BURRAJA KOORI YOUTH AND YOUNG PEOPLE PROJECT

Lead agency: Gateway Health

About the project

The Burraja Koori Youth and Young People (Burraja) project sought to engage with young Aboriginal people from the Wodonga region to reconnect with culture, and develop a sense of identity, pride and belonging through positive engagement with Elders and the Aboriginal community. The Burraja project developed age appropriate programs for two cohorts young Aboriginal people aged between 10-12 years and those aged 13-16 years. Programs were delivered over two years, in collaboration with project local partners and incorporated support from: the local Aboriginal community (including Traditional Owners, local Elders and community leaders), education providers and representatives from various social sector agencies.

Implementation

Participation

The Burraja project successfully engaged with 135 young Aboriginal people from the Wodonga region, with 113 participating in the education components of the program.

> *"By the numbers, we achieved what we had to do…had double the amount of people through that we were supposed to engage."*
> *(project stakeholder)*

Strong recruitment was enabled by the relationships developed between Burraja staff, Aboriginal community members engaged and local students and teachers. The project implemented a relationship-based recruitment strategy to make up for initial delays in recruiting key project personal and establishment of the Cultural Reference Group to provide endorsement of the cultural content underpinning the learning approach.

Activities

The Burraja project successfully delivered nine of the 10 planned activities (with one program element cancelled due to insufficient numbers). Burraja developed school electives style programs, that ran for 6-10 weeks in duration within the school term. Young Aboriginal students from partnering educational institutions were able to select an appropriate program for their age, and participate in during the term (though the programs were not formally embedded in the school curriculum). The Burraja curriculum incorporated a mix of learning strategies including:

- storytelling, dance and music

- cultural site visits and exploring the local area;

- understanding of bush tucker and medicinal plants

- guest speakers

- interactive cultural activities and traditional games and

- practical workshops and cultural skills development.

Activities were initially delivered at the Burraja Cultural Centre, then from within the partner schools to maximise access and participation.

Challenges to delivering activities noted by the project stakeholders included clashes with other key events and requirements in the school curriculum (e.g. NAPLAN testing).

Goal achievement and sustainability

All Burraja stakeholders who responded to the Urbis partnership survey (10 of 10) agreed the project achieved 'most' or 'all' of its goals. Just under three quarters (7 of 10) agreed 'most' or 'all' of these achievements would continue to benefit participants and the community beyond the pilot period.

Partnerships

The facilitation of strong partnerships by the Gateway Health (the lead agency) cultural programs coordinator was a key contributing factor to Burraja achieving its goals. Enabling relationships were developed with local schools in Wodonga, local Elders and the Wodonga council.

With the schools, the program coordinator built effective relationships through wellbeing officers in the first instance, progressing to engagement with school principals (whose authority was required to secure the partnership). Local Elders are reported to have been incredibly supportive of the project, and Wodonga Council played a key role in the ongoing running and maintenance of the Burraja Cultural Centre – providing basic utilities and infrastructure such as kitchen and hot water.

Qualitative insights from project stakeholders indicate the partnerships with the local Elders and council will continue through the operation of the cultural centre. It was less certain whether relationships with local schools would continue post the funding period. Gateway Health and its cultural partners remain committed to the project and are working together to identify alternative funding sources to keep the project running.

Crime prevention risk/protective factors

Summary of project impact on crime prevention risk/protective factors

- 🟩 Evidence indicates the project had a positive impact
- 🟧 Quality/lack of reported data limits ability to assess the project's impact
- 🟥 Evidence indicates the project had little or no impact
- ⬜ Crime prevention risk/protective factor was not identified as a focus of this project

1 Cultural identity

Strengthening the cultural identity of participants was one of the project's key objectives, and the project evidently made a strong impact in this domain for the young Aboriginal participants. Qualitative insights from project stakeholders outlines how students who were previously disengaged in classes and lacked confidence demonstrated positive shifts in their behaviour as a result of project:

> *"...they are now more confident, proud of their culture, went back to school and shared information and helped recruited."*

Key successes highlighted by project stakeholders include:

- increase in student pride and confidence – with students who were too shy at the beginning of the Burraja program to engage, being proud enough to stand up and talk about what they had learnt with their entire school and thanking people at their graduation

- students feeling that they belong due to feeling more comfortable at school and having a better relationship with teachers and being more involved in class

- students being more connected to Aboriginal people in the Wadonga community.

The project was also able to provide quantitative evidence of a positive change in this domain for participants across several indicators – including increased understanding of Aboriginal culture and increased connection to their Aboriginal identity.

2 Interpersonal connections

As outlined above, the cultural focus of the **Burraja curriculum also positively impacted on the interpersonal connection for the young Aboriginal participants.** The project reported positive

changes in the interpersonal behaviours amongst participants. Evidence of strengthened relationships between participants and school staff and local authorities further demonstrates how the project facilitated improved interpersonal connections:

> *"Students from the Wodonga Middle Years College were always at school on the days the Burraja program was running."*
> *(project stakeholder)*

> *"Students that were involved in the program engaged more with school."*
> *(project stakeholder)*

3 Education/economic participation

Increase education participation was central to Burraga's approach to strengthening protective factors for the young Aboriginal people who engaged with the program. The project reported increases in changes in school attendance rates, and levels of positive engagement with school staff as a result of the program. This was supported by qualitative feedback gathered by the from teachers at partnering schools, who agreed the project resulted in significant positive behaviour change amongst their students:

> *"Students seem to have a greater respect towards her [the teacher] as they appreciated her facilitating their involvement in the program."*
> *(project stakeholder)*

4 Neighbourhood characteristics

Improving neighbourhood characteristics was not a primary focus for this project.

5 Social cohesion

Project stakeholders report that **Aboriginal students who participated in Burraga are also engaging more with local programs and the local mainstream community.** This positive outcome is further supported by survey data collected by the project which indicates that the number of community events attended by students increased from 37 at the commencement of the project to 49 at its conclusion.

6 Accessible services and supports

There is limited evidence to suggest the project increased accessibility of local services and supports for participants. However, survey data collected by Burraga indicates that awareness of services increased amongst participants. Project stakeholders also reported that the average proportion of participants who accessed services increased after engagement with the project. Qualitative insight provided by project stakeholders indicated that a lack of transport was a barrier to participants accessing services and support.

Key achievements

Gateway Health engaged with the local Aboriginal community and Elders to develop and deliver a high quality and highly successful program to increase cultural connections for young Aboriginal people. This project filled a need that was not otherwise met by the available curriculum or services within the Aboriginal community.

> **"It is the sort of project that speaks to be in terms of what we should be doing... meeting an unmet need and it was pretty successful. Was clear to me that it resonated with community groups and the others involved…"**
> (project stakeholder)

The key enabling factors for the Burraga approach included effective development relationships with key partners, including the local Aboriginal community and engagement of cultural partners in the design and delivery of the program.

Key lessons and reflections

On reflection, Burraga project stakeholders noted that the engagement with education providers could have been strengthened – to ensure the program was well aligned and easily integrated with the local curriculum, and to establish a transition plan to secure ongoing support and funding for the project. The project identified the following key considerations for future applications of this type of grant project:

- concentrate project recruitment efforts on local school students

- involve school principals and wellbeing officers in the grant submission, to ensure

appropriate targets are set and integrate the project into curriculum planning

- seek a five-year submission to allow program results to be tracked for a longer period of time which will enable a more accurate trend in change.