.^v

The Young Boys Didgeridoo and Cultural Group formed, with an initial ten week program envisaged and agreed upon between the two organisations (see Appendix for Program Outline). The boys came after school to Mingaletta to take part in the ten week program. The boys started with the raw didgeridoos that were sourced from Far West NSW, painted

them, learnt stories and continued to learn to play. There were about eight boys involved in the first group.

Let's fast forward more than one year and this "10 week" group has grown in popularity and attendance. The boys now learn dance, song and traditional stories. When the second term started, there was a change of teacher and the group numbers grew. The teacher of the Didgeridoo Group, a talented and spiritual man, engages and motivates the boys. His leadership, along with the influence of Bob, provides the boys with great role models from within their community as they move towards manhood. Demand keeps growing for places, but the group has essentially been closed until further resources become available.

Measuring the impact

One of the evaluation challenges of offering community and cultural programmes can be identifying measures by which outcomes are measured. However, in respect to Mingaletta Young Boys Didgeridoo and Cultural Group the outcomes are evident. As mentioned above, important methods of supporting indigenous families are "i) working with (rather than working "on") Indigenous communities; and ii) ensuring your service is culturally competent;" have proven to be part of attaining this program's successful outcomes. The positive results take many forms, some very explicit, whilst others are working in a more indirect way to bolster the lives of the boys involved. In regards to the agencies involved the benefits have also been evident. A summary of the outcomes to date follows, including remarks made by various stakeholders.

1. Organisational

1.1 Close, effective ongoing relationship between agencies.

Mingaletta and Interrelate Family Centres both report a good relationship between the services, symbolised by a willingness to discuss issues of service delivery, and the continued development of the Didgeridoo group. As a committee member of Mingaletta said:

"The relationship with IFC, the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding)- everything has been good."

1.2 Embedding of broader Interrelate Family Centres services at Mingaletta.

Interrelate now offers weekly outreach counselling services at Mingaletta, as well as periodic parenting groups. This is a new service available to the local Aboriginal community. Interrelate is also looking at being involved in a 'reconciliation' group with members of the Mingaletta and wider community.

1.3 Development of service collaboration to include other agencies in support for the group.

Because of the recognition of the benefits of the group, other agencies have offered various types of support. For example, direct support from a third agency, New Horizons, where the current didgeridoo teacher is employed as an Aboriginal Support

Worker. The agency releases the teacher to attend the Didge group and many of the performances that the boys attend. It has also provided some financial assistance for the boys to go on a camp. Other agencies have supported the performances by the group through financially supporting transport costs.

1.4 Increased respect for both organisations from broader community.

Because of the public display of the success of the group (see 2.3 below) both agencies have been recognised as supporting a very positive program which is having a positive influence on this group of young Aboriginal people. As someone involved in the group said:

Working relationships with agencies are good. The community knows now that IFC is approachable, they really started it up, getting the boys to come that was really good- giving them a feed and their didgeridoos.(AB)

Some other comments included:

Great pride, taking the Mingaletta name out there into community; gives us pride (DO)

Feeling at Mingaletta really good, they are so good

I believe the agencies and individuals from these agencies were genuinely wanting to make a positive change for these young fellas in the community. That was achieved, so congratulations!

2. **Boys and families Involved**

2.1 Skills in didgeridoo, dance, cultural knowledge, team skills, leadership.

Very few of the boys had ever played a didgeridoo prior to joining the group. Many of the boys have now mastered the necessary technique of circular breathing. This allows them to develop more sophisticated playing and this leads to them learning songs that tell cultural stories. Those boys who have mastered it also encourage and support the other boys in their quest to develop the technique. Whilst some of the boys already had cultural connection, many did not. Many of the boys had not. As one parent of two boys in the group said:

(there is) Didge sound all the time (in the house). See more and another side of Aboriginal culture. Opened eyes up more to culture...

Their teacher explains the importance further :

The cultural side helps them to feel belonging- they have a relationship with land- and they realise as men they have to do certain things... very important things. There is so much to fight for- it helps them to have priorities- the boys like having these... they have to learn the dreaming before they play the song..... it holds a lot of powerful stuff....

2.2 Confidence, pride, friendship, respect;

The boys have developed their confidence as their skills have developed. As importantly are the friendships between the boys. As one boy said of himself, when asked what he liked most about the group, *Performing- I was shy at first but now I'm alright.*

A parent commented: Ever since it's started, noticed the boys coming out of themselves more- it does them good.

Several boys responded when asked what the best thing has been about the group with the following comments, *"I've made some mates"* and *"Playing the didge with my friends"*

2.3 Performance experience;

One of the unexpected outcomes of the creation of this group has been the extent of its success in public performances. The number of performances continues to grow, but memorable amongst these performances are the following.

- Babana Aboriginal Men's Group Community Assistance Day and launch of the new Tribal Warrior boat at Shark Island, February 2012.
- Coloured Diggers ANZAC Day March Redfern 2012.
- University of NSW Sorry Day ceremony May 2012
- NAIDOC Celebrations, Gosford Showground July 2012

The performance experiences have developed teamwork skills through the need to play instruments together and to coordinate and cooperate their playing and dance. The boys have also learned that they have different skills and abilities. For example, some are very good dancers, whilst others are better didge players. The boys also developed a sense of responsibility and respect for each other, through being in the public eye. Comments were made by a number of people in this regard. A teacher at a school where the boys were involved in an all-day cultural day commented:

The professionalism of the boys at the school was amazing- they ran workshops for children their own age, but it was one of the best workshops I have seen in a school setting- probably because of the similarity in age.

Matt from Interrelate remarked after attending the Babana Day performance:

"The boys were awesome. Athol has done an amazing job to bring the boys to this point and I think it's very exciting to think what unlimited potential is here. Bob (Williams) has worked so hard to get this group up and keep it running. He is a truly inspirational man who deserves a huge pat on the back".

2.4 Improved application to school work and attendance.

Anecdotally, the boys show an improved commitment to their school attendance and work. They have made friends with others across different age groups, and this is making school a more meaningful experience. For some, it has been more important than others. One teacher commented:

"I have only known (the boy) this year, but the difference for him has been very positive. He has learning difficulties, but he now has cultural pride, and his self esteem has grown because this is something that he is able to do- it is a strength that other kids don't have, and that he can share with classmates. It allows him to shine within his own talent.

Bob has made the observation in regard to another boy who was not attending school very much, "One boy has asked to go back to school because of the friends he has made through group- after being disengaged; now doing bridging course so he can"

Another teacher made contact with Bob to thank him and the group. She said:

You've done a great job... made such a difference to their lives of some of those young fellas, its turned their lives around. They are anxious to get to school now, they bring their didges, want to meet up with their friends.

Keeping the story going- into the future

This importance of this group in the cultural, social and emotional development of these boys into young men has not been lost on those involved. The importance of this type of program as a preventative intervention is widely recognised. As Shane Phillips, stated to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs ^{vi}:

What we are saying is that we are actually in the community, and we are asking for a bottom-up approach here. We are asking for the strengths of our own communities to be the guiding light. Let's take what is there. There are people within the community who can help build a better future for a lot of our kids. They can make it influential. That is the key to it, because if it becomes influential within our communities it is something they want to be part of and that they will share. It is about the ownership. The ownership of this whole belief and moving forward is the key to it. I am an advocate for mentoring, but it is capacity building within communities and families that is so important."

One of the challenges is the reliance on volunteer support for the program and the pressure this places on a few individuals. There are many ideas about the expansion and development of the group. These include:

- Secure ongoing funding
- Development of a leadership program which would see the older boys teaching the younger ones
- Through these measure expand the numbers of boys who can join the group

As part of the above strategy, Interrelate assigned funding for a number of measures:

- to engage someone to document the project and seek feedback of stakeholders,
- employed a filmmaker to film and documents the group
- the project has been promoted through conferences by Interrelate and Mingaletta.

Local Government funding submissions have been submitted in an effort to gain the resources necessary to develop the program and leadership component. Excitingly, an initial submission has been successful in obtaining a small amount of financial support for the program. More funding is currently being sought currently.

On an organisational level, Interrelate is seeking to consolidate its broader culturally appropriate service provision to the Aboriginal Community on the Central Coast. To that end, it has employed its first Aboriginal worker on the Central Coast. Its RAP has now been launched and is impacting on other areas of its operations.

The Mingaletta Young Boys Didgeridoo and Cultural Group is a year old now, with a track record of group achievements and personal growth amongst the boys. The preventative aspect of this program may not be evident for some years as the boys eventually leave school and make their way in their world. When asked, several of the boys indicated they hoped their work futures lay involved in cultural programs, either music or bush tucker type programs. One teacher acknowledged the significance of the boys' involvement and remarked:

"I think it's fantastic these kids have come together to learn and share it with others. Its creating kids with confidence who will become leaders in the future"









ⁱ *Interrelate Family Centres is a medium sized human services NSW-based organisation. Interrelate Family Centres is a community based, not-for-profit organisation that has been a leading provider of quality relationship services in New South Wales since 1926. It has a network of centres across metropolitan, regional and rural New South Wales. Each year, Interrelate helps over 50,000 individuals, couples, families and children to develop better communication, effective solutions and strong relationships. Central Coast Interrelate Family Centre has been strengthening the Central Coast community since 1998 through its provision of professional services to enhance relationships and support those experiencing personal and relationship difficulties.*

ⁱⁱ Rhys Price-Robertson & Myfanwy McDonald (in partnership with Peter Lewis & Muriel Bamblett of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency) *Working with Indigenous children, families, and communities: Lessons from practice* AIFS 2011 p1

ⁱⁱⁱ The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2011 Doing Time - Time for Doing Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs p8

^{iv} Excerpt from original brief:

Partners Responsibility

Mingaletta will provide the venue, admin support, advertising and recruitment, access to bus, community engagement and staff support (cooking & cleaning etc). **Bob Williams** will provide the overall coordination of the project. Bob will contact elders and other significant Aboriginal men in the community to support this project through their presence and influence. Mingaletta will invoice Interrelate for costs articulated below.

Interrelate will provide the funds as listed below for the project expenses after receipt of invoice and receipts. Interrelate will also provide a male worker (counsellor) to be present during the program and to write up the process including outcomes and to respond to any emotional issues presenting.

^v Interrelate Family Centres 2011 Program brief

^{vi} The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2011 Doing Time - Time for Doing p50