



youth affairs network qld

Which Wei? Values in Youth Work: A Murri Perspective

A Discussion Paper

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Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ)

About YANQ

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland. YANQ advocates on behalf of young people in Queensland, especially disadvantaged young people, to government and the community. The interests and well being of young people across the state are promoted by YANQ in the following ways:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying
- making representations to government and other influential bodies
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks
- consulting and liaising with members and the field
- linking with key state and national bodies
- initiating projects
- hosting forums and conferences
- input into policy development
- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector

Indigenous Acknowledgment



YANQ believes that the primary culture of Australia is Aboriginal.

We recognise that Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander people are 3 separate cultures. We recognise Aboriginal people as the permanent custodians of mainland Australia and Torres Strait Islanders as permanent custodians of the Torres Strait Islands that are an integral part of Australia, including those areas of land and sea whose owners have been wiped out as a result of racist politics and acts. We use the term custodianship in the context of protection and care for the land. YANQ is committed to respecting individuals, Murri and Islander communities. We seek to understand their responses to policies and issues affecting them. We are committed to learning about their understandings of the impact of decisions on them. YANQ apologises for the past and present social mistreatments of Murri and Islander people created by colonisation, and is committed to supporting the healing process.

Which Wei? Values in Youth Work: A Murri Perspective

By Melissa Lucashenko (Yugambah)

Jingawahlu!! Which wei? (Hi! How ya going?)

During 2009 Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) conducted research into youth work in Queensland. The Murri part of the research asked youth workers, managers and volunteers (both Murri and Migaloo) what they thought were the key **values** for doing this kind of work well. The researchers were told that some of the important values underlying Murri youth work were:

1. Relevant cultural identity and life-experience of the youth worker
2. Respect, open mindedness, and listening
3. Patience, tolerance and compassion
4. Working from the grassroots and walking alongside young people
5. Providing leadership and role models
6. Passion
7. Honesty

This Discussion Paper is about what youth work actually means in Murri culture, why values are important, and what difference it makes to youth work to have these Murri values in mind.

What is Youth Work?

Murri people have been doing youth work for thousands of years without calling it “youth work”. Sometimes we’ve called it “growing kids up the proper way”. Sometimes we’ve called it “putting them through Law”. And sometimes we’ve just called it the normal process of life – caring for, teaching, and nurturing young people as an unremarkable part of our day to day Murri existence. Of course, things are different in the modern world for most Murri people. Lots of our families have been dispossessed, broken apart, or damaged, put on missions and sometimes partly assimilated into white society through Stolen Generations policies. We grow kids up differently these days, although some things never change. But the first part of this paper talks about *how it used to be* before colonisation. Back when we all knew how to grow our kids up safely and effectively. Why? Because we can learn from that experience today, even though things have changed a lot in the 21st century.

Youth Work Before Captain Cook

Today it’s often troubled Murri kids who come in contact with youth workers. But back before colonisation, all Murri kids got the attention and care of adults who wanted to see them grow up properly. You simply didn’t get to become a full adult member of your Aboriginal clan without lots and lots of attention from older men or women, or both. And this attention wasn’t just accidental, or random. It was very highly organised and a priority for the clan. It took place over several years too and was a structured part of Aboriginal life. The Murri community always took the job of growing young people up, very seriously.

Everybody in the clan knew that at around or just before puberty, boys were normally selected to go through their first Law, if the older people in the clan felt they were ready. (The older people would have been watching the boys ever since they were little, to constantly check on their social development and character.) And everybody also knew that the girls would be taken aside by the older women when their time came to be made into

women. Our old Murri people understood that it takes a lot of adults, and a lot of work, to bring young ones up right. The youth had a lot of freedom as kids to roam the bush and play, but they weren't just left to run wild. Boys and girls were watched, and taught, and nurtured right from the word go.

Families stuck together and you travelled together, you slept together and you went to ceremonies together. All those things are still clear in my mind you know, the days when I roamed around gathering yams and berries, and goannas, bandicoots. All those are very clear. I used to love roaming the country after bushfire. I used to love the smell of the bushfire.

Darwin Elder, removed from Boorooloola under the assimilation policy as a young child in about 1930.

One way of thinking about “youth work” in traditional Murri culture is that it was the process of *transforming* young, partly-educated individuals into adults, with all the adult strengths that their communities needed in order to flourish. It was a process of training and teaching the youth. And it's really important to remember that this cultural training stood alongside a lot of loving and caring as well.

What were the qualities that the Murri communities needed back then? Well, traditionally, the process of growing young Murri people up involved teaching them to be:

- ❖ **good learners:** Boys and girls were taught how to learn and especially how to listen properly – and how to pay attention. Studies have shown that Murri kids are much more likely than other Australian kids to point out things in their environment to the adults around them. Questions from kids weren't encouraged, but keen observation by young people definitely was. They also learned to listen *by being listened to* themselves. Adults modelled the right way to pay attention to people and really hear what was said by everyone. When young people are listened to, they then also learn how to listen, by observation. If they are ignored by adults, then they learn to ignore others and not listen to them;
- ❖ **good thinkers:** Youth were taught that knowledge was earned by those who showed they could think critically, and who showed intelligence. Answers weren't handed up on platters to kids – they were taught to go away and think things through, to puzzle them out for themselves. This taught them the skill of critical thinking, and also intellectual independence;
- ❖ **how to be respectful of themselves as valuable people:** By being treated with love and respect from birth, young people knew deeply and instinctively that they were valuable. Abuse teaches kids that they are “rubbish”. It leads kids into depression and further abuse, of self and others. Real, solid respect from adults, on the other hand, teaches kids dignity and self-worth. Our old people knew this and Aboriginal Law encourages self-respect and kindness towards children;
- ❖ **how to be respectful of Elders;**
- ❖ **how to care for country:** By watching men and women conduct ceremonies, and burn the country at the right time, and do everything else necessary to keep their country healthy, young people learned what they would need to do when it was their job;
- ❖ **to have self-control and patience;**
- ❖ **how to be part of a community** by sharing resources appropriately, and contributing skills. Selfishness was always universally frowned upon by Aboriginal people, but sharing had to be a fair, two-way process, not a gammon one where one

side ended up with all the goodies;

- ❖ **how to help in caring** for younger children and babies. Boys and girls had different roles in caring, but both were expected to contribute to their family's wellbeing;
- ❖ **providers** of food. Youth were taught to hunt and gather from infancy, and at a young age Aboriginal children were fairly self-sufficient on their own country;
- ❖ **makers** of tools (eg spears, coolamons, baskets, fish traps etc);
- ❖ **builders** of shelter;
- ❖ **how to trust** adults and other young people. This is learnt by being in relationships with trustworthy people who behave consistently;
- ❖ **how to behave** in accordance with marriage and relationship Law;
- ❖ **the correct ways to resolve conflict;**
- ❖ **and how to be physically tough** (most initiation ceremonies involve some physical testing of endurance and mental strength).

Before colonisation, Murri people in Queensland were pretty stable in how we lived. We'd had thousands of years to work out how to live successfully, and we knew how to live well on our own country. When Captain Cook first sailed to north Queensland, he wrote in his diaries that the Cooktown Murries didn't want anything he had to offer them. Cook wrote that the Murries were quite content as they were, and that they were:

"The happiest people on the face of the earth".

Those Murries must have figured things out pretty well, if even a white man from the other side of the world could see it!

What's this got to do with youth work? For one thing, it means that the youth work we were doing back in the old days was *effective*. It means that Murri people (and many other Indigenous people around the world) were very smart about the ways we grew our young people up. How could our societies have been happy and functional and sustainable, unless we were doing something right with the youth? The answer is they couldn't have been. So – what were we doing back then that worked?

The Basis of Traditional Youth Work: A Very Conservative Approach

In traditional Aboriginal society, adults were nearly always working with young people they were closely related to. Uncles and Aunts had (and still have in lots of places) special responsibilities to the young. Parents played a different role, and grandparents and older siblings and cousins played different roles again.

Traditional youth work happened with boys and girls who understood that they were valuable people with a rich culture and a family who loved them. You could look at this as a "building on strengths" model. The adults were also coming from a very conservative position – they were trying to reproduce the Aboriginal society *as it existed*. They weren't trying to reform it or change it; quite the opposite, since Aboriginal Law is about keeping an eternal cycle of song and ceremony going much the same way it has been for thousands of years.

This doesn't mean that the youth work was "value free" or "value neutral". It simply means that the values in traditional youth work were *highly conservative* ones that valued the existing society. Remember that this was a very stable society that hadn't changed that much for thousands of years. Aboriginal Law/Lore held everything together safely in a tight web of responsibilities for country and people. Young Murri people had automatic access to

the Law/Lore as long as they showed that they were mature enough and intelligent enough to be initiated.

These Aboriginal societies before Captain Cook generally worked well, and so adults wanted young people to reproduce this society in turn, as they grew into adulthood. The youth work wasn't about too much change, or fast change. It was about the slow, steady, predictable growth of young people into adults.

The Murri "youth workers" (parents, aunts, uncles and other relations) before Cook were coming from positions of personal empowerment through their practice of Aboriginal Law. These people had high self-esteem and strong responsibilities to and affection for the youth. It wasn't a "catch-up" model of helping young people in deep trouble. It was a normal, natural process of continuing to help young people who had always been cared for properly right from the word go.

The Basis of Youth Work Today: Reformist or Radical Approaches

Since Cook, Murri societies that were previously very stable have had to adapt very fast to colonisation, attempted assimilation and the eras of so-called self-management and self-determination. Our families have often been split up, put on missions, and shifted thousands of kilometres from their clan homelands. Our lands were taken by the incomers, and often our children were too. Today a lot of us live as minorities in our own land. Most of us are in some form of culture shock from this process.

Aboriginal languages and culture were forbidden in some areas of Queensland, and allowed in others. Many Murri people became Christian or atheist, while some kept to Aboriginal Law, and some combined these religious options. So Murri societies today are very different than in the past. And there is diversity – some of us know our languages and some don't. Some of us have access to our lands and some don't. And we come in all colours and shapes today – we don't all look stereotypically black or brown, far from it. There are plenty of blonde, blue-eyed Murriss in Queensland.

Today, because of our colonial history, the Murri young people that come into contact with youth workers are often very marginalised kids. They are likely to have problems with their families and schools, and to have experienced violence, racism and other serious problems in their young lives. They might have been bullied, or be bullies themselves. They might be both bullies *and* bullied, in different settings.

The Murri boys and girls that youth workers see today are likely to have grown up in poverty seeing alcohol and drug abuse and family violence in their homes. They may be reproducing these harmful cycles in their own lives. They may suffer from mental illness, and have an enormous sense of shame about a perceived "lack" in their Aboriginal identities. They are likely to believe that they are "stupid" or otherwise deficient. They may have already given up on having a decent life, or being treated fairly. They will often mistakenly feel "too white" or "not really Aboriginal", not realising that these feelings are very widespread amongst all colonised Indigenous people today.

In this setting, it makes sense that many youth workers argue that Queensland society as a whole is not working for young Murri people. Instead of the conservative approach that traditional youth work had, youth work today usually involves a *reformist* or *radical* understanding of how colonisation and racism and other prejudices hurt our Murri youth. Like Indigenous youth all around the world, our young Murri people are experiencing what it's like to be a minority population living in poverty in a First World country. Added to this are the problems that come with being a young person with few resources, whose very being as an Aboriginal person is held in contempt by much of the mainstream society.

What is the Role of Murri Values?

From an Indigenous point of view it is ridiculous to suggest that any human activity can be “Value Free” or “Value Neutral”. Because every person on the planet has a culture, all human activity must be informed by the values that underpin that culture. It is generally only people in positions of power who are never forced to see that what they perceive as “normal” or “natural” is, in fact, an outcome of their (dominant) culture. “Value Free” youth work is therefore a nonsense: what masquerades as ‘value free’ youth work is in fact, youth work based on the *conservative value* of keeping modern Australian society just the way it is today in 2010.

In contrast, these are the values that were identified by the YANQ researchers as useful in working with Murri youth:

1. Relevant cultural identity and life-experience of the youth worker

Without a clear cultural identity (Indigenous or other) youth workers will be greatly disadvantaged in working with Murri youth. This means being able to state your ethnicity, and being able to really understand what your ethnicity means in relation to Murri people, Murri history, and Murri youth work.

If you are a Murri worker, it means that you have the spoken language (usually Aboriginal English, but in some places Aboriginal Languages), body language, mindset, historical understanding, personal affinity and cultural knowledge to communicate well with Murri youth, without needing a “cultural translator”. Having these things means gaining the trust of Murri people a lot faster.

If you are a Murri worker who hasn’t been taught the Murri culture (often through growing up in white society), it means that you recognise that you have to work hard to learn your culture and gain more understanding and thereby become more of an asset to your community. It also means understanding that your cultural ignorance is an outcome of a colonial history, and never something you should be blamed or attacked for. It also means acknowledging that you are not skilled in the same way as a Murri worker who does know Murri culture.

If you are a non-Indigenous worker it means working hard to gain more understanding of Murri culture, as a professional requirement of your job. It also means gaining an understanding of “whiteness” and how white privilege operates in Australia to hurt Murri people and advantage other people. It also means knowing what strengths you bring to youth work as someone of a non-Murri background and what is appropriate and inappropriate for you to do and ask. This is best learned from Murri people ourselves, although Murri books, dvds and music can also help you learn a lot. It also means learning enough about your ethnicity so that you can eventually almost forget about it (you aren’t the story here), and focus on helping your Murri clients in the best, most appropriate way for them.

2. Respect, open mindedness, and listening

Murri young people will quickly react to adults who don’t treat them with respect as *practiced in Murri society*. They will generally react with either anger or avoidance. In Murri culture, a child of ten is given far more responsibility and autonomy than a white Australian child. At ten, a Murri child is considered to know her own mind, to be capable of caring for younger siblings, and to have opinions and judgements of her own which should be respected. It follows that at twelve or fourteen a Murri child is regarded much more like an adult than your average white teenager is in their family.

When Murri teenagers are treated like small children at school or in the wider society,

they feel patronised and disrespected. Imagine if you were treated like a child yourself, when you are really an adult – how humiliated would you feel? Would you want to stick around?

It is a fundamental value of Aboriginal society that only select older people can discipline or 'correct' anyone who is doing the wrong thing. Therefore, Murri teenagers are not going to respond well to sudden judgements or criticism from outsiders, especially if those outsiders are non-Aboriginal strangers. Autonomy is held very dear to Aboriginal people, and this is true for teenagers as well as adults.

If Murri teenagers feel listened to and cared for, however, they are far more likely to accept careful criticism or suggestions for behaviour change.

The ideal sequence of events in Murri society goes like this:

Long-term LISTENING and CARING from adults leads to RESPECT then comes the possibility of GENTLE CRITICISM and/or MODELLING better behaviour. If better behaviour doesn't result then the person might be socially ostracised or, in the final instance, ceremonially shamed or punished by elders.

Unfortunately what happens too often to Murri youth in mainstream society these days is:

SUDDEN HARSH CRITICISM from outsiders leads to ANGER/AVOIDANCE from Murri youth leads to MORE JUDGEMENT and ADULT ANGER which becomes a vicious cycle finishing in prison or worse.

Most Murri people experience white culture as a space in which white people have never learned to listen properly, either to words or to body language. Learning *how to listen* in a Murri context is one of the best skills you can have as a youth worker. Important issues are often not spoken of directly; indirect references are a common aspect of Murri conversations and can easily be missed by the uninitiated. Listen to what isn't said, as well as to what is.

3. Patience, tolerance and compassion

Traditional Murri culture valued personal relationships above material goods. As a result, it is the way people interact that matters most. Soft voices, patience in working with troubled young people, and a willingness to bend and compromise are all valued highly by Murri people. This doesn't mean being a "sucker" however. All young people need strong boundaries and rules to help them learn and grow safely. But the imposing of these boundaries and rules, where necessary, can be done in a culturally sensitive way, not by sudden harsh measures or in a voice like an army sergeant.

A failure to show compassion to someone in distress is baffling to most Murri people. Youth workers should learn the appropriate ways to let Murri youth know that they really care about them – sometimes just by saying "that sounds like it was really hard for you" or "you poor thing" or sometimes (not always) with a big hug or a gentle touch of the shoulder.

Like other young people, Murri youth will "test you out" very often, to see just where you will draw the boundaries. If they don't find any boundaries, or the boundaries are inconsistent (allowed to muck up one day, but not the next) then they will quickly lose respect for you as a worker.

4. Working from the grassroots and walking alongside young people

Working from the grassroots means not putting yourself on a higher level than the young Murries you work with. It means having or gaining an appreciation for what it means to go without the basics of life – to be homeless or hungry, to be harassed by police or other authorities because of your culture or colour. It means learning to understand Murri English without making yourself ridiculous by mimicking it. And if you aren't Indigenous, it means always remembering that you are not an "expert" on Murri lives – Murri people are. You might have valuable skills and experience to contribute (or not) and you might build good relationships with Murri people, but you will never be the "expert" on our lives.

Walking alongside young people means being there for them when things are hard and in the good times too. It means being supportive, without having to "take over" and take control. It means recognising where young Murri people have intelligence, energy and skills to apply to their own lives and letting them make decisions for themselves. It means staying beside the youth as a support, not out in front taking over, or dragging behind letting them go any old way regardless of the consequences.

5. Providing leadership and role models

Young Murri people, like all young people, need role models to look up to and learn from. A good role model is fair, consistent, and keeps confidentiality. A good role model never promises more than they can deliver. A good role model knows the Murri culture but doesn't condemn those young people (or adults) who don't know the culture through no fault of their own.

A good role model is of use to the community and the world, while remembering that the **first lesson of Aboriginal Law is to care for yourself** as a valuable member of society.

A good role model never engages in sexual or other exploitative relationships with young people, and avoids creating "special" friendships especially where there is a power imbalance.

A good role model understands but never exploits the vulnerability of young Murri people.

6. Passion

Young Murri people, like most young people, respond well to youth workers who are really genuinely interested in them and their lives. So long as this interest is balanced by a respect for their Aboriginal autonomy, young people will blossom where youth workers show energy and passion in their work.

7. Honesty

Dishonesty in adults is anathema to young Murri people, and indeed young people everywhere. Because youth workers are often working with young Murries who have been abused, lied to and marginalised in their lives, it is of the utmost importance that workers are "straight" with the youth. Never lie to young people – **ever**. Personal integrity must always be at the forefront of your mind and your behaviour. To be dishonest is to risk hurting already damaged people.

People who are dishonest are seen not only as "gammon" (fake) by Murri youth, but also as weak and contemptible. It is *always* better to tell the truth, even if it puts you in a bad light in the short term. Tell the truth, apologise if there is a need for that, and then move on to the next thing.

Having said that, there is also a practice in Murri culture which is the equivalent of the “white lie” in mainstream culture. Sometimes people will make transparently false excuses for not doing something, and in Murri culture it is very rude to question this directly. Things can nearly always be questioned or challenged, but this happens indirectly and subtly. If behaviour needs to be challenged or commented on, *think before you speak*.

Conclusion

The values discussed in this paper are ones that YANQ surveys and other research found to be important in youth work. We believe that by working with young people and applying these values, youth work can be more useful for Murri young people. Murri and non-Murri workers will usually approach their jobs differently, and young people will form different relationships with you depending on your background. But there is no reason why non-Murri workers can't have good, productive and respectful relationships with Aboriginal people. It's just about learning what you can, and being prepared to admit that Murri people are the experts on our culture and our lives. Most Murri people will share what they know, if it is obvious that you know how to listen, are interested, and bring strengths of your own to the bargaining table.

Kingilawanna!! (that's all for now)

YANQ is keen to receive feedback / hear your views on this Discussion Paper. Please send your comments either by mail to The Director, Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc., 30 Thomas Street, West End Qld 4101 or email director@yanq.org.au

