

**Storytelling: A valuable living cultural practice to support the emotional well-being of Aboriginal students**

Author

Kruger, Candace

Published

2023

Journal Title

ASSIST Journal

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

Rights statement

This work is covered by copyright. You must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a specified licence, refer to the licence for details of permitted re-use. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please make a copyright takedown request using the form at <https://www.griffith.edu.au/copyright-matters>.

Downloaded from

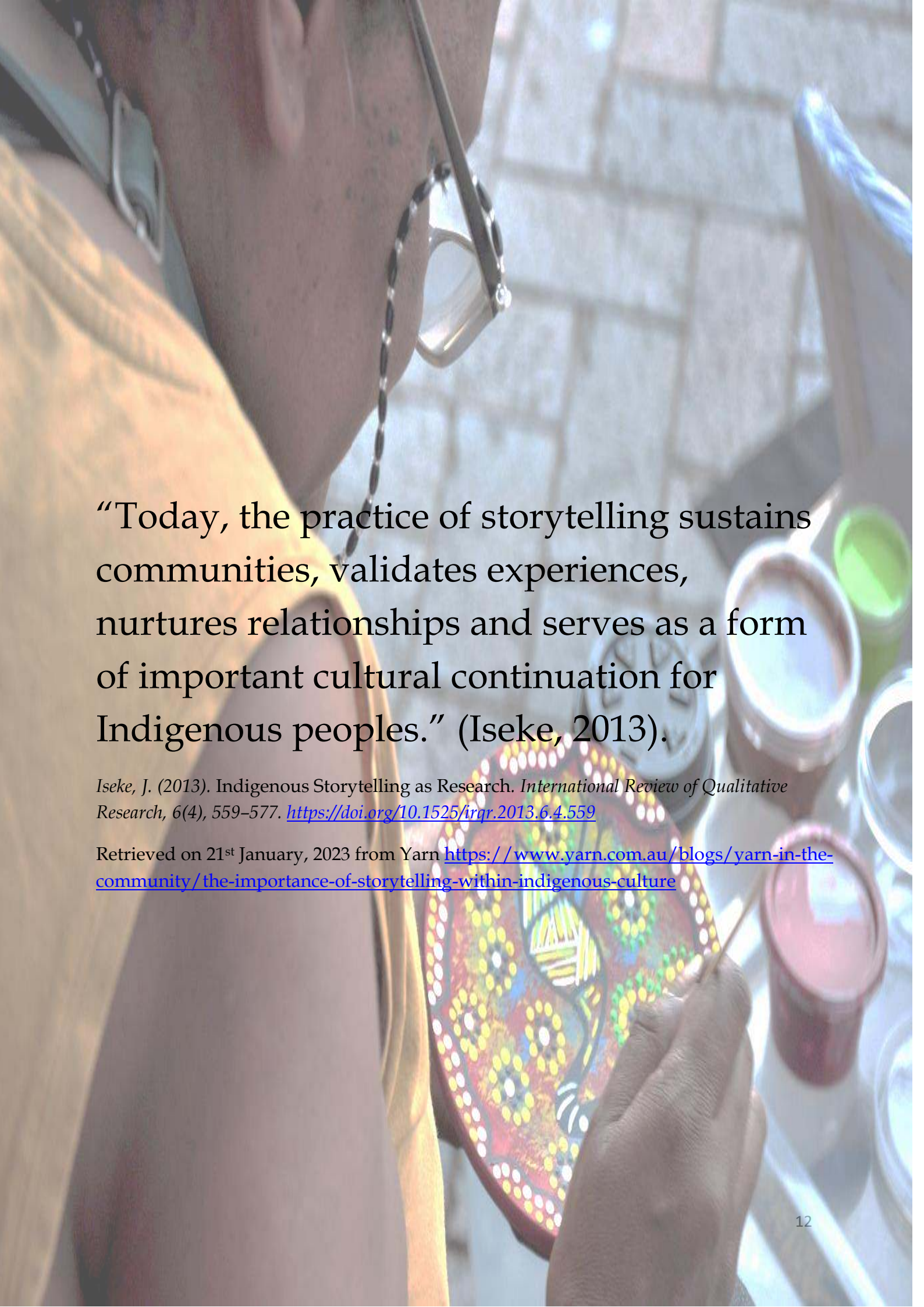
<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/428097>

Link to published version

<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3148334566/view>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

A close-up photograph of a person's hands painting a circular object, likely a boomerang or a similar traditional item. The person is wearing glasses and a yellow shirt. The painting is vibrant, featuring a central figure surrounded by intricate dot patterns in red, yellow, green, and blue. Several small containers of paint in various colors (red, green, blue, white) are visible on a surface next to the object being painted. The background is a light-colored, textured wall.

“Today, the practice of storytelling sustains communities, validates experiences, nurtures relationships and serves as a form of important cultural continuation for Indigenous peoples.” (Iseke, 2013).

Iseke, J. (2013). Indigenous Storytelling as Research. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 6(4), 559–577. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2013.6.4.559>

Retrieved on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2023 from Yarn <https://www.yarn.com.au/blogs/yarn-in-the-community/the-importance-of-storytelling-within-indigenous-culture>

# Storytelling: A valuable living cultural practice to support the emotional well-being of Aboriginal students.

by Candace Kruger  
Yugambah Elder and Songwoman.  
Griffith University School of Education and Professional Studies

storytime

Dr Candace Kruger



## Introduction.

'Who am I?' and *Winjigahl wahlu* (Where you from?) are important questions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The answers to these questions connect us to land, lore, language, culture and familial kinship ties. To care for *jagun* (land) means to keep alive people's link to this *jagun*, however, and unfortunately, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people this has been difficult to do.

Singing in, and learning Aboriginal language from, an Aboriginal cultural choir is one answer to the question 'Who Am I' and for *jarjum* (children), participation in living cultural practice can mean that they begin to connect to culture. However, long term, and as just one example of a cultural awareness activity, the oral practice (both sung and spoken) of storytelling and knowledge sharing can demonstrate to others, that there are lasting positive benefits waiting to be afforded to young people.

In this *gaureima [goorimah]* (story), I position and present myself, and the narratives of some of the *jarjum* that I have been privileged to know and work alongside. In particular, when we have learnt language and shared stories together.

*Jingeri Jimbelung, Gurri [Goori] Nhanya nyari Candace, Kombumerri nga Ngugi Junnebeineubani, Yugambah nga Moorgumpin Quandamooka Jagun.*

Hello Friends, I am Aboriginal, and my name is Candace. My family are *Kombumerri* and *Ngugi* of *Yugambah* country [Gold Coast, Logan and Scenic Rim] and *Moreton Island* of *Quandamooka* Country.

Candace is a Yugambah *yarrabilginngunn* (song woman) and proud *Kombumerri* (Gold Coast) and *Ngugi* (Moreton Island) Aboriginal woman. She is an author, musician, composer, as well as educator, and is the founder and director of the *Yugambah Youth Choir*. Candace's Doctoral study and research interests are investigations in the fields of Indigenous musicology, Indigenous studies, and Anthropology. Candace's research captures the songwoman's work, contributes to the development of Indigenous methodologies, and demonstrates one way in which an Aboriginal community are reconstructing Aboriginal knowledge for sustainability and legacy outcomes. Candace's co-composed piece 'Morning Star and Evening Star', which incorporates a Yugambah song line community narrative, is one example of this work and was the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) Online Orchestra, National 2021 music piece. Candace has taught in the classroom for over 27 years, and now lectures in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, in her specialty area - Indigenous Education.

In 2014, as a proud Aboriginal community member, gatherer of songs *Yugambah Talga* (Best, Kruger, & O'Connor, 2005) and music educator, I felt that I had sufficient Aboriginal cultural knowledge of *Yugambah* song lines, alongside 20 years of classroom music teaching experience, to establish an Aboriginal children's choir. Therefore, in 2014 I established the *Yugambah* Youth Choir, the first Indigenous Youth Choir on the Gold Coast for urban youth aged 5-25 years. The main objective was to *yarrabil* (sing) and learn *Yugambah* language. Following on, in April 2016, in response to requests from within the *Yugambah* language region, I established a satellite choir in Logan and in the first seven weeks attracted over 15 participants.



Image provided by the Yugambah Youth Choir

As a direct result of witnessing the connection to culture and acquisition of language skills being experienced by the children and youth who are members of the *Yugambah* Youth Choir, it was decided, supported by community, that an investigation was necessary into the potential benefits that could be afforded to urban Aboriginal children and youth through participation in an Aboriginal language choir. Therefore, in 2016, 'In the Bora Ring: *Yugambah* Language and Song Project - an investigation into the effects of participation in the '*Yugambah* Youth Choir' (Kruger, 2017), an Aboriginal language choir for urban Indigenous children' measured the thoughts and feelings of thirty-six *jarjum*, over a period of three months. As a result, the investigation revealed that there are five key benefits afforded to Aboriginal Children when they sing in Aboriginal language: identity, language acquisition, well-being, youth leadership and provision of socio-cultural capital. Furthermore, in 2022, I followed up with six choir members, all now adults, who could each confidently articulate, the long-term lasting benefits afforded to them through their years of connecting to culture through *Yugambah* Youth Choir. This included, and is not limited to, an ongoing relationship with community, trust and connectedness to a community, a heightened sense of belonging and identity, well-being in many situations, and knowledge, which often equals power, when voicing their opinion, or imparting cultural knowledge about Aboriginal people and culture to others.

## Gaureima [Goorimah] Story

'The Dreamtime', first proposed as a term in English by Aboriginal men in Central Australia, for lack of another English word, to somehow explain an all-encompassing existence, as recorded by Stanner (1979) is invariably the most common term afforded to the understanding of storytelling in reference to 'traditional' Aboriginal culture and life. Stanner's original discussion and interpretation of Aboriginal cultural knowledge is not constrained by what he learned, rather is open to the complexity of connectedness to all aspects of life and significantly recognises the importance of past, present and future within the narrative.

*The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man. If I am correct in saying so, it is much more complex philosophically than we have so far realised.*  
(Stanner, 1979, p. 23)

Today, Stanner's definition of 'The Dreamtime' has lost much of its original meaning. Many consider the term in reference to older narratives, or as creation or morality tales, of a time passed. This is evidenced by the following statement as taught in Aboriginal Cultural Studies in South Australia (2013) 'Dreaming stories were in effect moral guidelines passed down orally'.

Unfortunately, this action of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of Aboriginal culture, as expressed through a Western lens, means that we have generations of people who are not likely to understand that Aboriginal culture is nuanced and complex. Additionally for Aboriginal people who have had culture denied to them or have a disconnect to culture for various reasons, it means that living culture, which is the past connected to the present and the future, and is connected to all things, knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003), is stuck in the past and therefore the learning, receiving and passing on of culture knowledge and practice remains with and connected to the trauma of a culture denied to its people. Therefore, to rectify this situation we, as a collective both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, must look to alternate ways to ensure narratives, storytelling or 'Dreaming' are told in multiple ways, in multiple situations and from multiple people.

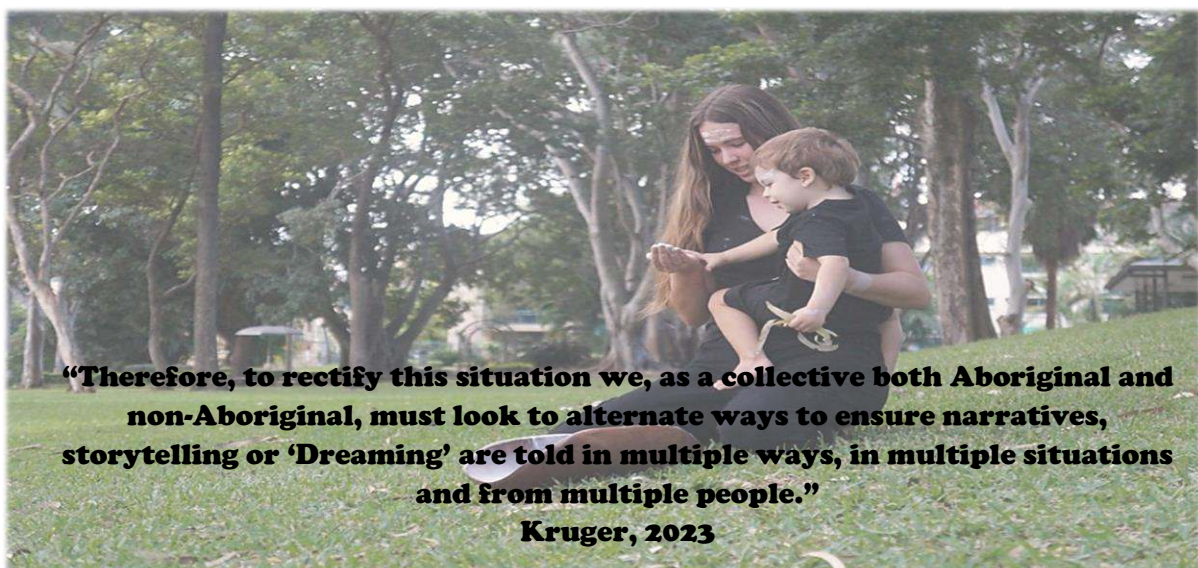


Image provided by the Yugambah Youth Choir

When I was in high school, my mother, a non-Aboriginal person, gave me Sally Morgan's 'My Place' (1987) to read. Most importantly, while I do not remember the narrative, I remember the feeling of understanding and connecting with a young Aboriginal woman who felt like me and feeling 'good' [well-being] inside after I read this book. As an adult, I have connected on the same level with Anita Heiss's 'am I black enough for you?' (2022), but in terms of learning culture, this knowledge was kept within the family. Some knowledge, such as language, was becoming lost, and other stories were sometimes kept by family members or only told in family gatherings, therefore the opportunity to learn about being Aboriginal because there was no class or place to learn culture formally has meant that I have had to figure out a way to do this for my own children and additionally find and interpret hidden narratives for other community members as well.

Now, more than ever, not because it is mandated in the Australian Curriculum for all children, but rather because we should learn about and care for people and the environment, learning about other people's cultures will promote understanding and build trust and capacity for communities, be that inside or outside of educational institutions.

*“ Now, more than ever, not because it is mandated in the Australian Curriculum for all children, but rather because we should learn about and care for people and the environment, learning about other people's cultures will promote understanding and build trust and capacity for communities, be that inside or outside of educational institutions.” Kruger 2023*

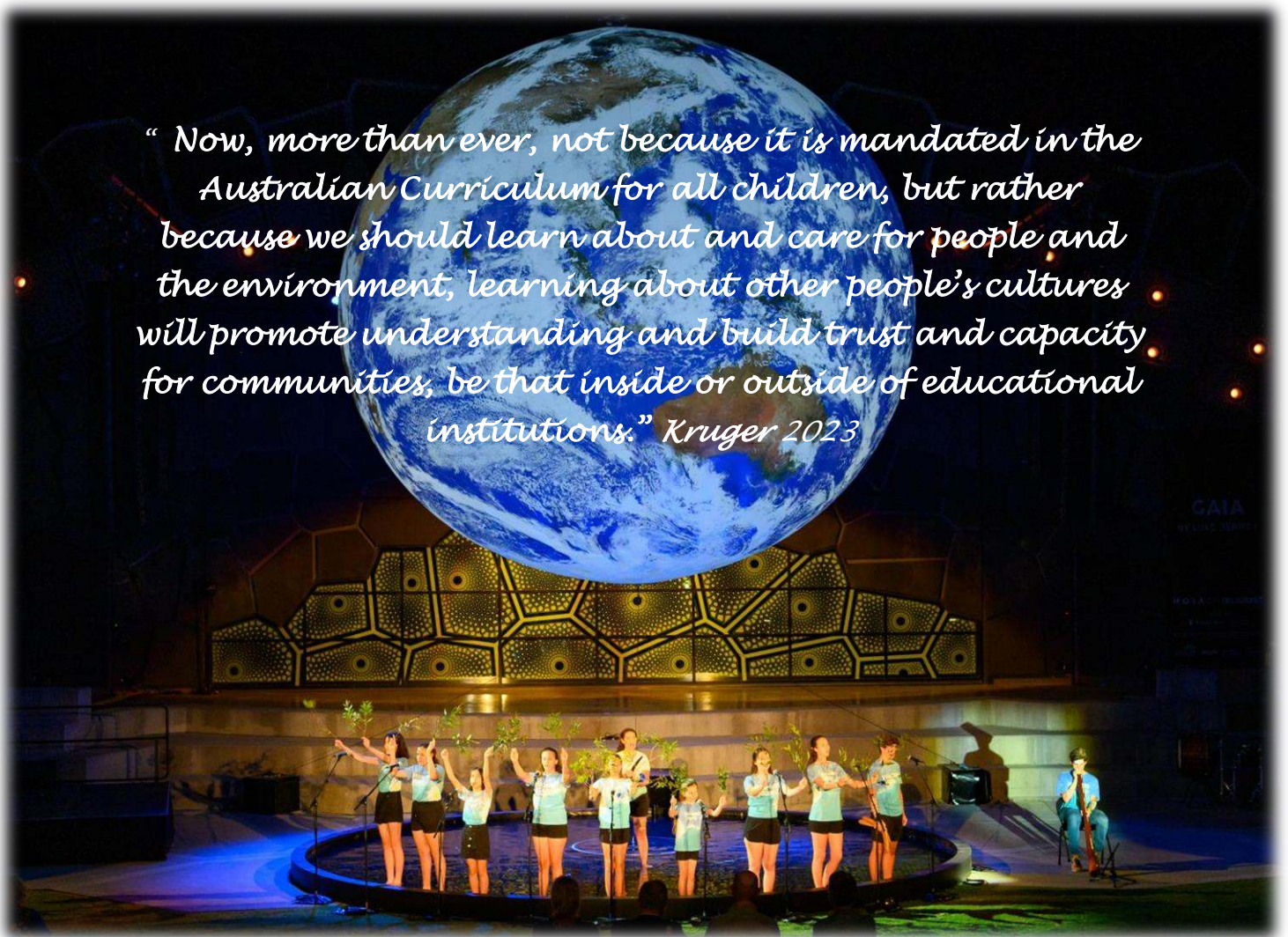


Image provided by the Yugambah Youth Choir

## Connecting with Living Culture.

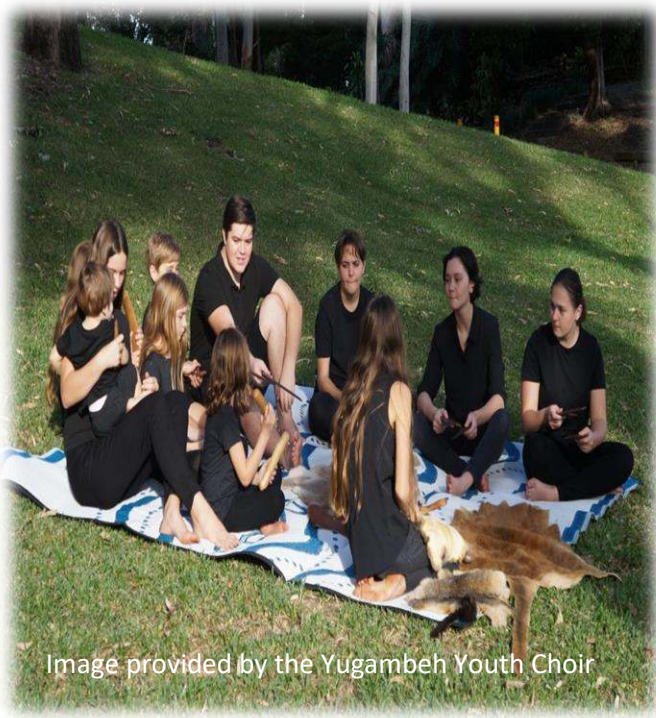


Image provided by the Yugambeh Youth Choir

The *Yugambeh* Language Song Project (YLSP) is an ongoing contextual study about learning and participating in living cultural practice with urban Aboriginal children. This narrative will discuss some of the benefits afforded to Aboriginal young people when they participate in cultural awareness activities, in particular the oral practice of storytelling, passed down through many generations, to teach language, embed knowledge, ensure the survival of community connectedness, and most importantly, evidence well-being. In the evidence provided it will become clear that storytelling is a critical tool when supporting Aboriginal students culturally and emotionally and will consequently demonstrate to educators one successful practice, and possible model to replicate, when trying to engage students in cultural activities or cultural awareness endeavours.

The following narrative is taken from a *wula bora* (talking and sharing) session on the 10<sup>th</sup> August, 2016, with *Mununjali jarjum*, Youth 1 (age 14-16), Youth 2 (age 14-16), Child 1 (age 8-10), Child 2 (age 8-10) and Child 3 (age 5-7).

When they began choir, these *jarjum* told me that they didn't know anything, meaning they had no prior knowledge of cultural heritage. What they did know was their tribal name and a family connection through an apical ancestor.

(*Wula bora* session, 10 August 2016)

*Youth 1:*        *To find out what we are (tribal and language ties) and to be, um, appreciated of who we are (Aboriginal), what we stand for and 'cause it's our land and people should respect us and treat us like everyone else...*

*Child 1:*        *Yeah. (Youth 2 also nods yes)*

*Candace:*      *It's a bit of a good thing, isn't it?*

*Candace:*      *Do you feel proud?*

*Youth 1:*        *Yes. (All agree)*

*Candace:*      *You do feel proud.*

*Candace: I've got a question for just this family group. So how do you feel about singing (Candace sings)*

*Wehga Wehga mullil, Jubbum Jubbum ngyu,*

*which was passed down by Aunty Moira, who you now know was a family line for you guys, how does it feel?*

*Child 2: Good.*

*Candace: Do you know when we sing the different stories, different kids in the choir that come down those family lines go, 'that's my family connection', so when we sing Wehga Wehga mullil, until I met you guys... (Youth 1 excitedly interrupts) Are we the only ones?*

*Candace: Yes, so 'till I met you guys, I knew of Aunty Moira, but I hadn't met her. The song was passed down to the Museum and we sang it, but it wasn't until I met you guys that I went, 'there's the real connection to a family group of one of the songs that we're singing' so it made me feel proud for you.*

*Youth 1 gets very tearful and indicates her emotions by drawing a line with her right fingernail down the inside of her left forearm.*

*Candace: What does that mean?*

*Youth 1: Like the bloodstream that's being passed down and we got them.*

*Candace: So, the bloodline, you feel the bloodline?*

*Youth 1: Yeah. (Nods and wipes a tear from her eye).*

The following narrative is taken from an interview on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2016. *Child 4* (aged 8-10) is from a different family, and this was a separate narrative. *Child 4* expressed his understanding about cultural revitalisation and the part that he plays in learning and sharing culture and language. In particular he shares that learning language through choir makes him feel special.

(*Child 4*, interview, 16 October 2016)

*Candace: What has it been like to learn your Aboriginal language?*

*Child 4: It has been pretty cool because I can say words in a different language, and it (Yugambah) belongs to me.*

*Candace: How does it make you feel that this language belongs to you?*

*Child 4: It makes me feel special (points to his chest) because this language belongs to me and my family.*

*Candace: Learning language makes you feel special and belongs to your family, how does this make you feel inside?*



*Child 4: It makes me feel happy, but also sort of excited because it was almost gone and now, we are bringing it back to life.*

*Candace: How does choir make you feel?*

*Child 4: It makes me feel connected to my culture, the language of my family and I'm getting to learn all about it.*

As demonstrated in these narratives, when *jarjum* participate in the learning and receiving of cultural knowledge they feel proud, special and connected to culture. It also demonstrates that this cultural activity provides a place where they can learn and engage and feel safe, because when asked how they feel about it, they have freely and unreservedly discussed their personal connection and feelings about learning culture.

In addition to learning about culture, this group have normalised the sharing of culture for the *Yugambeh* region, and as such this has had an impact on community and the *jarjum* as well. Aboriginal community, local community and the broader community have accepted this choral group and as a result there were 60 members who regularly performed in *Yugambeh* language throughout South-East Queensland, until COVID. This included: The Gold Coast Show 2014-2016, the 2015 National Rugby League Indigenous All Stars Australian National Anthem in *Yugambeh* language, the 2015 International Carer's Conference, 2016 ANZAC Southport Service, 2015-2016 ABC Radio Regional and National programs, 2015 National Reconciliation Week Launch and 2018 Commonwealth Games opening and closing ceremonies, and so many more. And since COVID, and rebuilding due to aging out of choir, we now have 25 young people, aged 3-23, and they have continued to do exceptional work, including in 2022 the Wallaroos and Wallabies performance with the National Anthem in *Yugambeh* language, the QLD Premier's Path to Treaty launch, and the Griffith University Chancellor Induction.



Image provided by the Yugambeh Youth Choir

Performance opportunities like these have meant that *Yugambeh jarjum* have been able to meet and talk to the Governor-General of Australia, Federal and State politicians, the Gold Coast and Logan mayors, cultural identities, university educators and business and community organisers and their sporting heroes. Consequently, participation in an urban Aboriginal cultural youth activity [choir] has normalised future academic studies and created aspirational future career pathways for Aboriginal young people, through connection and conversation, with a guaranteed community network of care and support.

## **Lasting Effects of Change.**

Accordingly, the central theme for this discussion - storytelling as a valuable living cultural practice to support the emotional well-being of Aboriginal students, can now look beyond one of the initial key findings of well-being from the YLSP and consider the effect on the next stage of life for the young adults, who initially participated in the study, but have now either aged out of choir, or have stopped participating regularly as work or study commitments fill their time.

As an adult, I recognised early on, that starting a community culture choir would never be short term, as the obligation and responsibility of the Songwoman to build relationships and sustain culture connections for community was, and is, a lifelong commitment. However, for these new adults, they are just coming to this realisation. Therefore, this second narrative is subsequent to the YLSP and is expressed as an outcome which was six years in the making, as identified by some of the six *jarjum*, who are now adults. In their 2022 narratives, we are informed about the positive long-term effects gained by participation in cultural activities as a child, we gain knowledge about the factors that these young adults' credit as the noteworthy links that assisted their successful transitions from childhood to adulthood, and we learn that once we locate ourselves within living culture, in particular, that there are inherent obligations and responsibilities that come with bloodline.

### *Adult 1: A Medical Doctor.*

Being in the medical field means you are one of very few Indigenous people around. Often Indigenous people in medicine talk about imposter syndrome because of the level of education that they have, that maybe they don't have the right to it. But being part of choir, gave me a leg to stand on, I could justify my identity and how I feel about it. I could say, I'm an active participant in my community, I learn, I give back to my community. This made me feel justified that I am Aboriginal. Without the choir, I would have struggled with imposter syndrome, because I have an education and I've become a medical doctor. Also, when you are only one of, or just a few, you have to agree to do everything that is expected of you as an Aboriginal person – like welcome to country or singing some song because you know one. I felt obliged because I was on an Indigenous scholarship, but if it hadn't had been for choir, I wouldn't have known what to do, or been comfortable doing it. Choir made me ready for the real world.

### *Adult 2: Studying - Final year Medical student*

The big issue in the health care industry, when speaking to other indigenous students is nobody feels comfortable in a clinical environment, and we discussed that we might never feel comfortable because there is a long history of stigma and bullying in the health care industry in general, so when you feel confident in your identity – which choir gave me – means that I can be more confident in myself, particularly when you don't look typically like what people think an Aboriginal person should look like. Having participated in choir for so long, while I was in really formative years, is probably the reason that I have any confidence in my identity and feel comfortable to say I'm an active member in my community, I know about my culture, I know about my language. I can introduce myself in my language – these things make me feel confident to say “this is who I am. You don't get to tell me who I am or am not”. And now, I'm comfortable being a health advocate for Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal people.

### *Adult 3: Studying - Masters of Secondary Teaching*

Choir gave me a lot of the skills and knowledge to confidently broadcast that I'm Indigenous and what that means. I work in education, as a teacher aide, until I become a teacher. There is a huge push at the moment, and it's been building for a couple of years, a focus on closing the gap, and whilst there's excitement and momentum to make it happen, there is no substance. The people I work with in identified positions, just don't know any culture. They have a superficial connection to culture. We talk about Aboriginality in a superficial way. Whereas I have the ability, knowledge, and skills to be able to add something meaningful to conversations and when I work with the Indigenous students at my school. In my 4-person Indigenous faculty, I'm the only person who has cultural knowledge. I recognise that I will always be talking about, teaching, and sharing my cultural heritage with others.

### *Adult 4: Studying Bachelor of Business and practicing Musician*

Choir gave me the confidence to pursue my passion as a contemporary musician. I am able to stand in front of an audience and tell the story about my songs. But not only that, about who I am, my cultural heritage, my love of the Gold Coast – land and waterways. Choir made me feel positive about who I am, and now I have the ability and responsibility to share this knowledge with others, and I guess come back and help you with the new little ones when I have time.

### **Implications for Education and Community.**

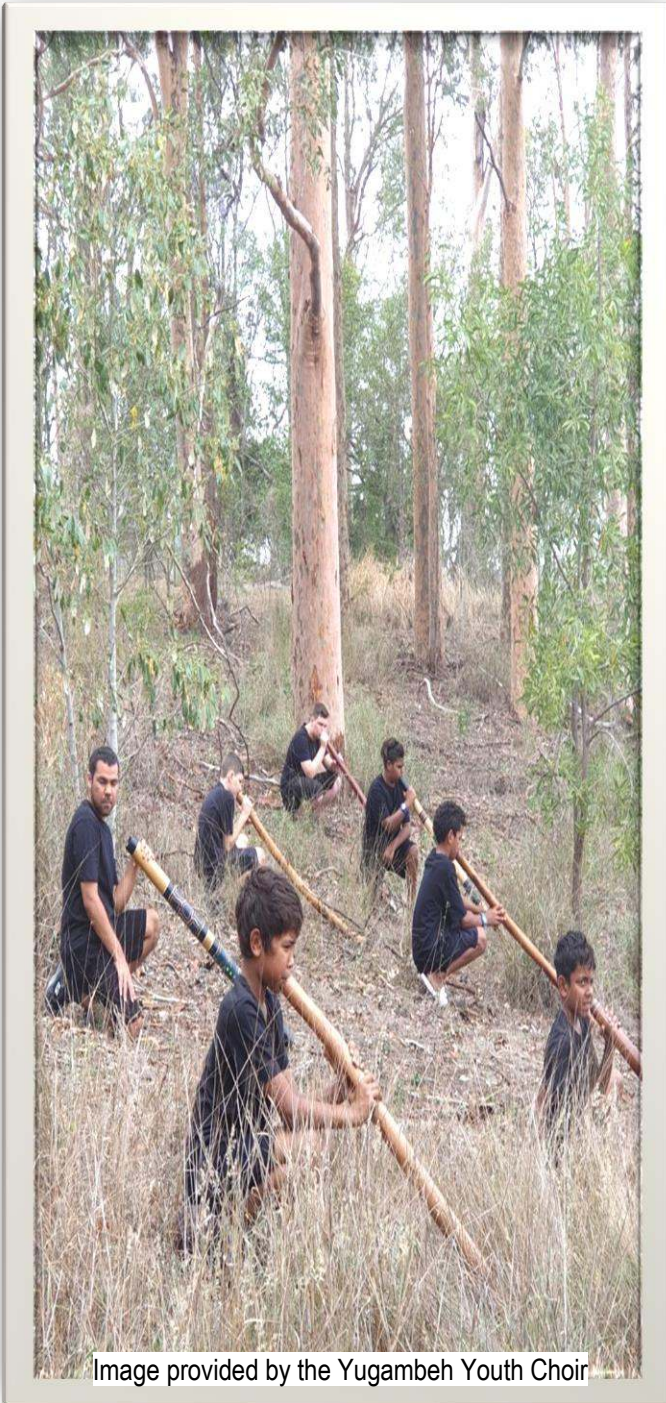
As I continue to work on gathering the thoughts of these incredible young adults and future young adults as they come through choir, I look toward the future and ask myself what this means. What are the implications for education and future community practice based on what they have said. Should we ensure that more educational institutions provide opportunities for living cultural practice, but how do we do this when so few Indigenous people have this knowledge? or is it that community practices, like the *Yugambeh* Youth Choir, where the stories and narratives of living culture are shared, must lean on its future adults to assist to build capacity in the broader community, thereby exponentially building a community of knowledge holders. Or perhaps we should be leaning on an entire region and be working towards ensuring that we embed as much cultural knowledge into our curriculum as possible.

*Regardless of which method or practice we collectively take as our next step, we can be reassured based on the evidence provided that our next step will go a long way to ensuring that our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jarjum become confident, feel safe and have trust in others, are educated in all aspects of their life, and are connected to culture.*



Image provided by the Yugambeh Youth Choir

## References.



Best, Y., Kruger, C., & O'Connor, P. (2005). *Yugambeh Talga: Music Traditions of the Yugambeh People*. Brisbane, Queensland: Keeaira Press.

Government of South Australia. (2013). *Reconciliation: year 10 - Protocols*. South Australia.

Heiss, A. (2022). *am i black enough for you?* Australia: Penguin, Random House.

Kruger, C. (2017). In *The Bora Ring: Yugambeh Language and Song Project - an investigation into the effects of participation in the 'Yugambeh Youth Choir', an Aboriginal language choir for urban Indigenous children*. MA thesis, Griffith University.

Martin, K., & Mirraboopa, B. (2003). *Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Research*. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(76), 203-14.

Morgan, S. (1987). *My Place*. New York: Seaver Books.

Stanner, W. E. (1979). *White Man Got No Dreaming Essays 1938-1973*.