

Strengthened relationships and pride in Indigenous culture and heritage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Yarn Up at Barker College

Purpose

To strengthen relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and between students and staff and strengthen students' cultural identity and pride in their Indigenous heritage. This was approached by providing students with a designated culturally safe physical space where they could come together to connect and contemplate shared experiences and feel empowered as First Nations people. Yarn Up allows students to form connections and find support outside of their age group, which is important in such a large school, and acts as a forum where students can share their thoughts about life at the school, express concerns and make recommendations to staff.

Target group

All 17 First Nations Students of Barker College are the target group, with 11 students participating in Yarn Up regularly.

Activities

Yarn Up involves regular, weekly lunchtime meetings. Sometimes the Indigenous Education Projects Leader starts with a discussion topic, other times students contribute topics of their own, regularly utilising Yarn Up to talk about current issues in the school and around the world. On special occasions such as Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week, students are invited to bring a friend and a teacher of their choice to Yarn Up, and lunch is provided. Cultural activities have included students identifying their Country and pasting photos of themselves on an AIATSIS map hanging in the Yarn Up meeting space.

Outcomes

Students now have strong, cross-year friendships that they can rely on as they navigate life at the school. More students are accessing leadership opportunities such as contributing to the planning and running of major school events for NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week. An unintended, yet positive consequence was that students attending Yarn Up are more confident in identifying as Indigenous and expressing the strength of their identity to non-Indigenous people.

Learnings

We have learned to adjust each Yarn Up session by listening to the needs and feelings of the students in that moment, whether that be a structured activity or discussion, or just providing a space in the middle of a long school day where they can relax. Advice to others would be to create a designated physical space that is welcoming and familiar, a space just for the students that they can come any time to be themselves, charge their phones, take food, and chat to the Indigenous Education staff about their day, wellbeing, schoolwork or family. When we have hosted Yarn Up in other locations, students have been less likely to participate and open up in discussions.

Student C could not identify which Nation he was from at the start of 2019, but after listening to the other students in Yarn Up talk about their Country and cultures, and wanting to add his photo to the map, he encouraged his parents to find out and proudly announced where his Country is during Term 3. (Observation of Indigenous Education Projects Leader)

Student Y "has been speaking to us in detail about her ideas about contribution to support Yarn Up this year... (she) has been researching ways of making this important moment in time, reflective of her maturing sense of self and a recognition of her community." (Student Y's parents, email to Indigenous Education Projects Leader)

"I'm not really worried about what people think, it's good for them to know that because most people when they look at me don't think that, so I definitely think the whole Yarn Up having others there who are the same [identifying as Indigenous] definitely does help and make it easy to say it." (Student Q, Interview re Term 1, 2020)