Spoken Paper

Finding Solid Ground: Industry collaboration and mentoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools

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In the past two decades the mainstream prominence of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists has increased significantly. Similarly, within philanthropic and government funded arts organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increasingly lead and control the direction of artistic decisions and outreach programs. This paper documents and evaluates the benefits of inviting professional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians, dancers and visual artists into secondary schools to help mentor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and encourage pathways into the arts and cultural industries. The study focuses specifically on a relationship formed between a group of school students in the diverse community of Blacktown in Western Sydney and award-winning Gamilaraay singer-songwriter Thelma Plum. Coordinated by Solid Ground – an initiative established by Carriageworks and Blacktown Arts Centre, the arts-administrator, mentor, students and their teacher worked on a series of collaborative cross-disciplinary projects leading to performances at Sydney Fringe Festival, and the recording and release of an EP featuring original tracks composed by the students. Throughout the role of the mentor is evaluated against the expectations and differing interests of the students. Here fame is quickly forgotten as students develop meaningful connections with the artist and get frustrated by the competing demands of Plum’s industry commitments.
Drawing upon the teacher-researcher’s PhD studies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music, the mentoring program is positioned within decoloniality (Quijanos, 1992; 1999; Mignolo, 2011; Lugones, 2010; Mackinlay, 2016) discourse as Solid Ground and the school make space for Indigenous voices to guide instruction and share knowledge. The paper also reflects inward on the role of the “expert” teacher-researcher as he helps guide, and at times unintentionally disrupt, the direction and purpose of the program. Importantly, the program also exposes the equally significant contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander administrators who maintain a consistent presence within the schools and connect the students with local support networks and opportunities. This paper ultimately endeavours to illustrate the benefits of educators working collaboratively with arts-organisations to provide their students with real-world experiences and the capacity of professional mentors to build relationships, inspire creative expression and illuminate industry opportunities for future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.