



Helping Them Shine

Evaluation of the Michael Leslie
Pilbara Performing Arts Program



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In late 2009, Michael Leslie and Dickon Oxenburgh of the Michael Leslie Performing Arts Foundation (hereafter the Foundation) approached the Kulunga Research Network (Kulunga) to evaluate the Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program (the program).

Through the assistance of a Healthways *Health Promotion Research Starter Grant*, Kulunga evaluated the program against its core objectives of empowering young people in the Pilbara to improve their educational outcomes and to overcome self and externally imposed barriers to success.

The program uses performing arts mediums – including dance, drama and creative writing to:

- build students' self-esteem; develop the necessary skills to facilitate co-operative engagement and responsibility; and,
- connect young people with professionals and organisations that can support their aspirations and future endeavours.

This is the first formal evaluation of the program. The data and findings are intended for a number of stakeholders including:

- the Foundation to outline the outcomes of the program and opportunities for improvements;
- project partners as evidence for the need to continue increased support and wider implementation of the program;
- students, parents and schools as feedback on the overall outcomes of the program; and,
- the Western Australian Department of Education and other government stakeholders as evidence of the important positive impact of performing arts programs.

The data collection and analysis utilises qualitative methods which enable a nuanced understanding of the impact of the program on the students and teaching staff who are directly involved, and on the families, and communities linked to the schools.

This evaluation found that the impact of the Michael Leslie program is consistent with much of the literature on the positive impact of young people's involvement in the performing arts on their self-esteem, confidence, learning, and motivation. The evidence gathered from participants and those connected to the participating schools found that participation in the program can be a transformative experience that brings about significant changes in students' lives. The program provides students with skills and experience that can assist them to collaborate, be disciplined both physically and mentally, be expressive, listen and respond, and take personal risks, complete a complex task and then perform it in front of peers. These are all highly valuable and transferable skills that are important in a range of contexts including a learning environment. The program's focus on youth engagement and youth participa-





tion provides a range of students with skills necessary for fostering qualities of leadership and different styles of communication amongst their peers and communities. Similarly, the program increases cultural pride and self-determination which, in turn, encourages students to take leadership of their own life, their family, and their community. The impact of the program on students' self-esteem and aspirations is particularly significant given the evidence on the importance of positive self-esteem to children and young people's healthy lives and futures.

Recommendations

The Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program is achieving its aims and objectives and, as a result, proving to be an effective program which is meeting the needs of many young people. The recommendations are designed to assist the program to continue to meet its aims, help sustain the delivery of the program across the Pilbara, and provide a pathway for the future expansion of the program.

Key factors required for the ongoing delivery and sustainability of the program include:

- increased financial support to retain more program and support staff and provide transport and other resources required for students to perform;
- supportive schools, communities, parents and local organisations who value the program and the performing arts and believe in its transformative capacity - to insure that the individuals who commit to this work are given institutional support;
- increased delivery of the program to current participating schools; and,
- ongoing data collection to measure and track the varying impacts of the program.





BACKGROUND



The Context

It is important when evaluating the impact of the Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program to consider the environment in which the program is delivered, specifically some of the issues impacting on Aboriginal children and young people. A key source of information on the lives and experiences of Western Australia's Aboriginal children, young people and their families and communities is the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS).

WAACHS is the largest and most comprehensive study of Aboriginal child health and development ever undertaken in Australia. Its main aim is to improve community and scientific understanding of what Aboriginal children and young people need to develop in healthy ways. The four volumes arising from the survey are each based on a detailed analysis of the data collected and provide a wealth of information on the experiences and issues impacting on the lives of Western Australia's Aboriginal children, young people, their families, carers and communities.

While many of the findings are important to understanding the situation faced by Aboriginal people in the Pilbara, of particular note for this evaluation are those relating to social and emotional wellbeing and education experiences. These highlight the magnitude and urgency of the emotional and behavioural difficulties faced by many Aboriginal communities and families and the range of factors impacting on young people's social and emotional wellbeing. For instance, the survey found that an estimated 26 per cent of Aboriginal children aged 4 to 11 years were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, compared with 17 per cent of non-Aboriginal children in the same age group. 21 per cent of Aboriginal children aged 12 to 17 years were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, compared with 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal children. Volume Two – *The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*, shows that one of the major issues facing Aboriginal children and young people is the way in which they view themselves and how they feel about themselves in relation to their everyday experiences. (p.342) This volume suggests self-esteem is developed by people's interaction with their environment and how they reflect on that interaction. Furthermore, it found that self esteem is a mediating factor for several important outcomes including, educational achievement, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, and suicidal behaviour. Of particular note for this evaluation is the finding that the self-esteem of children and young people is predictive of their self esteem as adults and longer term social and emotional wellbeing.

The findings reported in Volume Three - *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People* - build on the findings on physical health and social and emotional wellbeing reported in Volumes One and Two. The findings highlight the magnitude of educational disadvantage facing many Aboriginal students and their families. As is well known, the majority of Aboriginal students are behind in their level of school performance. The enormity of the discrepancy in the level of academic performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and the lack of substantial progress in closing this gap, underscores the importance and urgency of developing new approaches to addressing the challenges faced by many Aboriginal students especially with regard to





their engagement. The data collected from classroom teachers and through independent national benchmark testing shows that the majority of Aboriginal students are behind in their school work. In fact, on average, Aboriginal students are performing at levels far below that of non-Aboriginal students. The report found that the proportion of students who missed 26 or more days of school in the school year tended to decline from Year 1 to Year 6 then increase to Year 10 where the proportion who have missed more than 26 days peaked at 70%.

The findings within the WAACHS provide an important context and backdrop to some of the many challenges facing Aboriginal children and young people in the Pilbara which have a direct impact on their schooling experience and their attitudes towards themselves and their lives. Michael Leslie recognises and seeks to address many of these issues through the program, particularly those relating to self-esteem.

The Program

The Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program (the program) was launched in 2006 after founding director Michael Leslie approached Rio Tinto with an idea to form a partnership program targeting young people in the Pilbara. The program gave rise to the Michael Leslie Performing Arts Foundation which seeks "...to help all people in the Pilbara discover and express themselves in spirit, mind and body – through the Arts – and in the process develop invaluable life skills, self-acceptance and learning". The program and Foundation is supported by a number of sponsors and working partners. Rio Tinto Iron Ore provides the majority of funding.

Founder Michael Leslie started dancing in 1975 and has been described as "an accomplished artist and social entrepreneur" who imparts his talent, skills and expertise to empower others. Michael Leslie has the overall responsibility of programming of the Foundation's activities. The Foundation has a Board of Directors and coordinator who in addition to normal administrative duties is currently involved in the strategic planning and development of the Foundation. The Foundation operates on the philosophy "Jinanagu and Wanggangu" or walking and talking, which Michael Leslie says "represents the power that comes through verbally and physically expressing our truth".

Michael seeks to inspire and motivate young Aboriginal people to seize the opportunities available to them in terms of education and work. His motivation is a combination of his individual experiences and observations of Aboriginal communities. His mother encouraged him to pursue his education and instilled in him a strong work ethic. He says that while he was sometimes bored by school, he realised the value of education and hard work as the keys to success. He feels that these ethics and values have been lost by many Aboriginal people and communities. Part of his program is about restoring these to Aboriginal kids, families and communities. He also wants to overcome the fear of family and negative community reaction to success that stifles ambition and aspiration among young Aboriginal people.

The vision of the program is "To develop the Pilbara region as a centre of excellence in the performing arts in Western Australia and Australia." The program aims to provide opportunities for young people to discover their hidden talents and overcome universal challenges such as low self esteem, shame, shyness and embarrassment, poor body





image, and a constant worry about what other people think of them. The program's mission is "To teach and inspire children and young people in the Pilbara to gain self-respect and pride through the Arts, and help them overcome self-defeating attitudes and barriers that prevent them from reaching their true potential."

MLPPA Program streams include:

- Acting
- Singing
- Dance
- Creative Writing
- School program
- After-school program
- Talent Identification Program
- Choir
- Adult literacy
- Physical activity and wellness
- Live productions
- Guest speaker series
- Mentoring
- Pilbara Spinifex Youth Performing Arts Festival

Another key component of the program is about creating pathways for students and people in the Pilbara to further their interests and talents in the performing arts is another key component of the program. Current pathways for young people and adults to pursue these opportunities and/or share their skills include:

- Scholarships
- School and after-school programs
- Talent Identification Program
- Train the Trainer
- Artists in Residency
- Freelancing

While the program works to break the cycle of Aboriginal youth being restricted from aspiring to be different and successful, one of its strengths is its inclusivity of all children in the area. Michael recognises that many of the issues and fears and attitudes towards success and achievement are also present in many non-Aboriginal families and communities, and therefore there is a need to work with all young people and encourage and inspire them.





Program Sites

Map of Pilbara



[Map Source - Australian Bureau of Statistics]

The program has a regular schedule of schools visits although attendance at particular schools can vary from term to term as a result of timetabling and availability. The current course venues include Karratha, Pannawonica, Roebourne, Tom Price and Wickham involving 11 schools and up to 600 students. Karratha Senior High School, Wickham Primary School and Onslow Primary School participate in the program at present on an occasional basis. The program also runs various after-school activities including: Drama classes for Embryonik which is a young people's theatre company that fosters and supports emerging talent identified by visiting workshop teachers through the course of the Performing Arts Program. Several Embryonik members have gone on to successfully audition for elite institutions such as the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) and the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). Holiday programs are subject to funding but include visiting professional artists who, if possible, include a holiday activity in their schedule. They also include additional school workshops in their visit to the Pilbara.

Members of the research team were able to meet with students, staff and parents from 6 of the participating schools. These were:

- **Dampier Primary School**

Dampier is a coastal town located 20km from the regional centre of Karratha, with an average enrolment of 170 students (K to 7). The school has a strong tradition of academic achievement and sporting success, as well as numerous programs to cater for the arts, social and values development and students at risk. The school offers specialist programs in Music, Physical Education and LOTE. Selected students in Years 5 - 7 are involved in Primary Extension classes.





- **Millar's Well Primary School**

Millars Well Primary School is located in Karratha. It has around 440 students K to Year 7. It has a Principal, two Deputy Principals and specialists in LOTE, Music and Physical Education. Non teaching staff include a Registrar, School officer, gardener, 2 cleaners, Special Needs Education Assistants, an Aboriginal Islander Education Officer, Education Assistants and Library Officer. school facts

- **Pegs Creek Primary School**

Peg's Creek Primary School is regarded as a multi-cultural school within Karratha with 27% of the student population being Indigenous. Other cultures represented in the school include Maori, English, Canadian, Indian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Dutch and South African. Over the last four years there has been a 40% increase in enrolments.

- **Roebourne District High School**

Roebourne District High School, in the town of Roebourne, has a student population of mostly Aboriginal students. The School caters for Kindergarten to Year 12. The Aboriginal people in the town are largely from 3 language groups: the Ngarluma people, in whose country the town is situated along with Yindjibarndi and Banyjima people. There are also smaller numbers of Aboriginal people from other areas. The communities have a desire to be strong in spirit, grounded in a strong culture. The school strives to encourage and nurture this spirit. The communities are involved in the school, not only through Language and Culture but also with wider community consultation meetings. The Strong Men and Strong Women's groups are invited to the school to talk to students. Attendance strategies to improve student engagement are a key driver for programs.

- **Karratha Senior High School**

The Karratha SHS motto 'Towards Tomorrow' embraces responsible and caring individuals preparing for success in a changing world.

- **St Lukes College**

St Luke's College was founded in 1987 and is a Catholic secondary school of approximately 400 students and 40 staff, and is a part of the Geraldton Diocese. It is the Pilbara's only private secondary school, and caters for Year 8 to 12 students from the Karratha township and the surrounding smaller towns of Dampier, Wickham, Roebourne and Point Samson. The College offers a curriculum linked to the local industry, environment and community.





School Facts

	Dampier Primary School	Millar's Well Primary School	Pegs Creek Primary School	Roebourne District High School	Karratha Senior High School	St Lukes College
School sector	Government	Government	Government	Government	Government	Non-government
School type	Primary	Primary	Primary	Combined	Secondary	Secondary
Year range	K - 7	K - 7	K - 7	K - 12	8 - 12	8 - 12
Total enrolments	169	423	254	237	633	398
Girls	81	190	121	104	293	207
Boys	88	233	133	133	340	191
Full-time equivalent enrolments	155.8	399	230	225.6	632.6	398
Indigenous students	7%	13%	30%	97%	24%	5%
Location	Remote	Remote	Remote	Very Remote	Remote	Remote
Student attendance rate 1	94%	91%	86%	49%	80%	93%
Teaching staff	14	25	21	21	56	30
Full-time equivalent teaching staff	10.8	22.6	17.4	19.7	53.5	29.4
Non-teaching staff	12	18	16	18	29	12
Full-time equivalent non-teaching staff	5.1	12.9	8	13.2	24.5	8.6





The Evaluation

In late 2009, Michael Leslie and Dickon Oxenburgh of the Michael Leslie Performing Arts Foundation approached the Kulunga Research Network at the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research to evaluate the Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program. The Institute is a world leader in conducting high quality maternal and child health research and has an extensive track record in effectively managing comprehensive research projects. All research undertaken by Kulunga is designed to support Aboriginal community interests and priorities, and incorporates a set of research protocols and principles that aim to ensure genuine participation and engagement of Aboriginal people.

An application was made by Kulunga to Healthways for a *Health Promotion Research Starter Grant* – a competitive grant scheme for research into areas of health and wellbeing priority in Western Australia that enabled an independent evaluation of the program. In addition, ethics applications were made to The University of Western Australia Human Research Committee and the Western Australia Aboriginal Health Information and Ethics Committee for approval to conduct this research. A letter of support was also received from Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation. (**Attached at Appendix A.**) Applications to the Department of Education (WA) and Catholic Education to conduct research on their sites were also completed and approval was granted.

The evaluation sought to assess the program against its core objectives of enabling improved educational attainment, self-esteem and aspiration in its Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It sought to develop a greater understanding of the impact and outcomes of the program specifically, and from this draw conclusions about the efficacy of arts based youth programs more generally on students and their learning. It also sought to assess the need for future tracking of the program to measure the extent of various changes in students' development of academic and higher order skills, and such factors as changes in attendance and retention.

Literature Review

The research team conducted a preliminary literature review on the efficacy of performing arts programs on children and young people. The review focused on research and studies that have examined the impact of such programs on students' school engagement, inter-personal development and skills acquisition. The literature review was designed to provide a context against which the Michael Leslie program could be situated and its outcomes understood. The research team found that an expansive body of literature attests to the usefulness of performing arts programs in affecting positive personal, pro-social and other changes at the individual and community level. There is compelling evidence that such programs can serve as a vehicle for change both in terms of student's personal qualities and on their learning capabilities (See for instance, Fiske et al, 2000; Stone et al, 1998). For this evaluation the resources surveyed included a wide and varied body of literature including program evaluations, academic research articles, and policy documents from fields of education, arts, policy and psychology. The majority of existing research comes from North America and the UK with a small body of Australian literature - evaluations, policy documents and literature reviews – complementing this.





The literature covers a range of positive gains and outcomes arising from participation in performing arts programs, across three levels:

- Individual – skills acquisition, personal development (esteem, confidence, efficacy, self concept), improved wellbeing, academic achievement;
- School – cohesiveness, engagement, retention, harmony, richer school life;
- Community – (family, geographical, group specific) – harmony, cohesiveness, tolerance, pro-social behaviour, richer lived experience, less crime.

The literature overwhelmingly supports the view that participation in performing arts programs delivers a multitude of benefits to students. Researchers have identified improved and positive outcomes across a range of interconnected areas, including: health and well-being, educational outcomes, social inclusion/cohesion, engagement of at risk/marginalised groups, economic benefit, skills development, work readiness, growth in creativity and expression, and in providing positive role models and mentoring (see for instance, Barraket, 2005; Bryce et al, 2004; Heath, 2008; Melbourne University, 2009; O'Brien, 2004; O'Brien and Donelan, 2008; Osmotherly, 2007; Stone, 1998). The consensus in much of the literature surveyed is that arts interventions are effective programs for promoting positive change and producing social, educational, and community benefits.

The other reoccurring finding in much of the literature surveyed is the way in which involvement with the performing arts provides an array of opportunities for learning and for young people to attain high levels of achievement. There is a wealth of evidence supporting the view that participation in the performing arts has an impact on learning. It shows that, when well taught, the arts provide young people with authentic learning experiences that are meaningful and authentic and which engage their minds, hearts and bodies. Importantly, this impact is on learning, not just on formal education. (Barraket, 2005; Bryce et al, 2004; Heath, 2008; Melbourne University, 2009; O'Brien, 2004; O'Brien and Donelan, 2008; Osmotherly, 2007; Stone, 1998). Much of the research points to the efficacy of performing arts programs in developing the 'whole' individual, in increasing their education and work readiness, and in bringing benefits to both communities and the wider society. (Garrett, Graham, Kallipuska) Many authors suggest that student achievement is heightened in an environment with arts education and a school climate supportive of the arts and such approaches to learning. Available literature also shows the links between enhancing school engagement, youth development and school success. Furthermore, research now identifies the importance of socio-emotional, behavioural, cognitive development on learning and on school success which translates in later life on developmental trajectories and educational success. (Sinclair et al, 2003) One US study of over 2000 pupils attending public schools in grades 4–8, found significant relationships between in-school arts programs and creative, cognitive, and personal competencies needed for academic success.

The study began by asking three inter- related questions: What is arts learning? Does it extend to learning in other school subjects? What conditions in schools support this learning? It found that the arts add the kind of richness and depth to learning and instruction that is critical to healthy development but only in schools where arts provision is rich and continuous, administrators supportive and teachers enlightened. (Catterall, 2000).





Engagement is another re-occurring theme in the research examined with many studies assessing the impact of performing arts programs on students' engagement at school. In terms of the concept of engagement, the literature on arts based programs refers to it as a broad concept which encompasses 'physical' aspects such as participation and attendance, as well as behavioural and attitudinal aspects including a student's attitudes toward school, learning, attentiveness in class, and participating in the school community (see for example Smithrim & Uptis, 2005; Jennings, 2003). Related to the concept of engagement in school is that of 'identification' – defined as having a sense of belonging in school and valuing school and school-related outcomes (see for example Voekl, 1997). Research shows that classroom participation and academic achievement were significant predictors of identification and that the emotional and physical withdrawal of many students from school may be associated with their failure to identify with school. Interestingly, the research on identification and engagement shows that such factors are particularly amenable to change and influence from teachers or parents and responsive to deliberate efforts to change such behaviour, specifically through encouragement. (Sinclair et al, 2003) Another aspect of engagement is that of opportunity. Performing Arts programs are seen as offering many students an opportunity to connect through an alternative and more appropriate form of engagement in the educative process than the mainstream model. Furthermore, that as a result of their participation in such programs and the encouragement they receive, many previously disengaged students have found an acceptable way of learning, achieving and identifying.

One of the critical findings highlighted by the research on arts programs and learning is that the learning in and through the arts can help 'level the playing field' for young people from disadvantaged circumstances and make a more significant difference to students from low-income backgrounds (see Fiske et al, 2000). Research also shows that arts-based programs enable individuals and groups to develop behaviours and skills conducive to building co-operative and harmonious communities. For example, Barraket (2005) highlights the value of arts based programs as vehicles for engagement and restoration in divided communities stating that they stimulate participants' creative interests and thus facilitates high levels of active engagement and that these can be very effective in building networks amongst diverse groups and providing the social frameworks in which conflict can be resolved.

The research shows that many arts based programs that work effectively with young people fill the "institutional gap" by providing young people with substantial learning and practice opportunities with adult professionals and older youth who serve as teachers and models. Such programs create instruction, and structured exploration time for young people to know and to develop their talents as producers, spectators, and evaluators in one or more of the arts. This, in turn, enables young people to develop the motivation, skills, and habits of mind necessary to contribute to solo and group projects while holding high standards of achievement for themselves and others. (see for example, Heath 2000).



The majority of the literature and research undertaken on performing arts programs are evaluative and based on qualitative data. Some authors suggest this can lead to a criticism of a lack of 'hard evidence' proving the value of these programs and their outcomes (see for example, Fuller, 1999 and Wilson, 1999). Others suggest the qualitative approach yields rich correlative data that shows the worth of such programs for schools, communities and students (Luftig, 2000). Discussions on the type of research also raise questions regarding the causal connections between performing arts programs and outcomes. The main areas of debate appears to be the degree of causality and proving causality.

Some argue that it is very difficult to prove performing arts programs are able to improve educational outcomes, psycho-social change, or generate pro-social outcomes. They suggest that the benefits and outcomes are too nuanced to measure empirically or to adequately quantify in simple cause and effect terms. Certainly, many changes that arise from participation in performing arts programs are difficult to quantify – such as positive outlook, aspirations and improved self esteem - can only be described, and are usually the outcome of a number of factors of which programs are one part. Their impact however, is no less significant. This evaluation, which is a qualitative one, has actively sought to uncover the lived experiences of the students, parents and teachers connected to the Michael Leslie program and through the outcomes, perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program. The research team believes that the use of qualitative data is a legitimate approach to understanding and ascertaining the complexity of people's experiences and interaction with the program and its provider. The use of qualitative data also reveals the diversities and similarities of people's experiences, needs and circumstances across the different sites from which broad themes and findings can be drawn.





THE EVALUATION



Objectives

1. To evaluate the program against its core objectives of empowering young people in the Pilbara to improve their educational outcomes and to overcome self and externally imposed barriers to success by building self-esteem, self-efficacy and aspiration.
2. Provide students, parents and schools the chance to contribute to the development of the program through comment, feedback and reflection.
3. Provide evidence based feedback to the school and community on the successes and benefits of the program.
4. Generate evidence to support the sustainability of the program for a number of key stakeholders.

Methodology

The aim of the qualitative data collection was to ascertain:

- A greater understanding of the ways in which the program responds to the needs of students;
- An understanding of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student's experiences of the program;
- The impact on participant's inter-personal qualities, school and learning experiences and relationships with others as a result of their participation in the program;
- The impact of the program from the perspective of teachers, principals, parents/carers and the broader community; and,
- What is working well and why, and what, if any, factors have detracted from the program and its effectiveness.

The main methods of data collection were a questionnaire/survey, focus group interviews and one on one interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, parents and carers, teachers and relevant support staff. Interviews were conducted with a sample from the student cohort who are entering or have just started the program; those who are part way through the program; and those who have completed the program. This allowed for a snapshot of attitudes across the program lifespan. The interviews and surveys had two main objectives. First, to measure self reported changes in relation to retention, engagement, esteem, confidence and aspirations from the young people involved in the program. Secondly, to measure changes in these areas as seen by parents, teachers, carers and other education staff.

There is no baseline data for this study to measure against or compare. No data was recorded when the program was established five years ago. In addition, there is a lack of quantitative data relating to indicators about students' retention rates to establish any links between these indicators and participation in the program. Furthermore, the use of





quantitative data in this evaluation would have yielded limited insight into the impact of the program. There are many limitations to establishing a conclusive link between participation in the program and students retention at school. The lack of any baseline data and the impact of the program on attendance and retention rates could not be clearly identified or supported statistically without consideration of the many other variables that could account for any notable changes in attendance and retention rates. The evidence is therefore based on anecdotal/self-report/observation to assess the impact of the program.

Data Limitations

All participating schools were asked to be involved in the surveys and interviews/focus groups with members of the research team. The constraints, given the commitments on the schools as well as various issues (out of the control of the research team) among the communities meant that there were some limitations in the ability of the research team to access students, parents and community representatives. The distances required to travel for the research team also meant that our availability needed to be clearly defined and also limited. These restraints necessarily and unavoidably impacted on the availability of some schools and students. One school chose to participate solely through the use of the surveys. Past students who are no longer residing in Western Australia chose to participate via a telephone interview and written correspondence.

THE DATA

Surveys

The surveys sought to gauge student, parent and teacher attitudes toward the program, performing arts, continuing education, feelings about school and toward learning. The surveys also asked people to reflect on whether they thought the program has influenced any perceived changes to themselves or their children/students. Ultimately, the aim was to explore whether participation in the program may have effected some change – positive or negative - in student's lives and their families and the wider community (including school).

A number of surveys were provided to students, parents and teaching staff relating to their experiences of the program. The surveys were designed to be easily completed by requiring only a box (yes, maybe or no) to be ticked to a set of simple questions. The surveys had a set of four categories of questions and statements that sought a response to: people's experiences about various aspects of the program, changes people may have experienced about themselves and in the classroom, attitudes about school and the future. In the surveys people were also asked to identify whether they were Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or non-Aboriginal. (Not all participants chose to nominate their status).





In total the research team received 41 completed surveys:

- 28 surveys from students currently participating for one year or more in the program, this included 21 primary school students and 7 secondary school students. (19 non-Aboriginal, 6 Aboriginal students and 3 who chose not to identify);
- 3 teachers (3 non-Aboriginal);
- 2 Parents (1 Aboriginal and 1 non-Aboriginal)
- 2 school based staff (2 non-Aboriginal)

Results

Primary school students:

Summary of results

	Now that I do program:	Yes	Maybe	No
1	I like dancing	14	4	3
2	I like watching dance	15	6	
3	I think dance is a good thing to do	16	5	
4	I feel more confident	14	5	2
5	I like myself more	15	4	2
6	I feel happier	16	4	1
7	I feel like I am a good person	18	3	
8	I know I can do things well	17	4	
9	I like going to school	17	2	2
10	I like learning	17	3	1
11	I do better work	12	9	
12	I listen to my teacher	17	4	
13	I get better marks	15	6	
14	I get on better with other kids	14	7	
15	I get on better with my teacher	14	6	1
16	I like trying new things	17	4	
17	I am better at talking to people	13	8	
18	I have made new friends	15	3	3





The survey results show that overwhelmingly the students are experiencing a range of positive factors resulting or linked to their participation in the program.

Interestingly, questions 4-8 that focus student's thoughts on the inter-personal, are extremely good results. These show a notable affirmation of a positive feeling about oneself that is attributed to participation in the program, and are an extremely important indication of the positive impact of the program. The statement that had the most positive response was that, "I feel like I am a good person". These results would also attest to the literature on the importance of engagement in the performing arts, and the development of social and personal competencies, in particular self-esteem. This is especially significant when we consider that one of the three key indicators of social and emotional wellbeing is youth reported self-esteem. Furthermore, these self-reported improvements in self-esteem and other inter-personal qualities are significant given the evidence on the association between low self-esteem and a high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties and health risk behaviours.

The results also show no negative responses to having confidence to try new things or talking to people. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to liking going to school and similarly, the responses to questions 11-15 suggest the students' relationship to the classroom environment is a positive one. Again, these results support much of the literature on the impact of performing arts programs on improving a student's relationship to their learning environment. Indeed, these results are important in demonstrating the significance of the Michael Leslie program to improving and enhancing students' engagement and potential for academic achievement.



High school students:

Summary of results



	Yes/ Always	Mostly	No/ Never
This is my first time in a special arts program (a)	4		2
Since being part of program...			
I understand more about 'the arts'	3	3	1
I think the arts are useful	5	2	
I think it is important to have arts in my life	4	3	
I enjoy being part of program	5	2	
I enjoy dance as much as other things such as sport	5	1	1
I feel more confident	2	5	
I like myself more	3	3	1
I feel happier more often	4	3	
I feel I am a good person	3	4	
I feel more positive about my future	2	5	
I am more likely to try new things	4	2	1
I am better at telling people how I feel	2	4	1
I now like going to school	2	3	2
I now enjoy learning	3	3	1
I now contribute in class	2	4	1
My schoolwork is better		5	2
I can concentrate better	1	4	2
I pay more attention in class		5	2
I don't skip school as much	4	1	2
My grades are better	2	3	2
I would like to stay in school	6	1	
I feel I can achieve anything	3	3	1
I have dreams/goals for life	6	1	
I have made new friends	4	1	2
I have made friends with different people	5	1	1
I am more open to other people	5	1	1
I now think being different is good	5	2	





(a) there was one survey with this question incomplete

The survey results do not show a lot of variability in the data, and therefore it is difficult to identify many trends in any of the domains of the data. However, as a general rule, very few people answered 'no/never' to any of these questions which is generally indicative of a positive response to the program. There were some students who indicated that they already agreed with many of the statements and it is hard to ascertain whether the program provided any additional benefit. It is encouraging to see 4 out of 7 responses agreed that as a result of the program "I don't skip school as much". Overall, the students' results are indicative of a generally well regarded program that is enjoyable and identified as having some impact on various aspects of students' personal lives and relationship to school. An important result in terms of the importance of the program to the wider school curriculum and students' retention and engagement, are the responses to having dreams and goals for life and a desire to stay in school.

Parents & teachers/school staff:

Summary of results

Since joining program, my child/ the students seem...	Yes/Always	Mostly	Never/No	Survey question Incomplete
More confident than before	3	3	1	
Happier than before	3	3	1	
To like themselves more than before	3	3	1	
To concentrate more than before	1	4	2	
Be less disruptive than before	1	4		2
More cooperative than before	2	5		
To like school more than before	1	5	1	
To pay more attention in class	1	3	2	1
School attendance has improved	2	1	3	1
More open to trying new things	4	3		
Better at talking about their feelings	1	5	1	
To mix with different types of people	2	4	1	
To get on better with family and friends	1	6		
More positive about the future	1	3	2	1
Knows what they want to do with their life		3	3	1
Talks about finishing high school (Y12)	1	1	4	1
Talks about getting a job further study	2	2	3	





The survey results, while small, show some interesting responses regarding parents and teachers perceptions of students/children's views about the longer term issues such as post-school aspirations and employment and further study. The responses to feelings about being more open to trying new things and the future are suggestive of a link between the program and students' confidence, goals and sense of what is possible. This represents an important finding in terms of the longer term impact of the program. These results also correlate with the experiences relayed to the research team by past students of the program who confirmed that as a result of their participation in the Michael Leslie program they had been able to aspire to pathways not previously considered or thought possible. The responses to those questions examining behaviour with others are all positive and indicate the program is proving successful at fostering cooperation and tolerance. As with the primary school students, the responses to the impact of the program on the inter-personal are overwhelmingly positive.

While the survey responses were small, they consistently show that those involved with the program can recognise its benefits to students sense of themselves, their relationship to learning and school, and their outlook on their future. Given the program's emphasis on building students' self-esteem, relationships with others and aspirations and goals, the results are very positive and indicate it is meeting its aims from the perspective of those involved in the program. Furthermore, the impact of the program on student's attitude to school suggest it is having a significant effect on their learning in other domains, and is offering another path to feeling engaged and achieving. This is especially relevant for those students who might otherwise be disengaged from the school environment or not able to achieve in a traditional classroom setting. This result is especially important in the context of many Aboriginal students and the challenges many face, particularly with regard to their engagement and opportunities to achieve.





INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

For the interviews and focus groups, an emphasis was placed on accessing a range of people to ensure an adequate account of the different experiences of the program. The qualitative evaluation tools - focus groups and key informant interviews - were used to understand and document the experiences of different stakeholders including students, parents, teachers and community representatives. The use of interviews and focus groups was designed to allow for an insight into the experiences people have with the program. Such methods of data collection enable participants to explore their feelings and attitudes in greater depth. The evaluation also sought to take account of the way that the different needs and circumstances within each community may impact on people's experiences and the effectiveness or otherwise of aspects of the program, including the different periods of time it had been delivered in a community or school.

Approach

The project team was committed to ensuring methodological appropriateness in the collection of all information throughout the evaluation, and all participants were assured that it will be treated in the strictest of confidence. All respondents were guaranteed anonymity within the research project and its outcomes. Open ended questions and interview prompts were used throughout each of the processes. All prospective interviewees were provided with a verbal brief describing the project and their prospective role within it. Informed consent was sought from participants and their appropriate guardians, and participants were free to withdraw themselves and/or their information from the research process at any time. Consenting schools sent information packs for students which included information letters and consent forms for students and parents/carers, surveys for parents/carers, and information and consent forms for participation in project reference group. Information packs were also sent for teachers and staff at schools.

A total of 43 people were consulted representing a mix of focus groups and key informant interviews.

- Students: 26 (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal)
- Principals: 2
- Teachers/ Teaching Assistants: 7
- Parents/carers: 6
- Past Students: 2

The largest focus group involved nine students, and the smallest focus group involved three teaching staff.

There were also anecdotal notes taken from people in the associated communities who did not participate in a formal interview but were happy to discuss the program with the research staff and have their views included in the report.





Decisions regarding focus groups and interviews were made on the basis of the availability, willingness and informed consent of participants. In each location an attempt was made to interview several key informants. However, for a range of reasons the process did not always generate high response rates.



Findings and Themes

The following reports on key aspects of the program based on analysis of the information and experiences gathered through the interviews and focus groups. Each of the focus groups sessions and interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a professional service. The transcripts were then read and analysed by the research team to identify the key themes. From the interviews, several commonalities in people's experiences and ideas about the program arose. The more common or reoccurring views expressed by those consulted for this evaluation form the key research themes provided below. There are also some quotes that typify and encapsulate many of the views expressed by focus group and interview participants. The key themes identified in the data also resonate with key findings from the literature examined on the efficacy of performing arts programs. Some of the relevant research findings from the literature are included under each key theme.

Theme One

Michael Leslie as a positive adult role model

One of the commonly identified protective factors in the literature and research on children and young people's resiliency is the presence of an adult in their life who fuels the motivation and fosters the development of life skills needed to overcome obstacles.

To those who have met Michael Leslie or worked with him or been taught by him, it seems that he represents a strong, confident, Aboriginal man in a professional capacity. Parents and teachers spoke of the importance of having an Aboriginal man in the school environment and for students to have a positive male role model. One parent commented that seeing someone like Michael – a strong, successful Aboriginal person – makes her **“feel proud to be Aboriginal”**. This is especially important given the absence of many male role models due to high rates of incarceration and other issues that impact so greatly on Aboriginal men. Many people commented on this being the lived experience of many young Aboriginal people in the region. Data from the Department of Corrective Services shows, in January 2011, shows 85% of all prisoners in Roebourne regional prison were Aboriginal males.

Many of the students recognise and respect his experience. **“Michael is seen as a bit of a “legend” in town – he is someone kids look up to and strive to impress. He can command students of a variety of ages in any situation and he’s a constant source of inspiration.”** (past student)





Michael was described as a role model to different groups:

To young men he is an 'alternative' male to the macho stereotype that dominates in mining communities. He is seen by many as a strong man who is doing something that is usually considered feminine.

To young people he is an adult they can look up to and rely on but who is not their parent or teacher. It appears that some students are more likely to open up to him because he does not occupy these positions which would seem very important to the boys who often lack an older male they can talk to about their transition to manhood.

For non-Aboriginal students Michael provides them with a strong, articulate and successful Aboriginal person who is different to the stereotype they are often exposed to.

To Aboriginal students he gives a sense of pride and a positive example in learning cultural traditions and being successful. Aboriginal students get to see a person who is successful and speaks out and up for himself, his people and his culture

Teachers and parents/carers noted that Michael's relationship with Aboriginal children and young people is a critical aspect of the program.

"He knows how to handle them (Aboriginal students) probably better than white teachers – but he is also "different" in that he is very strict and demands their respect in his classes. He leads by example and shows them that anyone can live their dreams and this earns him a lot of respect in that he came from a very similar situation to many of the Aboriginal students living in the Pilbara". (Teacher)

For many of those interviewed Michael's dedication and commitment to the program and the students is a strength of the program is. There were frequent remarks about his constancy in the area and in the schools. School staff appreciated that he had been around for a long time. In contrast, many remarked on having seen lots of similar programs come and go.

The staff interviewed talked of the importance of this constancy as it sent a message to the students that he cared about them and their wellbeing. For many students he is one adult in their life they can rely on and who values their contribution. Many students said one of the best things about the program was that Michael trusted in their ability and valued their input. This made them feel special and confident that someone of such a high calibre valued their opinion and input and gave them confidence in their own abilities and creativity.

One School Principal spoke of the important role Michael plays as a representative of Rio Tinto's work in the community. The Principal believed this allowed the community to get to see another side of Rio Tinto and the outcomes of their investments into the Pilbara. The Principal also commented on the number of high achievers who have passed through the program saying they are not just a good advert for the program, but also for Rio Tinto. These young people can then relate back to their communities that Rio played a part in this achievement, which sends a strong message that Rio's presence can bring many positive outcomes to communities.





Theme Two

Enhancing students' engagement

Research shows that involvement in the arts can reach students who are not otherwise being reached and provide young people who are disengaged from schools with a reason for being engaged.

Many students said that they liked having the program in their school as it offered an alternative way of contributing, participating and learning. They said it was one of the things they enjoyed most about coming to school. This is an important finding as it has been shown in other studies that alternative pathways and programs are often critical to engaging and connecting students with school and with learning: in turn this contributes to retention and attainment. This issue of engagement is especially critical for many Aboriginal students and, in particular, boys. An important aspect of the program seemed to be what it offered boys, including breaking down stereotypes about dance, but also the links dance represents to Aboriginal cultural traditions.

One Aboriginal carer spoke of the pride and importance of seeing the boys learning and continuing traditions such as dance which are cultural roles for boys and men.

“..its a majority of little boys that I have been watching and I go wow, they're the next dancers – not only doing the white man dance, but the cultural way they move, using an Aboriginal person singing and getting the beat, finding their own rhythm – and wow that makes you cry I tell you”. (carer)

The program also helps to break down stereotypes of dance as something only for girls, or that boys are participating in a feminine activity. The evidence suggests it is proving successful in building confidence, skills and self-esteem among the boys. It is also giving them something that they feel they can be good at, especially those students who do not have strong academic abilities. Staff and parents talked of the importance of the program in getting boys involved and helping to break down stereotypes about being male. The program specifically seeks to show young Aboriginal people, especially boys, that sport is not the only pathway to excellence and success. Teaching staff also talked of the difficulties in engaging the boys because they tend to be more interested in sport and that the increased engagement of boys in the program was a good sign of “changed thinking” among the boys. One female primary school student said that she thought the boys in program are better behaved and work more co-operatively with each other as a result of the way they work on program. She said they were not as “hyped up” – that when they are in program they are disciplined and focused more than they are in normal classes.

One male student spoke of moving to the school, being de-motivated and wanting to leave/drop out, then joined the program which gave him renewed connection to the school and an alternative way of getting involved. Another student spoke of not being that interested in other subjects except for the program which had developed a love for drama which really engaged him and kept him motivated in school.





Theme Three

Building students' strengths

Research shows that performing arts programs provide a alternate learning environment that encourages both self-directed learning and complexity in the learning experience and the skills necessary for working as a member of a team.

Many students and teachers talked of the ways in which students respond to Michael Leslie's teaching and the positive, disciplined, supportive learning environment that he creates.

“Michael has always taught us that discipline is important – discipline and passion and that to achieve in the performing arts we need to put in the hard yards. He shows us – not just through his words – that being successful in the performing arts is all about hard work and a humble but confident attitude – by this I mean, Michael doesn’t tolerate any cockiness or arrogance in attitude. He rewards hard work – he also demands respect both of yourself and of him”. (past student)

“He’s very positive. He’s never negative. Never shamed.” (High School student)

A notable comment from many students referred to the ways in which Michael builds on the strengths and addresses the weaknesses of all students to make all feel equal and part of a team working together.

“There are no teacher’s pets. If you have more acting experience or singing experience or dancing experience, you are still treated equal”. (High school student)

Many expressed the view that every student receives a fair share of workload that is appropriate to their bodies and capabilities whilst being able to comfortably work in a group. Students spoke of the way some students who are self-conscious prefer to work with their close friends and with people of the same sex and Michael will accommodate this so they don't feel uncomfortable while he's working with them. He was also described as being more specific with separate girl and boy groups in his teaching ways as boys traditionally do different movement types to girls (and vice versa) and need different levels of fitness and strength training. At the end of the session Michael will always bring both groups together to showcase what they've worked on or to join pieces of work to perform them as a whole class again.





Theme Four

Instilling discipline and self-respect

Research shows the discipline required for participating in the performing arts enables young people to develop motivation and skills necessary to achieve high standards for themselves and others that can translate to many environments.

Through observation of his teaching method by members of the research team, it would appear that the ways in which the program is delivered instils a set of core values that would have the potential to translate outside of the dance program. Michael challenges the students to 'have a go', and in so doing, teaches them about persistence and endurance and gives them confidence to try new things and be proud of their attempts.

The program teaches discipline with students having to keep time to the music, and multi-tasking by listening to instructions and timing while also focusing on their individual moves and the movements of others around them and moving in sync with others to perform the routine successfully. It teaches them about persistence as students have to practice individual moves, sequences of moves and whole routines over and over until they have mastered it to Michael's satisfaction. It allows them to experience the importance of team work/collaboration with students having to move together in time with the music and each other. It creates spatial awareness as students have to be aware of their position on stage in relation to the audience and to the other performers.

"Having him come in and teach the students helps to enrich their lives by building up confidence, improving skills such as co-ordination, teaching them discipline and respect and that the arts is a wonderful avenue for creative and personal development. Michael always gets everyone involved and has put together dances and plays for special school events which may not have happened otherwise." (Teaching staff member)

The program also teaches the importance of physical control as students have to perfect individual moves; perform the moves in time to the music; connect movements into sequences and routines. They also have to control their movements so that they do not disturb the movements of others. This awareness of your physical presence can transfer to areas such as the classroom where people have to operate in a confined space.

Students also identified the health benefits of being involved in program. They said that the dance and warm ups were good exercise and recognised this as being important to their health and wellbeing. One teacher commented on the importance of exercise for the students in terms of an active body leading to an active mind but also its impact on such things as ear, nose and throat conditions including otitis media which is prevalent in many communities. The teacher believed that the physical effects of jumping around led to the kids being "able to hear sounds and hear people talking and they can speak clearly as well." The physical aspects of program also show young people that dancers are athletes and very much like sports people. It teaches them about the need to be disciplined, strong and physically fit in order to perform. It also teaches them to respect their bodies. This is especially important for young girls and comments made to the research team reflected on Michael teaching young girls to express themselves in an appropriate way that is not overtly sexual.





Theme Five

Developing self-esteem and confidence

While much learning often focuses on development of a single skill, the performing arts engages multiple skills and abilities and nurtures the development of cognitive, social and personal competencies that transfer into other areas of participant's lives.

Teaching staff talked about the ways in which the program focuses on areas of students natural strengths/talents and provides them with alternative pathways to excel.

“It’s like you have got some kids that are not very academic and then you have got some that are really good at dancing and singing and painting, so it gives them.. it let’s them have (something) I’m good at this and they will use it for something else later on down the track. If I can do this, then I can do other things as well. Give them confidence.” (Teacher, Roebourne)

Students spoke of their own confidence, esteem and resilience growing as a result of the program. It seems from observation and reflection by some of the students, that the program forced students out of their comfort zone in a safe and supportive environment.

“It’s non-judgemental. We can basically do what we want and not be afraid of being judged or put down. We can do stuff like we would never do usually.” (High school student)

This allowed students then to feel confident about public performances within class, in workshops, and to parents, peers and community. Students from different schools highlighted a number of positive factors arising from their links to the program including:

- Confidence – to speak and perform in public and to participate in class –to speak up and ask questions;
- Resilience – to be confident in themselves and ignore teasing; and,
- Having an opportunity for personal expression and a chance to be creative and show their personality.

Students also spoke of being recognised by members of the school and broader community through their involvement in the program, particularly public performances. They said that students approached them in and out of school saying that they recognised them from a performance. Likewise they had been recognised in public by members of the local community who had remembered them. This gave the students a sense of pride in themselves and their work, especially the fact that it was able to connect with a wider audience and have a lasting impact.

Many students said they feel more confident than they used to. As a result of the program some have performed at large festivals in Derby and Broome (such as the Croc Fest) and said that they used to feel ‘shame’ in front of others but now they are confident and proud. They said that they enjoyed the attention and response from the audience as it gave them a sense of pride and achievement. These students also felt they were now confident to participate in other areas of school life. Many of the senior school students interviewed said that they now asked more questions in class because they weren’t afraid of speaking to





their teacher or of other student's reactions. They said they could not have done this before the program and that it had taught them it is ok to speak up and be heard and not to worry about what other people think. Many of the senior students interviewed were now involved in the school's leadership program. One of the things they have to do is speak at school assemblies: many said they were less afraid of doing this because of the confidence they had gained through the program.

Theme Six

Fostering aspirations and dreams

Research shows that new skills and techniques gained through the performing arts connect students to the world of real work in new and innovative ways and foster aspirations and goals not previously considered.

The skills gained from participation in the program have the ability to be transferred to both the class room and also to post-school aspirations. Parents commented that it broadened kids thinking about what they could do and their capabilities. Certainly, the students interviewed had aspirations for life beyond school. Many of the students expressed aspirations to go on to higher learning after school and wanted to become zoologists, physiotherapists, or professionals in the dramatic arts. Students talked about going to university specifically to pursue a career in drama. Some said they would like to pursue careers in dance or performing arts and would like to go to places such as WAAPA in the future: one girl said she would like to become a professional hip hop dancer. Others said they would like to go to university to become doctors or teachers.

"I began dancing at the age of 7. My love of dancing lead me to Michael because I believed he would offer me challenges and new insights into dance that I would not have otherwise. This has been true! It has helped me think about my future a great deal. If it were not for the teachers I have worked with through Michael and the opportunities he has provided, I doubt I would have had the confidence to think about WAAPA or even audition for it." (past student)





Theme Seven

Importance of choreography and performance

Research shows that the learning is 'deepest' when learners are given the capacity to represent what they have learned with the performing arts providing multiple modes of such representation.

“Michael also provides his students with opportunities to extend themselves as performers and people which helps lift self-esteem and creates role-models within the youth of society.” (past student)

Students spoke of the importance of learning to choreograph and the performance aspect of the program. A key aspect for many was the opportunity to develop their own choreography and then work on that with Michael Leslie. The anecdotal evidence suggests this aspect of the program gives students a sense of responsibility and trust where their contributions are valued and also provides them with an avenue for self-expression. This can be in direct contrast to many students' experiences in the class room.

“We think that he is a good person because he cares about us. Plus we are not professional so it is good to have someone who actually wants to listen to us and take our ideas.” (High school student)

Students also talked about gaining confidence through performance and agreed that this transferred to participating in other activities. Students talked about being more confident in taking positive risks and stepping out of their comfort zone and boys were especially more confident in themselves and their maleness and that enabled them to take risks. Teaching staff talked about the ways that performing has improved students' esteem and the ways this stays with them and transfers to other areas in and out of school. This aspect of the program is also important in developing different and important skills for students. The process of choreography fosters students' ability to create and provides an important path to finding and solving problems, and realizing a vision or dream. There is also a dedicated focus on self-expression and exploration, and self reflection.

At St Luke's College the students relayed the experience of being approached by teachers to develop and perform a play about bullying to educate the school about the issue. The way students spoke of their experience suggest they saw that teachers trusted them to develop and deliver the message to students; recognised that due to the program they occupied a position of leadership amongst the student community and recognised that they had the ability to communicate effectively with students. The teachers had communicated that there was a level of trust in the students that they could develop an appropriate message and deliver it in the right way. This experience also taught the students about their responsibility to their peers and their community, about leadership, alternative ways of teaching and of mentoring. Students also learnt about the power of performance to teach others and effectively communicate messages. They also learnt about the use of comedy to diffuse situations and how it can be used in different ways.





Another positive experience related to the same students going out to Roebourne School to teach primary students dance and drama. The students perceived this as Michael trusting them in their ability to deliver and placing them in a position of authority and leadership. The students talked positively of this experience, particularly the opportunity to teach younger people what they had learned. The body language and expressions when telling of this experience conveyed a sense that the students were proud of themselves and what they had done. There was a sense of satisfaction and joy at seeing young children engaged, enthusiastic and keen to learn, and that they were able to deliver this.

Theme Eight

Teaching inclusivity and collaboration

Research shows that arts-based programs connect students to themselves and each other and enable individuals and groups to develop behaviours and skills conducive to building co-operative and harmonious communities. It also shows that effective youth arts programs build strong community focused and pro-social values in young people.

The evidence from those involved shows that the program is teaching students to work co-operatively and collaboratively with a range of people. Students said that through the program they had worked with people they would not normally mix with, especially across school year levels. Another important aspect noted was the opportunity to make deeper connections with people based on shared interests and passions. Students spoke of making friendships with others. They also talked about how working collaboratively in developing performances they had learned to communicate, negotiate, and co-operate with others. Such collaboration teaches students about the importance of working as a group and dealing with group dynamics, including the experience of everyone sharing responsibility to take risks and support others in taking risks. This means, first and foremost, that failure is not only quite acceptable, but necessary and expected. There is also a sense of generosity with everyone sharing responsibility to approach the work and the other students with a spirit of generosity, of offering to help, give, and share whatever they have or perceive may be needed by others. It is also teaching the students a discipline and work ethic that fosters a sense of personal responsibility to the work and the group, in supportive and respectful relationships among everyone in the group.

This is an important aspect of the program as it enable students to take their experience of working with the 'other' into the classroom, their homes and families providing for a potential ripple effect into the community that could help bring inter-cultural and race harmony. The inclusive approach of the program also means that by working with all students Michael avoids inter-group rivalries based on jealousy – i.e. 'the Aboriginal kids get all programs: that's not fair, what about us?' attitude that can be very damaging to the school and wider community.





Theme Nine

Supporting and fostering Aboriginal culture and community

Research shows that student's individual confidence and building of expertise from their participation in the performing arts leads to an awareness from the wider community of their collective talents that can add to the larger community's sense of ownership and pride.

Michael Leslie believes that for Aboriginal people dance is especially important because it taps into the cultural heart of Aboriginal identity and ways of being. He says that as "cultural people, Aboriginal people should be encouraged to pursue arts and culture as meaningful careers". Aboriginal interviewees spoke of the importance of the program in bringing positive outcomes to the community, especially in terms of creating harmony and cohesion. Dance and performance actively engages the audience in a way other art forms can't. Further, it brings the audience together in a shared experience. It allows people of different backgrounds to come together and share an experience. Parents and grandparents of student's participating in the program spoke of the confidence and pride they experienced by watching their children's performances and also seeing their children thrive from their involvement in the program.

"And its really boost the parents, and you know, they were – when they see their kids dancing in their traditional dance, there were tears in their eyes... it blows the minds of the parents and grandparents that are watching – and it makes you really cry, I tell you" (carer)





Summary

The surveys, interviews and focus groups provided a wealth of data pointing to the efficacy of the Michael Leslie program. Using a qualitative research approach has yielded rich data on the experiences of a representative group of people linked to the program. As such, it has provided a deeper and important insight into many aspects of the program and the impact it is personally having on participants and their families and community.

In summary, the experiences and anecdotes of those interviewed or consulted about the program show that it provides:

- an adult Aboriginal male role model who not only epitomises and achieves respect, discipline, and trust, but promotes these values in students;
- a safe environment (physical and emotional) for students to learn and express themselves;
- an environment in which all ideas are considered and valued;
- a discipline and work ethic that fosters a sense of personal responsibility to the work and the group;
- supportive and respectful relationships among students and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers;
- opportunities for learners to find personal points of engagement and make choices about significant aspects of their work and learning;
- frequent opportunities for learners to be actively engaged in various aspects of the work including watching, listening, and responding to others' work;
- opportunities to learn choreography and to perform for peers, teachers, family, community; and,
- opportunities for Aboriginal youth to learn and gain respect for their culture.





CONCLUSION

Results from this evaluation clearly show that the Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program supports many of the findings in the literature on the positive impact of young people's involvement in the performing arts. This is particularly true of its impact on students' self-esteem, confidence, learning, and motivations. This evaluation has shown that participation in the performing arts can be a transformative experience that brings about significant changes in students' lives. The ability to collaborate, be disciplined both physically and mentally, be expressive, listen and respond, and take personal risks, complete a complex task and then perform it in front of peers, are all highly valuable and transferable skills important to a range of contexts including a learning environment. Similarly, the program is fostering qualities of cultural pride, self esteem, and self-determination which, in turn, encourage initiative and student's to take leadership of their own life, their family, and the areas within their community where they can have influence. This is especially important to such things as community development, where a key principle is to build the capacity of local individuals and communities to identify problems, develop solutions, and engage in actions to implement these solutions. This requires creativity, vision, and—most importantly—leadership. Leadership needs to be recognised and developed in local communities so that they can support and determine their own priorities and needs and, in so doing, thrive. The program's focus on youth engagement and youth participation is fostering different models of leadership and different styles of communication which are meeting the needs of many young people who, for a number of reasons, may not have opportunities for developing these qualities in other ways or environments.

One of the most important findings of this evaluation is the positive impact of the program on students' self-esteem. This was seen from self-reported changes by students as well as observation noted by parents, carers and teaching staff. In Volume Two of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, the authors note that research has shown that “programs targeting the negative explanatory style of young people with chronically low self esteem can significantly reduce their later risks for depression, anxiety and other mental health problems”. Furthermore, the authors state that protecting and promoting self esteem is critical “to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people”.(p.346) This is a significant finding and it is this aspect of the program that highlights its importance to children and young people both in the short and long term.

The experiences described by the participants in the program offer an important view of what a performing arts program can contribute and teach when delivered in positive ways by well trained artists/teachers. It provides an example of a program achieving excellence in student's development, teaching, and learning. Furthermore, it provides powerful evidence of the impact of such a program on student's social and personal growth and their high-order thinking skills. As such, the Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program can be seen as offering students alternate pathways and experiences of learning, developing, achieving and personal success.

As one student reflected, Michael and the program are teaching kids to “turn their lives around”, and “help them shine”.





RECOMMENDATIONS

The Michael Leslie Pilbara Performing Arts Program meets many of the criteria of what constitutes a successful performing arts program and an effective intervention with regard to promoting Aboriginal young people's self-esteem. As such, it should be acknowledged as a program that has the potential to expand, complement, and improve the learning provided by schools. Through the experiences of those directly linked to the program, this evaluation has demonstrated many of the strengths of the program and of Michael Leslie. Much of the anecdotal evidence provided to the research team suggests the need for the program to continue to be sustained through support and funding, and argues for its wider implementation within schools and across the Pilbara.

Key factors required for the ongoing success and sustainability of the program include:

- supportive schools, communities, parents and local organisations who value and support the program and the arts and believe in its transformative capacity;
- financial support for the program to retain more staff to maintain and potentially expand the program;
- increased consistency and delivery of program; and,
- ongoing research to demonstrate the impact of the program on a set of key indicators.

Community and Parent Involvement and Support

Research shows that the engagement of parents and community leaders and resources is critical to the arts learning experience and the success of arts programs. This has been shown to be particularly in the case of those programs operating 'out of school'. Teaching staff and parents interviewed were very supportive of the program. Many perceived the benefits to the students and their own work and were keen to see the program have a continued and increased presence in their school.

Financial Support

Financial support is required to support the program in its current form to ensure its sustainability and future extension so that more students can access the program more often. Increased financial support extends to assisting Michael Leslie to continue to teach the current schedule and also to enable the Foundation to increase its teaching and support staff across the Pilbara. It also extends to engaging more visitors to attend classes and host workshops, as well as the after-school programs. The need for transport for students to attend, perform and connect to other communities and schools was raised as an ongoing issue and is another financial consideration. Students said that they would like to have more opportunities to travel to other towns and areas to perform. The need to ensure students can attend and perform and share what they are learning is vital given the extent to which it appears students thrive on and benefit from public performance.





Increased consistency and delivery of the program

Many commented that the benefit of the program would be greater if Michael was able to attend more frequently. This was noted by students, staff and parents and also raised in terms of a means of reaching kids who are not regularly attending school. The question was put “do you think the program is one of the things that could help with kids not coming to school” and teachers agreed that this would absolutely be the case. One teacher commented “the kids will get more excited because they will be thinking for that day that he comes and it relaxes them and they really have a good time”.

Extended Research on the transformative aspects of program

While this evaluation has sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program across a range of domains, such qualitative research would be complemented by quantitative longitudinal data where information on student’s retention and academic achievement could be tracked. Such data would be effective in measuring and understanding the transformative capacity of this program on an individual student’s academic experience and engagement in school and beyond. Such an approach would need to document and quantify such transformation over a longer period of time, especially on students learning and success at school, and what causes such changes by participating in a performing arts program. Such data would provide evidence that could support arguments the program should be incorporated into schools as part of the curriculum so that students can gain accreditation for their participation and achievements. Extension of the program into the school curriculum would provide a necessary and alternate pathway to learning and the increase in the success of many students – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.





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APPENDIX A



ICN 4511

NGARLUMA VISION: "Keeping our culture strong as we work together to empower
Ngarluma people towards a sustainable future"

To Whom It May Concern,

Re: Evaluation of The Michael Leslie Foundation for the Performing Arts

The Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation is a working partner with the Michael Leslie Foundation in the cultural development project: the Three Trees Project: Gujarla (the other side).

Although a newcomer to the region I understand from community members that the Pilbara Performing Arts Program administered by the Michael Leslie Foundation for the Performing Arts delivers a valuable contribution to the well-being of youth in the region and Michael is personally regarded with respect and esteem.

Further, I understand that research into the efficacy of the Pilbara Performing Arts Program will provide a valuable insight into the needs of the community in this area.

I have no hesitation in recommending support for this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Allan Wedderburn

Acting CEO

Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation

20/09/10