

Characteristics and case studies supporting First Nations learning success

Cycle 4: The Power of
Recognising More
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Authors:

Dr Josh Cubillo
Alyssa Richardson
Anjali Ali

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NIYEC
NATIONAL INDIGENOUS
YOUTH EDUCATION
COALITION

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land who have been learning and educating on Country for over a thousand generations. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to live in spiritual and sacred relationships with Country.

About this report

This report was commissioned by Learning Creates Australia and undertaken in partnership with the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (NIYEC) and First Nations researchers as part of Cycle 4 of the Power of Recognising More Action-Research Study, a First Nations-led cycle of work.

About the researchers

- Josh Cubillo PhD is a Larrakia and Wadjigam man from the Northern Territory and has extensive experience in secondary and tertiary education in improving the visibility of Indigenous knowledge in the education sector. Josh is currently the Associate Director of the Murrup Barak institute which provides student administration, wellbeing and scholarly support services for Indigenous students at the University of Melbourne.
- Alyssa Richardson is a proud Tagalaka woman. She graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Commerce (Marketing), and is now working at the National Indigenous Education Coalition (NIYEC). Alyssa hopes this report will contribute to meaningful discussions about improving education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- Anjali Ali is an Alyawarr woman, whose journey bridges academic excellence and deep community commitment. With a Bachelor of Business (Economics and Finance), she advocates for space that empowers young mob to dream big and hopes this report supports those visions for future generations.

Research steering committee

A First Nations Steering Group was appointed to provide cultural guidance, accountability, and oversight throughout the project. Members included Associate Professor Michelle Kennedy (University of Newcastle), Elinor Archer (University of Canberra), Professor Chris Matthews (UTS and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Maths Alliance), Fiona Cornforth (ANU), and Hayley McQuire (NIYEC and Learning Creates Australia).

Notes on terminology

It is important to clarify terms before discussing the review. We refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as 'Indigenous students' in this paper. We acknowledge the great diversity among Indigenous populations while using the singular term for all Indigenous populations. Although there are times throughout the document where 'First Nations' is used to mean Indigenous peoples, it is the preference of the Authors to use Indigenous to encompass and mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The term 'culture' in this paper refers to Indigenous peoples' cultures. 'Participation' in the context of this research refers to engagement, attendance and retention of students. Country, with a capital 'C', is a term used by Indigenous people across the continent to describe a spiritual interconnection to all that is part of Country, including landforms, waters, air, rocks, trees, plants, animals, sky, stories and special places. Country is linked to the Dreaming and provides a source of cultural lore (Dudgeon & Bray 2018; McKnight, 2016).

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Foreword



At Learning Creates Australia, we are proud to lead The Power of Recognising More, a national participatory study exploring the impacts of new ways of understanding, validating and celebrating what young people know and can do. This work aims to contribute to the reshaping of how learning is recognised so that all young people can flourish in school, work and life.

This study is grounded in a shared commitment to value every young person's full learning journey. Learning happens across many settings, with home, community, culture and Country as vital sources of knowledge. As young people told us in The Whole Learner report from the study's second cycle, they want to be seen for their whole selves, not only for what can be captured in exams or test scores.

The First Nations Action-Research Cycle is a central part of this study. Its focus is on the strengths, experiences and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Importantly, it reflects a self-determined approach to research that places First Nations voices at the centre, shaping the direction and design of the work from the start. This cycle responds to the ongoing effects of a colonial education system that has too often asked First Nations young people to set aside their identity in order to succeed. It seeks to elevate Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and to create educational approaches that build on their cultural strengths, rather than marginalise them. While culturally responsive education is widely acknowledged as important, there is a lack of research focused on how it supports Indigenous students during key transition periods in their education.

A key output from this cycle is this desktop and literature review, co-authored by Dr Josh Cabillo and two young co-researchers Alyssa Richardson and Anjali Ali. It explores the characteristics of learning environments that foster safety, belonging and support for Indigenous students, particularly during transition periods. Alongside this review is an action report, authored by Alinta Williams which reflects on the research presented here, highlighting elements needed for change: co-agency, belonging, relationships, and self-determination.

We extend our deepest appreciation to Josh, Alyssa, Anjali, Alinta and First Nations Steering Group for this cycle, whose guidance has ensured this work is grounded in community and meaningful impact. They have helped to craft research questions, shape ethical practice, and interpret findings in ways that reflect the diverse realities of First Nations learners. We especially acknowledge our Co-Chair, Hayley McQuire, whose leadership brings cultural integrity and vision, reminding us that true system transformation must be led by those most affected.

Change is possible, and these reports shed light on good practices across the country. It is incumbent on all of us to learn from and embed these principles, and to stand in solidarity with First Nations learners.

Bronwyn Lee, CEO Learning Creates Australia

Preface

Young people's lives are strongly influenced by their participation in education.¹ The Prime Minister's Cabinet and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) have emphasised the need to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students, whose attendance and engagement rates are 10% lower than their non-Indigenous counterparts.^{2, 3} While policymakers have stated that they want to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students for decades, most outcome indicators reveal underwhelming results.^{4, 5, 6} This suggests that the policy initiatives to improve education, the measures of success, or both are not fit for purpose.

Teachers, researchers and policymakers are typically the ones driving efforts to improve Indigenous student outcomes, drawing on observations, their own educational experiences, and new theoretical and pedagogical developments. With the majority of these institutional actors being non-Indigenous, however, the potential for cultural misalignment is great, and can lead to more of the same, rather than real change for Indigenous students and communities. There is ample evidence showing the ways in which mainstream education settings enact colonial violence on Indigenous students, and the degree to which Indigenous students are impacted by this violence can be challenging to convey.

Many Indigenous students do not see their culture reflected in the classroom, which can lead to poor relationships with teachers and poor engagement outcomes.⁷ At a more systemic level, little attention is given to Indigenous students and their families when it comes to understanding and developing best practices for engagement. Education research that has aimed to prioritise 'student voices' falls short in explicitly understanding the way Indigenous students' voices, knowledges and skill sets are utilised by educators in the classroom. It is vital that Indigenous people are involved in the development of best practice to build Indigenous understanding within Western education – in the classroom, in policymaking and in research. To address this, Indigenous education scholars consistently call for self-determination in the education system if we are to truly address the disparity in outcomes for Indigenous students.⁸

This report is part of a larger report series by Learning Creates Australia – The Power of Recognising More⁹ – which was commissioned to challenge conventional notions of educational success by embracing diverse perspectives, including Indigenous ways of knowing and being. It highlights systemic failures within the Australian education system that disproportionately impact Indigenous students including the reductionist nature of the ATAR system, which often fails to capture the diverse skills and cultural strengths of Indigenous students. Similarly, the School Exclusion Project¹⁰ report by the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (NIYEC) exposes the structural barriers that marginalise Indigenous students such as disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates. It calls for systemic reforms, including: implementing student voice and advocating for student agency in education reform, teaching truthful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, engaging in restorative justice approaches, and calling for greater community involvement in education decision-making. Together, these contributions underscore the urgent need for an education system that affirms Indigenous identities, values diverse ways of knowing, and fosters inclusive and supportive learning environments where Indigenous students can thrive. This research report – led by Indigenous researchers and centring community-driven, self-determining education programs, contributes to this integral shift in how we think about Indigenous students and the measures of their success.

OVERVIEW:

About the research



Introduction

Recently, it has been critically interrogated¹¹ why over \$45 billion in funding spent in the recent decade on Closing the Gap strategies has failed to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students.^{12,13} Questions have been raised about the obsession held by non-Indigenous entities with deficit discourses, and fixations on academic outcomes. Closing the Gap Reports¹⁴ continue to measure Indigenous students using mainstream or inappropriate metrics, which frame Indigenous students in a negative way that doesn't celebrate the unique knowledges, cultures and skill sets they bring to the classroom.¹⁵ In contrast to this narrative, it has been argued that¹⁶ Indigenous student disengagement is not a reflection of individual shortcomings, but rather a response to the systemic failures of the schooling system.

Western curricula and teaching methods often marginalise Indigenous knowledges, reinforcing a sense of alienation among Indigenous students. Further contributing factors include a student's previous experience of education, school accessibility (particularly in remote areas), level of parental support, and whether Indigenous education support is offered by the school.^{17, 18} Students' broader contexts consistently deny and invalidate Indigenous sovereignty, epistemic knowledge and culture, creating an environment where Indigenous students are expected to conform to Western educational norms that were never designed to include them.

This exclusionary framework not only delegitimises Indigenous ways of knowing but also reinforces the colonial structures that perpetuate educational inequity. When students do not see their identities, histories and ways of learning reflected in the classroom, engagement declines. This can be seen as a rejection of a system that does not value their identities, perspectives or lived experiences. Conversely, strengths-based discourses emerge when Indigenous students and families are provided opportunities to position themselves within local Indigenous language and cultural programs.¹⁹

Positive educational experiences often arise when programs support Indigenous sense of identity, belonging to Country, wellbeing and connections to

First Nations knowledges. Fostering positive outcomes and removing the potential for harm requires systemic reform, including embedding Indigenous knowledges into curricula, recognising Indigenous sovereignty in education policy, and dismantling the eurocentric foundations that continue to alienate Indigenous learners.^{20, 21} Culturally responsive education is an important approach that must be practised to work toward these goals that are called for throughout the literature.²²

Culturally responsive education acknowledges the significance of Indigenous knowledge systems, histories and ways of learning. It moves beyond tokenistic inclusion to meaningfully embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum, teaching practices and school policies. This approach values the lived experiences of Indigenous students, ensuring that education is not just accessible but also affirming of their cultural identities. It prioritises relational learning, community engagement, and strengths-based approaches that empower Indigenous students rather than forcing them to conform to Western educational norms. By fostering culturally safe and inclusive learning environments, culturally responsive education challenges systemic biases and seeks to redress historical educational disparities for Indigenous students.

Our research: Shifting the focus

Though the need to shift to culturally responsive approaches is widely accepted, there has been limited research sharing culturally responsive approaches to supporting Indigenous students through the vulnerable points in their education journeys.

Most of the research regarding Indigenous educational success has either focused on numeracy, literacy and attendance outcomes,²³ or had little validity when scaled up to system-wide applications. These reviews failed to identify evidence of programs or practices that could help Indigenous students achieve sustained educational success.²⁴ This highlights two gaps in the literature that may be hindering efforts to improve Indigenous student engagement: the gap in research into Indigenous students in ‘transition’, and the gap in literature identifying existing practice and programs that are designed to support Indigenous student success.

Students who enter high school at the end of primary school (5 to 12 years) are considered to be in ‘transition’, which is defined as the process of adapting psychologically, socially and educationally.²⁵ It is a defining time in a young person's life that begins during their primary school years, and continues throughout their high school years.²⁶ Although most students navigate the transition experience positively, Indigenous students are most at risk of marginalisation, which is highlighted by a decline in high school engagement.^{27, 28} Disengagement through this period can be attributed to a number of factors, including: a decrease in sense of belonging; a decrease in relational connectedness with peers and teachers; a history of bullying at school; a lack of support from home and/or school; and navigating an environment that is larger and more complex than the home environment. While several literature reviews have been published on the transition of primary school students to secondary schools since 2005,²⁹ Indigenous students' transition from primary to secondary school and their school participation throughout the transitions has not been systematically examined in any of them. Additionally, there is limited literature highlighting the success of ‘alternative’ programs that have been developed to celebrate the unique epistemic knowledges, cultural backgrounds and skill sets Indigenous students bring to their learning environments, even though such programs are being delivered across the nation. These settings display the importance of connecting with Country, community and culture, and have a lasting impact on students' sense of identity and engagement with education. Such programs have not been given the appropriate attention or praise for embedding culturally responsive practices that help students achieve success in self-determining ways.³⁰

This research report aims to address the overlap of these gaps through a comprehensive literature review investigating the characteristics of learning environments that foster a sense of safety and support for Indigenous students. A further goal of our research is to examine how ‘alternative/innovative’ programs celebrate Indigenous students' cultural backgrounds and consider how this contributes to sustained student success, engagement and wellbeing. The report was developed with the intention to foreground Indigenous self-determination, incorporating Indigenous researchers and experts to shape the research process and outcomes. This approach ensures that Indigenous perspectives on learning, identity and wellbeing are authentically represented, advocating for educational frameworks that recognise and value the cultural strengths and knowledge systems of Indigenous students.

Examination of educational programs designed for Indigenous students in this research contribute(s) to a shared future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people work side by side to challenge narrow measures of success that hold back the strengths and aspirations of teachers, students, families, and communities.³¹ Therefore, this review has defined success as: **practices that enhance Indigenous young people's school engagement, enhance their cultural identities and contribute to overall wellbeing.**

Research objectives

Evaluate the impact of recognition on educational experiences

By gathering evidence on how recognition and validation of diverse forms of learning contribute to a sense of belonging, wellbeing and engagement among Indigenous young people, we aim to assess the effects of recognising a broader spectrum of skills and knowledge on students' educational experiences and post-school pathways.

Identify enabling factors and barriers

Investigate the systemic conditions that either facilitate or hinder the implementation of broader learning recognition approaches for First Nations young people. By identifying key factors that influence the success of such initiatives, this goal aims to inform policy and practice to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Cultivate collaborative and respectful research practices

Establish and maintain respectful, equitable, and collaborative research partnerships with First Nations communities and organisations. This goal emphasises the importance of building trust, valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, and prioritising the self-determination and agency of Indigenous peoples throughout all stages of the research process.

Research questions

The research aimed to investigate the common characteristics of initiatives focussed on recognising Indigenous young people's learning in ways that value belonging, agency, cultural backgrounds and wellbeing.

It explores questions like:

- What diverse approaches are being implemented to recognise and validate the learning of First Nations young people, specifically focusing on methods that prioritise learner belonging, agency, culture and wellbeing?
- How do these initiatives impact the sense of belonging and wellbeing of First Nations young people?
- To what extent do these initiatives influence the engagement levels and sense of ownership that First Nations young people have over their learning experiences?
- Are there existing correlations between the recognition of First Nations young people's learning and their post-school pathways?

Scope and methodology

Led by Indigenous researchers, this review actively sought out the characteristics of programs that promote Indigenous student success, and aimed to elevate diverse education programs designed to support Indigenous students' academic, cultural and wellbeing outcomes.

Employing a multi-faceted approach, the research process combined document analysis, and data synthesis to produce a literature review of culturally responsive practices that foster Indigenous student success, and to collate case studies of programs and initiatives showcasing these practices. We comprehensively examined the current literature on culturally responsive practices that contribute to increased Indigenous student engagement and learning success. Analysing these sources helped us understand the similarities between culturally responsive programs and how community success is determined.

Development of characteristics

A literature review was conducted alongside a desktop review of culturally responsive programs implemented across the continent, providing valuable insights into practices and approaches. This included the creation of annotated bibliographies and an in-depth analysis of various themes. Themes were identified through an inductive process, where key ideas emerged naturally from the data. These themes focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, Indigenous agency, wellbeing, identity and connection to culture as core factors influencing student outcomes. The research process involved data extraction, analysis and synthesis to develop the final group of nine characteristics. Academic and grey literature, historical materials, and policy documents were analysed to examine the qualities of learning environments that enable Indigenous students to feel safe and thrive. Analysis of the case studies occurred alongside the development of characteristics, enabling the researchers to validate how they contribute to educational success of Indigenous students through an iterative process.

Collation of case studies

In undertaking this research, a comprehensive approach was employed to identify and examine programs that exemplify culturally responsive practices in Indigenous education across the continent. The search process encompassed a desktop review of initiatives that prioritised agency, identity, and belonging, and that integrate Indigenous knowledge, cultivate cultural pride, and promote community engagement.

The selection of case studies in this report was guided by our aim to represent diverse contexts, spanning urban, rural and remote settings, with an emphasis on programs that embraced community-led approaches and cultural safety. Particular attention was given to programs incorporating land-based learning or 'Learning on Country' approaches, which embed Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into educational frameworks. Additionally, the research sought to highlight community-driven initiatives, including those operating independently of government funding or with strong community oversight regarding program delivery. Trauma-informed and wellbeing-focused education programs were also considered, reflecting the importance of holistic support in fostering safe and empowering learning environments for Indigenous students.

It should be noted, however, that while the literature review drew on sources from across Australia, the case studies presented in this report do not include examples specifically focused on Torres Strait Islander or Tasmanian contexts. This represents a limitation of the work and highlights an area for future research to ensure that the diversity of Indigenous experiences and perspectives is fully represented.

Case studies were also selected to highlight the innovative and diverse approaches to culturally responsive education across the continent, and show potential for the development of many more programs featuring the characteristics supporting student learning success. Information on each initiative or program was then carefully examined to understand its structure, the role of Indigenous knowledge, and how it fostered a sense of belonging, wellbeing and academic achievement. This approach ensured a holistic understanding of the educational environments that empower Indigenous students to thrive.

Findings

This part of the report details the research findings, which are presented in two sections:

SECTION 1: Characteristics supporting Indigenous learning success

Sets out the characteristics that support Indigenous learning success. These are the underpinning practices or features of education models/programs that assist Indigenous students to feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing at school.

SECTION 2: Case Studies

Outlines case studies of educational programs that demonstrate how schools and different education settings bring the characteristics to life and contribute to Indigenous students' educational success in innovative ways.

The literature review and research process also led to some overarching findings, which are worth highlighting before we explore the characteristics and case studies.

The first is the critical role that school staff, families and communities play in working together to foster an environment that supports Indigenous students' engagement and wellbeing during the middle to secondary years. This alliance is necessary to shift towards educational practices that prioritise Indigenous self-determination, celebrate cultural identity, and empower students to thrive. Another key point highlighted through the report is that Indigenous representation, culturally safe spaces, strong relationships, mentoring and strengths-based approaches are critical in building students' sense of belonging, wellbeing, and academic achievement. A further finding was the positive impact of innovative programs designed to celebrate and support the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students, which were central to students' overall success and sense of belonging within the educational system. Our research revealed that students in such programs feel safe and comfortable engaging in appropriate ways according to their learning needs as they celebrate and honour their Indigenous cultures.

These programs are emerging all over the country and are evidence of the effect of enhanced sovereignty and self-determination on Indigenous communities, and their young peoples' educational success.

SECTION 1:

Characteristics supporting Indigenous learning success



Summary of Characteristics

The literature review and data analysis component of the research led to identifying nine common traits of education programs that supported Indigenous student success. Importantly, some of these characteristics are school-specific (focused on what happens within a school environment) while others are broader across learning initiatives (involving community, systems, and partnerships beyond the school walls).

Characteristics of programs supporting Indigenous learning success		
1	Inclusion, representation and visibility of culture at school	Integration of Indigenous languages, artworks, cultural practices, histories, and values into the everyday school environment.
2	Indigenous spaces in schools	Dedicated spaces within schools that serve as cultural hubs, fostering familiarity and safety for Indigenous students.
3	School leadership	School leadership that champions Indigenous knowledge, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inclusive practices across the school.
4	Centrality of Relationships a. Student-staff relationships b. Family and community cultural connection c. Community-school partnerships	Strong, authentic relationships between students and staff, families, communities, Elders, and peers, including cultural connections and school-community partnerships.
5	Teachers seeking professional development opportunities	Teachers actively seeking learning opportunities to build cultural understanding and engage with Indigenous histories, knowledge, and protocols.
6	Mentoring	Supportive guidance provided by adults, Elders, or older students, offering role models and cultural connection.
7	Strengths-based approach	Emphasis on Indigenous students' strengths, resilience, and positive identities rather than deficit perspectives.
8	Belonging	Fostering a sense of identity, cultural connection, and inclusion within school and community contexts.
9	Young people's empowerment	Opportunities for Indigenous students to participate in decision-making, leadership, and self-determination.

1. Inclusion, representation and visibility of culture at school

The literature emphasises the importance of representing culture at school in supporting Indigenous students' wellbeing and success. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language is often used in two ways in schools to represent culture. This includes signs and values in Indigenous languages and bilingual classes.^{32, 33} As part of the representation of culture in the education setting, Indigenous artworks can be displayed; Indigenous performers and sportspeople included; cultural acts such as 'Welcome to Country' performed at events; and important cultural events and days acknowledged through announcements.³⁴⁻³⁷

In the development of curricula, Indigenous perspectives, events, cultures, histories and values have been identified as necessary elements to be reflected in the education environment.³⁸ Cultural inclusion and representation must be done ethically and with support from the school and local community.³⁹ It is important to extend beyond representation to include Indigenous values and practices.⁴⁰ Studies in this area have emphasised that the school should embed culture 'into the fabric of the building' and make it part of the school's everyday life, as opposed to just being add-ons targeted only at Indigenous students.⁴¹

Foregrounding Indigenous cultures, cultural domains and practices is essential as a means of promoting student participation and success in transition.⁴² Culture serves as a protective factor for social and emotional wellbeing because it is 'relational, spiritual, ecological, consensual, and communal'.⁴³ It is considered vital for school engagement and connection that students have cultural connections and knowledge in both their school and personal lives,⁴⁴ as this fosters a sense of identity, belonging, and confidence. When students see their culture reflected in their education, they are more likely to feel valued, participate actively, and achieve academic success.

Indigenous students are more likely to engage and participate in education when identity, belonging, and cultural connectedness are interwoven.⁴⁵ Similarly, our review found that a sense of belonging contributes to students' wellbeing, motivation, and academic achievement.⁴⁶ School programs are more effective when cultural practices, such as connections between home, community and school, are emphasised.⁴⁷

For Indigenous students to feel comfortable practising their culture, and to develop safe and meaningful relationships based on cultural practices in their school environment, it is imperative that their school fosters an inclusive and culturally affirming space where their traditions, languages, and identities are valued and respected.^{48, 49, 50}

2. Indigenous spaces in schools

In many of the schools discussed in publications relating to culturally responsive schooling, a separate space served as a focal point or cultural hub for the Indigenous students. Rather than the intimidating and alienating environment of school, a cultural hub offers practices and conditions that feel closer to home. Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs) were often the ones who staffed these centres and were responsible for much of this familiarity. Many Indigenous students congregate in these culturally safe rooms, using the centre as a social hub and for information.

The literature often advocated for the creation of a specific space for Indigenous students within the school, as providing these spaces to Indigenous students is shown to foster a sense of belonging and help them express themselves culturally.⁵¹⁻⁵⁴ These in-between spaces can facilitate the transition from home to school.⁵⁵ A number of studies suggested Indigenous staff, especially IEOs, needed to be available in this space to engage with students.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁹

At the same time, some scholars caution that if not carefully embedded within whole-school practices,

these spaces can unintentionally reinforce separation or stigma, highlighting differences rather than fostering genuine inclusion.

3. School leadership

Indigenous students' success is strongly related to the school leadership, particularly where leaders at the school – like Principals, Department Heads, Year Level Coordinators and even student leaders – champion and advocate that Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies be used to engage Indigenous students in culturally responsive ways.^{60–64} Student success should extend beyond academic achievement to encompass wellbeing, cultural identity, and a strong sense of belonging. In this way, success is measured not only by grades but by a student's ability to navigate the education system while maintaining their connection to culture, community and self. A truly supportive learning environment fosters a sense of inclusion, ensuring that Indigenous students feel valued, seen, and empowered. When schools integrate culturally responsive pedagogy, prioritise relational learning and embed Indigenous knowledge systems, students develop confidence, resilience and the ability to thrive both within and beyond the classroom.

The OECD identified the leadership of a strong leader as key to speeding up positive educational change for students in schools, with passionate and inspirational leadership flowing to the rest of the staff.⁶⁵ The OECD also noted the positive impact of Indigenous people's inclusion in leadership positions on student engagement. Indigenous students need leadership that is student-centred and demonstrates commitment to the success of Indigenous students.^{66–69}

A study reviewing impediments to culturally responsive school leadership found that school leaders who understand Indigenous students' culture can positively impact them and their achievements.⁷⁰ It highlights that without this cultural awareness, school leaders may inadvertently reinforce systemic barriers, limiting Indigenous students' engagement and success.

It emphasises the need for leaders to actively challenge institutional biases and implement culturally affirming practices to foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

4. Centrality of relationships

Relationships are often discussed as a factor affecting Indigenous young people's engagement and attendance in secondary school. In some studies relationships were examined across three dimensions: relationships with teachers; relationships with peers on a horizontal level;^{71, 72} and relationships with family and community.^{73, 74, 75} Several studies^{76, 77} have emphasised the importance of parents participating in their children's learning.^{78, 79} Indigenous staff are identified as key to brokering these familial relationships, which require ongoing commitment and work.

To support the transition to and participation in high school, it's been said that forming new friendships with peers is beneficial.^{80, 81} School events and activities that facilitate horizontal relationships between peers significantly contribute to the development of friendships and the expansion of social networks.^{82, 83} The literature also points to a need to decolonise the view of relationships and educational success. Indigenous students' relationships with Country, as well as the role that Country may play in their education, are largely absent in the literature. The lack of Indigenous voice in this space is surprising, since Indigenous scholars, attribute education to the land.⁸⁴ For Indigenous people to develop cultural knowledge, it has been argued that the relationship between them and Country is crucial.^{85, 86} This provides a critical reminder to decolonise our views of relationships when thinking holistically about the relationships that support student success.

4A. Student–staff relationships

Relationships between Indigenous students and their teachers have been shown to foster educational participation and transition. In fact,

creating a school climate that enhances Indigenous students' success in high school is dependent on creating trust-based relationships between students, teachers and other school staff.⁸⁷⁻⁹¹

For such relationships to flourish, teachers must demonstrate respect and genuine care.⁹² Building accessible, supportive and trust-based relationships needs to be facilitated by several teacher characteristics and practices. It was found that teachers who displayed a sense of humor, showed an interest in learning about Indigenous cultures and countries, and intentionally created a sense of welcome in the classroom and school environment were more successful at engaging Indigenous students.^{93, 94} The need for these relationships to be ongoing, authentic and trusting comes through strongly. Students who are engaged with their learning do so because of the relationship they have with their teachers. Trying to effectively engage Indigenous students requires understanding and developing this family-like relationship. When Indigenous students trust and connect with their teachers, they will engage with them and work to build a relationship. Strengths-based approaches tie the relationships together, supporting the deconstruction of deficit discourse.⁹⁵

A student-teacher relationship may need to be built outside of school hours, such as attending community events or home visits. By engaging in this manner, schools demonstrate a willingness to go beyond acknowledging differences to sharing knowledge and respecting one another.

4B. Family and community cultural connection

Educators' relationships with community members, Elders, and families enhance Indigenous students' participation in education. Indigenous students' connection to Elders is particularly important. Indigenous young people's sense of cultural identity and belonging is enhanced by this connection as they learn and maintain cultural customs, responsibilities, and obligations.⁹⁶

Family and community connections were shown to enhance school attendance and participation among young people.⁹⁷ Throughout the literature, Indigenous students also report a positive impact on their cultural connectedness from spending time with Elders. It was the inclusion of Elders that enabled Indigenous young people to form and strengthen their own identities.⁹⁸ Elders played an important role in providing cultural links to the community by discussing their own histories.⁹⁹⁻¹⁰⁹

4C. Community-school partnerships

Partnership between communities and schools was identified in many studies to be beneficial to improving transitions and participation in high school.¹¹⁰⁻¹¹⁸ The outcomes of these school-community partnerships to implement transition and participation programs included an increased sense of confidence, self-esteem and aspirations, a sense of belonging and a greater understanding of culture. In one study¹¹⁹ the authors identify 'transition conferences' as an effective program in supporting student transition, which are part of 'The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Programs' and connect students to community-driven programs. As a result of these programs, students have shown a greater connection to culture, a greater ability to gain cultural knowledge, and a smoother transition to high school with Elders, guest speakers, and cultural activities.¹²⁰

While the results of many studies¹²¹⁻¹²⁹ have emphasised the importance of community-school partnerships, the practices that must be followed to establish and sustain such partnerships and generate positive outcomes have not been discussed in detail. Co-designing transition and participation programs with communities is rare in studies. Though this is beyond the scope of our research, it is an area deserving of attention, given the positive impact these partnerships create for Indigenous students.

5. Professional development

Teachers constantly struggle to juggle increasing, and at times, competing demands of their workloads.¹³⁰ In conjunction with the hyperfocus on metrics, some suggest that teachers, particularly Indigenous educators, are increasingly frustrated, under pressure and restricted in their ability to pursue professional development. While Teachers' express a desire to build meaningful connections with Indigenous students and communities (with the aims of fostering change, advancing equality and contributing to reparative practices) these efforts are frequently undermined. Wider socio-educational discourses and competing pedagogical pressures often translate into deficit-orientated narratives in school-based practices.¹³¹

When Indigenous programs are not interfering with Western schooling priorities, teachers express theoretical support for Indigenous programs in mainstream education. This educational space has been described as tricky and complex in the literature.¹³² It is, however, widely accepted that fostering understanding between teachers and students through student-teacher-community relationships that emphasise Indigenous sovereignty, identity, and culture is essential to transformative change – for teachers, for students, for communities, and for Australian education.¹³³

Professional development initiatives that meaningfully involve Traditional Owners and Indigenous community educators support in gaining a deeper understanding of local histories, knowledge systems, and cultural protocols. This approach supports teachers to build genuine relationships with Indigenous students and communities, creating culturally safe learning environments that promote student wellbeing and academic success.¹³⁴

6. Mentoring

Mentoring has been identified as an effective strategy for assisting Indigenous students with transition and participation in high school.¹³⁵⁻¹³⁹

A wide range of roles and types of mentors were identified across the studies, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults, Elders and older students. As part of the educational system, adult mentors provided direction and advice to students.^{140, 141, 142} Several types of mentorship were provided by school staff, including Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) and Aboriginal Education Resource Teachers (AERTs).^{143, 144} Mentor relationships of this type have been shown to enhance connections and assistance for Indigenous students.¹⁴⁵

Many mentoring approaches involved engaging Elders from the community to facilitate specific activities, to establishing regular, ongoing connections with Elders from the students' community.¹⁴⁶ Both students and teaching teams benefit from the teaching and learning of culture from Elders.^{147, 148} A number of studies have found that older school students are also effective mentors, providing role models for students with the same cultural background.^{149, 150, 151}

Mentoring programs have been shown to reduce school absences, improve academic performance and improve attitudes about school attendance.^{152, 153} A key component of effective mentoring programs is integrating mentoring into a school-wide focus that incorporates both formal and informal supports and opportunities to connect.¹⁵⁴ Research advises that the mentor and mentee should maintain regular contact over a period of at least 12 to 18 months to see the greatest benefit from the relationship.¹⁵⁵

7. Strengths-based approach

Many studies advocated using a strengths-based approach across curriculum and messaging from leadership in relation to Indigenous pedagogy and knowledges. Schools should emphasise positive capabilities rather than problems and negative labels, through which a student or a community's identity can be defined.¹⁵⁶

This approach is especially important for Indigenous students because it takes into account the impacts and narratives of colonisation, assimilation, cultural oppression, and elimination.¹⁵⁷ By acknowledging Indigenous students' resilience and capacity to address challenges in their historical, social and political contexts, we can boost their sense of control over their lives.

8. Belonging

There was a strong emphasis on belonging in the literature. As a result of their involvement in cultural practices with their families, communities, and schools, Indigenous students feel a stronger sense of belonging. Being part of a community and culture enhances self-worth, strengthens cultural identity and increases school engagement.¹⁵⁵⁻¹⁶² Additionally, it was found that a sense of belonging was crucial for engaging, participating and transitioning through the school system.¹⁶³

9. Young people's empowerment

Students' voices, participation and decision-making were discussed in various papers. Providing young people with a voice and a choice was found to be empowering.¹⁶⁴ Indigenous young people developed skills to take ownership of their lives through programs targeted at decision-making and leadership development.¹⁶⁵⁻¹⁶⁸

From the perspective of parents, developing leadership skills in students and providing leadership training was considered nurturing.^{169, 170} As students gained confidence, they felt more pride in their cultural identity and were able to speak in public. In addition, these attributes increased students' ability to engage in cultural activities in school.^{171, 172}

SECTION 2:

Case studies



Locations of case studies

1. *The National Indigenous Science Education Program*
2. *National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy*
3. *Djiriba Waagura*
4. *Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School*
5. *Bundjalung Youth Leadership Camp*
6. *Jabalbina On Country*
7. *Warriappendi Secondary School*
8. *Shooting Stars: Empowering Aboriginal Girls*
9. *The Academy of Sport, Health and Education*
10. *Girls from Oz*
11. *Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Education*
12. *The Mindyigari Centre*
13. *Yipirinya School*
14. *The Learning on Country Program*



The National Indigenous Science Education Program

The National Indigenous Science Education Program (NISEP) is a national initiative that leverages science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as tools to engage and empower Indigenous youth.¹⁷³

A collaborative effort between universities, schools and Indigenous communities, the program is based at Macquarie University in Sydney and aims to promote STEM interest and participation among Indigenous secondary school students. Through NISEP programs, Indigenous students' engagement with and aspirations toward STEM education and careers are encouraged, and act as pathways to secondary education, tertiary education, and employment pathways. Since its inception, NISEP has continually evolved its programs to meet the changing needs of Indigenous students and communities. Their culturally inclusive educational opportunities address the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in STEM fields by providing Indigenous students with hands-on experiences and putting them in leadership positions. This program design develops students' confidence, broadens their career aspirations, and creates role models.

NISEP employs a variety of strategies to achieve its objectives. One key approach is empowering Indigenous students to take on leadership roles in STEM activities, which fosters confidence and a sense of ownership over their educational journeys. Additionally, the program collaborates closely with Indigenous communities to ensure that its initiatives are culturally relevant and supportive, ultimately enhancing student participation and success. Through organising workshops, science shows and other interactive events, NISEP stimulates interest in STEM subjects among Indigenous youth, helping to make these subjects more engaging and accessible. Furthermore, the program provides access to mentors and resources that guide students through their educational pathways, from secondary school to tertiary education and employment, ensuring they have the support they need at every stage of their journey. Through these approaches, NISEP contributes to a more inclusive and diverse STEM landscape supporting Indigenous students in realising their full potential.

National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy

The National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy (NASCA) is a national initiative dedicated to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.¹⁷⁴

By combining education, culture and sports, NASCA provides holistic support that fosters leadership, connection and academic success. NASCA offers a variety of programs specifically designed to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Through sports engagement, students participate in physical activities that build teamwork and resilience, with culture and education activities including mentoring, on-Country experiences, support networks, and initiatives like the Young Women's Academy. Mentoring and coaching provide personal and academic support, inspiring and guiding students in their educational journeys. Cultural activities, including on-Country experiences, storytelling and workshops help strengthen cultural connections. Additionally, leadership development programs cultivate confidence and self-determination, empowering students to take charge of their futures. The NASCA team includes Indigenous role models who lead activities that resonate with students' cultural and personal experiences, delivering tailored support. Their programs empower Indigenous youth by connecting them to culture, improving school engagement, and addressing systemic challenges. NASCA operates nationwide, serving urban, regional and remote Aboriginal communities through partnerships with schools, communities and local organisations.

Djiriba Waagura

Djiriba Waagura's education programs provide students and educators with opportunities to integrate cultural knowledge into learning. By blending cultural immersion with practical education, these programs aim to foster pride, engagement and a stronger connection to heritage.¹⁷⁵

Djiriba Waagura was created by Matt Simms and Nigel Millgate, and mentions Uncle Paul Gordon and Uncle Sonny Simms as notable Elders on their website. Djiriba Waagura aims to serve a range of students across age groups and institutions, including preschools, primary schools, high schools, technical and further education institutes (TAFEs) and universities. Djiriba Waagura offers tailored cultural programs for schools, providing classroom support, cultural performances, and on-Country camps that support greater connection and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Their 'Cultural Calendar' activities commemorate significant events for Aboriginal people through school excursions, dance performances, Welcome to Country ceremonies, smoking ceremonies, Yidaki (didgeridoo) demonstrations, school camps and cultural bush walks. Excursions offer immersive experiences such as bush tucker tours, introductions to Aboriginal culture, traditional dancing and music, boomerang demonstrations, and other hands-on cultural activities. Additionally, Djiriba Waagura supports teachers by training them to integrate culturally sensitive and authentic Aboriginal content into their teaching, ensuring a progressive and sequential approach to education.

Programs are conducted primarily on Yuin Country (South Coast, NSW). Camps and workshops often take place in culturally significant locations within the region. The programs aim to address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal students in education, such as low cultural representation in schools, a lack of inclusive practices, and disconnection from heritage. On-Country learning allows students to connect with Country and traditional knowledge systems. Workshops and performances bring Aboriginal perspectives into schools, inspiring an appreciation of cultural diversity and inclusion and building greater connection and communication. By fostering cultural identity and academic engagement, Djiriba Waagura empowers students to improve their leadership skills.

Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School

The Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School (GGFS) is a pioneering educational institution dedicated to providing culturally responsive education to Indigenous students in New South Wales (NSW).¹⁷⁶

GGFS was established by the Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation, an organisation committed to revitalising Gumbaynggirr language and culture. The school serves primarily Indigenous students, aiming to strengthen their cultural identity and academic achievements. GGFS is the first bilingual school in NSW to offer education in an Aboriginal language. It integrates conventional teaching methods with Gumbaynggirr language and cultural education, providing a holistic learning experience that emphasises both academic excellence and cultural heritage. The school is located in Coffs Harbour, NSW, within the traditional lands of the Gumbaynggirr people, enhancing the cultural relevance of the education provided.

GGFS commenced operations in early 2022, initially catering to students from Kindergarten to Year 2. It has plans to expand its offerings up to Year 6 in the coming years, with enrolment numbers growing from approximately 15 students in its first year to over 50 in 2023. The establishment of GGFS addresses the need for culturally responsive education that validates and incorporates Indigenous students' heritage. By teaching standard education subjects in both English and Gumbaynggirr, as well as incorporating cultural practices into the curriculum, the school aims to enhance students' sense of belonging, agency and wellbeing, fostering a strong cultural identity alongside academic success. This approach is designed to create a culturally safe and supportive learning environment, encouraging student engagement and a deeper connection to their heritage.

Bundjalung Youth Leadership Camp

The Bundjalung Youth Leadership Camp, also known as Ngalawaa Bulaan Gii (which translates to 'Gathering Together'), is designed to strengthen cultural identity among Indigenous youth, foster leadership qualities, and create a supportive environment for personal growth.¹⁷⁷

The camp serves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students from various regions, particularly those connected to Bundjalung Country, and is facilitated by organisations such as Culture College, in collaboration with local Elders and community leaders. The camp offers a blend of cultural education, leadership development and personal growth activities. Participants engage in traditional practices, storytelling sessions with Elders, workshops on leadership and resilience, and discussions on contemporary issues affecting Indigenous communities.

The camp takes place on Bundjalung Country, a region in northern New South Wales, known for its rich Indigenous heritage and natural beauty. The camp is organised periodically, often aligning with school schedules to maximise student participation. Specific dates may vary annually. The camp addresses key challenges such as cultural disconnection, educational disengagement, and the need for strong Indigenous leadership within communities. Through cultural immersion, students engage directly with Elders and participate in traditional activities, deepening their connection to their heritage. Leadership workshops provide interactive sessions that focus on building confidence, communication skills and community leadership. Additionally, the program collaborates with local organisations and schools to ensure a holistic, community-centred approach that supports the long-term development of young Indigenous leaders. The Bundjalung Youth Leadership Camp exemplifies the power of culturally responsive education, providing Indigenous youth with the tools and knowledge to become future leaders while honouring and preserving their rich cultural heritage.

Jabalbina On Country

The Jabalbina On Country program reconnects Indigenous youth with their cultural heritage while empowering them through education, environmental stewardship and community engagement.¹⁷⁸

Designed for Indigenous youth and community members from the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Nation in Far North Queensland, the program is guided by the Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation, a Traditional Owner-led organisation responsible for managing land and sea Country for the Eastern Kuku Yalanji

people. Jabalbina On Country integrates cultural education, land and sea management, and personal development to strengthen participants' connection to their heritage. Activities such as cultural camps, traditional knowledge-sharing, language revitalisation, bush skills, environmental conservation, and leadership training provide immersive and meaningful experiences. Ultimately, the program fosters cultural pride, encourages environmental stewardship, and supports personal growth while enhancing educational and employment opportunities for participants. Collaboration is central to the program, with key partners including schools, local councils, environmental organisations and government agencies. The program operates across the Eastern Kuku Yalanji Nation in Far North Queensland, covering areas from Mossman to Cooktown, including the Daintree Rainforest and surrounding coastal regions. The Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation has been active since 2007, with the On Country program evolving as a key initiative in recent years to address the community's educational and cultural priorities. The program is run throughout the year, with specific camps, workshops, and projects aligned with community and environmental needs.

Activities take place on culturally significant lands and waters, ensuring participants are immersed in their ancestral environments, and addressing the loss of cultural knowledge and disconnection from land that many Indigenous communities face due to colonisation and systemic barriers. The program design responds to the desire of Elders and community members to pass on traditional knowledge and empower younger generations to take pride in their identity while building sustainable futures.

The deeply immersive cultural experience offers participants the chance to learn directly from Elders and Traditional Owners about language, stories, cultural practices, and sacred sites. By integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation techniques, the program also provides valuable education in sustainable land and sea management. All activities are co-designed with Elders to ensure they reflect cultural priorities and respect important protocols. Education partnerships with schools and educators help incorporate cultural lessons into broader educational outcomes, making learning more engaging and relevant for students. In addition to cultural and environmental education, the program offers holistic support through mentorship, leadership opportunities, and pathways to further education and employment in fields such as land management, tourism, and cultural heritage.

The impact of Jabalbina On Country is far-reaching. By strengthening cultural identity and ensuring the transmission of traditional knowledge to future generations, it plays a vital role in cultural revitalisation. Participants actively contribute to environmental stewardship, helping to protect and sustainably manage their ancestral lands and waters. The program also improves school attendance and engagement by integrating cultural learning with formal education, fostering a greater sense of purpose among Indigenous youth. Ultimately, Jabalbina On Country builds pride, confidence, and a strong sense of belonging, contributing to healthier and more connected communities. It stands as a powerful example of how culturally responsive education and a deep connection to land can empower Indigenous youth while preserving cultural heritage and fostering sustainable futures.

Warriappendi Secondary School

Warriappendi Secondary School provides a culturally responsive educational environment tailored to the needs of Aboriginal students.¹⁷⁹

It emphasises respect, resilience and responsibility, fostering both academic success and personal growth. Located in Adelaide, on Kaurna Country, the school serves Aboriginal students in South Australia, working closely with their families and communities. The school offers:

- Individual learning plans – customised strategies to meet students’ academic and personal needs
- Cultural programs – activities that integrate Aboriginal history, art and language into the curriculum
- Wellbeing support – dedicated programs addressing mental health, resilience and social skills
- Community engagement – partnerships with local Elders and organisations to enrich learning.

The school also incorporates on-Country learning experiences to connect students with their cultural heritage. Warriappendi Secondary School was established to address the educational and social challenges faced by Aboriginal students, including disengagement, cultural disconnection and limited access to tailored support. Its goal is to improve academic outcomes while fostering a strong sense of identity. Through small class sizes, a culturally inclusive curriculum, and strong community connections, the school provides a safe and nurturing environment. The school’s holistic approach ensures students receive personalised support to overcome barriers and achieve their goals.

Shooting Stars: Empowering Aboriginal Girls and Women

Shooting Stars is a program designed to empower Aboriginal girls and young women through education, health and wellbeing and personal development.¹⁸⁰

It engages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls aged 7 to 18, including those at risk of disengaging from education. Led by Aboriginal women and supported by non-Indigenous allies, the program benefits from staff members who serve as role models, sharing their lived experiences to inspire participants.

An initiative of Glass Jar Australia, a subsidiary of Netball WA, Shooting Stars operates with the support of local communities, schools and corporate sponsors. Using a range of platforms, including sport, art and camps, the program encourages educational engagement while promoting leadership, confidence and cultural pride. Participants receive tailored support, including mentoring, engagement with learning and cultural activities designed to meet their individual needs.

Operating in Western Australia and parts of South Australia, the program serves multiple communities, particularly those in regional and remote areas with significant Aboriginal populations. Programs are embedded within local schools and tailored to reflect the unique cultural and social contexts of each community. Piloted in 2014 in response to low school attendance and retention rates among Aboriginal girls in these areas, Shooting Stars has since expanded to multiple communities, supporting hundreds of

participants annually and achieving measurable improvements in school engagement. The program has resulted in increased school attendance and self-esteem, as well as pathways for young women to achieve their aspirations, creating a lasting impact on the lives of its participants and communities where they live.

At its core, the program addresses systemic inequities in education and social outcomes for Aboriginal girls, fostering their potential and empowering them to shape their futures. It tackles barriers such as cultural disconnection, low self-esteem and limited access to opportunities in regional areas. Through a range of activities that foster connection and relationships, the program provides participants into a supportive network that values education and personal growth. The program integrates Aboriginal cultural practices and perspectives, celebrating identity and instilling a strong sense of pride.

Each participant receives individualised support, including goal setting and personal mentoring. Shooting Stars also collaborates closely with families, Elders and local organisations to ensure cultural relevance and community ownership. Regular events, awards and showcases celebrate the achievements of participants, building confidence and fostering community recognition. It also fosters leadership skills, preparing young women to take on active roles in their communities. By uplifting and supporting Aboriginal girls, Shooting Stars contributes to broader community wellbeing and resilience. It stands as a powerful example of how culturally responsive education, combined with sport, culture, and mentorship, can transform lives and create lasting change.

The Academy of Sport, Health and Education

The Academy of Sport, Health and Education (ASHE) currently sits within The Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence in Shepparton, and is a leading initiative that empowers Indigenous people through education, sport and community engagement.¹⁸²

With a focus on improving education, health and employment outcomes, ASHE adopts a holistic approach that uses sport as a key engagement tool. ASHE's programs blend traditional academic subjects with vocational education, life skills and cultural activities, tailoring learning to the needs of Indigenous students. By integrating cultural identity and community values into the curriculum, the academy fosters engagement and long-term success. Based in Shepparton, ASHE operates in partnership with the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club, a central hub for the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. ASHE is also partnered with the University of Melbourne and maintains close relationships with local community leaders and Elders, reinforcing strong community connections.

Since its establishment in 2004, the academy has played a vital role in supporting Indigenous students and their families, addressing barriers to education and employment while fostering pride in cultural identity. Recognising the historical and contemporary challenges Indigenous communities face, including intergenerational trauma, socio-economic disadvantage, and educational disconnection, ASHE creates programs that are culturally relevant and responsive. By incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural activities, and mentorship from Elders, the academy makes education meaningful and engaging. Sport plays a pivotal role in ASHE's approach, fostering teamwork, confidence and resilience. The connection to the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club strengthens this engagement, providing students with opportunities to develop skills both on and off the field. ASHE also works closely with families, local

Indigenous organisations, and community members to ensure programs reflect community needs and aspirations. By offering a trauma-informed and nurturing environment, ASHE promotes student wellbeing, belonging and resilience throughout their personal and academic journeys. As a model of culturally responsive education, ASHE demonstrates how valuing Indigenous perspectives and fostering strong community connections can create meaningful change, empowering Indigenous youth to thrive in education, employment and beyond.

Girls from Oz

Girls from Oz is a program designed to empower young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls in remote communities by fostering confidence, resilience and life skills through performing arts and cultural exchange opportunities.¹⁸³

Since its pilot in 2009 at Halls Creek District High School, Girls from Oz has built a longstanding presence across Western Australia's Kimberley region and Queensland's Far North Cape York Peninsula, where programs have run since 2015 at Lockhart State School. These school-based initiatives support young Aboriginal girls in remote areas, celebrating their rich cultural heritage while creating new opportunities for growth and connection.

Girls from Oz aims to address several challenges faced by Aboriginal girls in remote communities, including limited extracurricular opportunities, lower school engagement and a lack of representation in leadership roles. It works in partnership with local schools, families, community organisations and professional mentors from across the continent to provide meaningful support and opportunities for personal growth. The program aims to build self-confidence and resilience, improve school attendance and engagement, encourage cultural pride, and provide pathways to further education and employment.

The program offers a variety of activities, and achieves its goals through strong alignment with community values and needs. Performing arts workshops are used as a medium to engage participants and build transferable skills, including through dance, music and drama, which encourage self-expression and creativity. Female mentors also play a key role, inspiring participants by serving as role models, and helping set and achieve personal goals. The program facilitates trips to urban centres like Melbourne, with cultural exchanges providing participants with the opportunity to perform publicly and engage in diverse cultural experiences. These experiences foster a sense of achievement and broaden participants' horizons. Additionally, educational programs are designed to improve school attendance, enhance literacy and numeracy, and promote overall academic engagement.

Girls from Oz aligns with culturally responsive schooling principles by valuing Aboriginal cultural identity, celebrating traditions through performing arts, and creating a learning environment where participants feel proud of their heritage. Mentors and facilitators build meaningful relationships with participants, fostering trust and providing a supportive learning space. The program engages participants through relevant activities that are tailored to their interests and strengths, making the experience more impactful. By offering platforms for self-expression, Girls from Oz helps build confidence and leadership skills, empowering girls to see themselves as capable and influential. In Halls Creek, Girls from Oz creates a space where young Aboriginal girls can thrive, bridging cultural connections and personal growth while reinforcing the importance of education, opportunity, and cultural pride.

Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Education

Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Education is an initiative based in Western Australia, focused on providing culturally grounded education and support services to Aboriginal students and families.¹⁸⁴

The program fosters cultural pride, educational engagement, and pathways to success within the broader schooling system, ensuring students remain connected to their heritage while excelling academically. Serving Aboriginal students, their families and the wider community in the northern suburbs of Perth, Wadjak Northside works collaboratively with schools, educators, community centres and local Aboriginal Elders to create culturally safe and inclusive educational experiences. The program offers a variety of services. Their cultural education programs teach Noongar language, traditions and history to strengthen students' cultural identity. Academic support is provided through tutoring, mentoring and resources to help students succeed in school. Family engagement is a key aspect, with workshops, events and advisory services designed to empower families to support their children's education. Additionally, cultural awareness training is offered for schools and teachers, ensuring Aboriginal perspectives and needs are respected and integrated into the curriculum. The initiative partners with organisations and institutions across Western Australia to enhance its reach and impact.

The program addresses systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal students such as cultural disconnection, discrimination and challenges in navigating mainstream schooling systems. Its goals include improving school attendance and academic outcomes for Aboriginal students, promoting cultural pride and identity, building stronger relationships between schools, families and the Aboriginal community, and advocating for culturally safe and responsive education practices. Wadjak Northside's community-led programs are designed with input from local Elders, families and students. Partnerships with schools ensure the curriculum and school environment are inclusive and culturally respectful, while holistic support addresses academic, social and cultural needs through integrated services. The program also celebrates Noongar culture through events and activities, fostering community pride and encouraging students to embrace their heritage. In alignment with culturally responsive schooling principles, Wadjak Northside ensures that Noongar culture and history are integral to the educational experience, fostering inclusion and creating environments where Aboriginal students feel valued and respected. The initiative helps strengthen students' identities, enhancing their confidence and sense of belonging. By collaborating with families, schools, and Elders, Wadjak Northside takes a community-driven approach to education. Blending cultural education with academic support, Wadjak empowers students to succeed in school while staying connected to their culture, creating pathways to a brighter and more inclusive future.

The Mindyigari Centre

The Mindyigari Centre at Erindale College is a dedicated facility designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through culturally responsive education.¹⁸⁵

Serving students enrolled at Erindale College in Wanniassa, a suburb of Canberra, the Centre offers tailored educational support, including individual tutoring, homework assistance and mentorship. It is staffed by a team of committed personnel, such as an Indigenous Education Officer, who work closely with

students to ensure they receive the support they need to succeed. The Centre provides a variety of services aimed at enhancing students' academic, cultural and personal development. These services include individual tutoring, assignment support and regular meetings that foster cultural connections and discussion about career pathways. It also collaborates with community organisations to offer comprehensive support, helping students with Australian School-based Apprenticeship applications, post-school transitions and ongoing support, such as assisting students to apply to universities or TAFE. The Centre facilitates links with community agencies and maintains timely communication with families to ensure a strong support network for each student. Additionally, it offers cultural programs, excursions, and access to educational resources and kitchen facilities.

The Mindyigari Centre was established with the goal of improving educational, training, and career outcomes for Indigenous students by creating a supportive and culturally safe environment. It was re-launched on November 12, 2020, with enhanced facilities and programs to better meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The re-launch event included Ngunnawal Elders, community members and students, emphasising the Centre's commitment to cultural integrity and community engagement. The Mindyigari Centre exemplifies Erindale College's commitment to promoting academic achievement, cultural pride and the overall well-being of Indigenous students.

Yipirinya School

Yipirinya School is a unique, independent Aboriginal school located in Alice Springs, Northern Territory, that is dedicated to preserving and promoting Indigenous culture while providing a holistic and bilingual education.¹⁸⁶

The school primarily serves Aboriginal students from Alice Springs and surrounding remote communities, offering education from early childhood through to secondary level. It is deeply connected to the local Arrernte, Warlpiri, Luritja and Pitjantjatjara peoples, reflecting the diversity of the region's Indigenous cultures. The school offers a dual-focus curriculum that integrates cultural education with mainstream subjects. It teaches local languages, cultural practices and traditional knowledge alongside standard academic subjects. Bilingual learning is a central feature of the curriculum, with students being taught in both English and their local Indigenous languages to preserve linguistic culture and foster pride in their identity. Yipirinya School also emphasises community engagement, involving Elders and community members in the teaching process to ensure the authenticity of the cultural content. Additionally, the school adopts a trauma-informed approach to education, supporting students' emotional, social and physical wellbeing. Surrounded by the Traditional Lands of the Arrernte people, Yipirinya School serves both urban and remote Aboriginal families. Its central location in Alice Springs provides accessible education to a wide range of students from different backgrounds and communities. The school was established to address the challenges faced by Aboriginal students in mainstream education systems, including cultural disconnection, language barriers, and limited community involvement. Its goals are to preserve Indigenous languages and culture, provide an education that respects students' heritage, improve educational outcomes, and foster cultural pride and self-determination.

Yipirinya School achieves its mission through a bilingual and bicultural curriculum, integrating local languages and cultural teachings into core subjects. The school creates a culturally safe environment where students feel respected and supported in their cultural identities. It also offers integrated support

services to address challenges such as poverty, access to healthcare and trauma, helping students fully engage in their education. Through its focus on respecting cultural identity, involving Elders, and providing holistic learning, Yipirinya School exemplifies culturally responsive schooling. By teaching in students' first languages and celebrating their heritage, the school fosters confidence, a sense of belonging and empowerment. Yipirinya School serves as a model of how education can be a tool for cultural preservation and empowerment, offering a meaningful learning experience that bridges Indigenous and mainstream educational worlds.

The Learning on Country Program

The Learning on Country (LoC) Program in Maningrida, Northern Territory, is an initiative designed to integrate cultural knowledge with mainstream education, promoting 'both-ways' learning.¹⁸⁷

The LoC utilises the connection and strengths of Country for place-based learning, immersing students in both their culture and real-world conservation practices. Operating in partnership with the Bawinanga Rangers and Maningrida Community Education Centre, the program provides students with opportunities to engage in environmental conservation, land and sea management, and cultural preservation. In doing so, students gain vocational qualifications, such as a Certificate II in Conservation, Land and Sea Management. The program primarily supports Aboriginal students from Maningrida and surrounding communities, working closely with Traditional Owners, local rangers and school staff to ensure the program is both culturally relevant and academically enriching. It blends Western scientific knowledge with Indigenous practices, offering students hands-on learning through activities like biodiversity mapping, maritime training and cultural camps. This approach allows students to gain practical vocational education in conservation and land management while preserving traditional practices and knowledge.

The program was established to address educational and employment challenges in the region, aiming to enhance school attendance, promote cultural pride and prepare students for careers as rangers or in related fields. By focusing on both traditional knowledge and modern vocational skills, the program allows students to 'walk strong in two worlds', blending Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to create a robust pathway to future opportunities. Through collaborative partnerships between schools, ranger groups, and community Elders, the LoC program offers a structured curriculum aligned with cultural values. Students also benefit from mentorship by Traditional Owners and past graduates. This model of education not only equips students with the technical skills needed for career success but also fosters a deeper connection to their cultural identity and traditions. The LoC program exemplifies culturally responsive schooling by embedding Indigenous knowledge systems into education. It values local culture, language and practices while providing students with skills that open up broader career opportunities. The two-way learning model respects and elevates Indigenous perspectives, fostering a sense of identity and belonging, while also addressing systemic educational inequities in the region.

CONCLUSION:

Discussion and recommendations



Discussion and recommendations

The current literature and data on culturally responsive education programs for Indigenous students' transition to secondary school has its limitations. While there is considerable research into topic areas that are adjacent to the questions asked in this report, certain aspects of this research and the literature informing it should be highlighted to support thinking through the findings.

Several of the papers reviewed for this report lack the voices of parents and community members, with only a handful including them as research participants. A better understanding of Indigenous students' needs as they progress through the schooling system would be enhanced through the inclusion of parents and community members. Crucially, the investment and requirements for supporting the implementation of programs and practices were rarely highlighted in the research, and are not critiqued here. A few examples of this are the need to develop and maintain trusting relationships, to create and staff culturally specific spaces and activities, and to provide language representation in school. These practices assume funding will be available on an ongoing basis, staff will be able to meet with families outside of office hours, and unpaid family members will contribute to program delivery. It was also unclear from any of the reviewed documents what specific considerations Indigenous staff should be aware of, including how to manage expectations and boundaries within both the school and community whilst walking in two worlds.

Similarly, whilst the literature discusses Elders' contribution to Indigenous students, it also examines the many roles they play within and outside of the educational environment.^{188, 189} Elders play a critical role in school transition and engagement, such as connecting students to Elders for schooling and providing a continuous link to Indigenous way of knowing, being, and doing. These examples illustrate the importance of authentic and sustainable approaches, which require a genuine investment in schools and staff. Consideration of the resources required to maintain this would provide valuable insight into the ongoing mechanisms that would support greater implementation of the characteristics of Indigenous student success discussed in this report.

There was little discussion on how schools can respectfully use Indigenous knowledge and culture in the classroom to support Indigenous student's wellbeing and belonging, particularly in relation to the 'border crossing' between home and school.¹⁹⁰ As Indigenous students transition from primary to high school, colonial pedagogy may have an impact on their sense of connection and educational engagement. By integrating Indigenous epistemologies and practices into education, Indigenous students may have an improved educational experience, which increases their interest and willingness to engage in school. Further specific guidance on how schools can meaningfully and appropriately integrate Indigenous knowledges into curricula is recommended to support students through transition.

This report highlights critical questions surrounding Indigenous governance in educational contexts, prompting deeper inquiry into what effective governance structures might entail. This presents a valuable area for further empirical exploration, particularly in understanding how Indigenous-led decision-making can shape policies and practices to better support students' educational and wellbeing experiences. Investigating models of Indigenous governance offers the opportunity to amplify Indigenous voices, foster self-determination, and establish frameworks that honour cultural knowledge, authority, and community involvement in schooling. Future research could delve into how these governance models contribute to creating culturally safe environments and enhancing student outcomes, ultimately driving transformative change in education systems.

In summary

While many studies have advocated for partnerships between schools, communities and community organisations to support Indigenous students, there is no evaluation or discussion of the actual programs designed to enhance Indigenous students' transition to high school in the literature. This report aimed to identify what is known in the literature about supporting Indigenous students' sense of wellbeing, belonging, engagement, participation and transition through school, as well as identify programs that are structured and operating in accordance with these evidence-based practices.

Most of the studies discussed provided local context for culturally appropriate programs, strategies, practices and interventions, signalling the potential difficulty in transferring programs across communities or school environments. However, the recurring common traits of effective support programs, or 'characteristics' in this report, act as guideposts when considering developing a program for a new environment.

To summarise, there several key areas and practices that should be considered when developing culturally responsive practices and programs:

- Supporting students in their educational and cultural experiences requires relationships
- Strengths-based education
- The establishment and maintenance of long-term mentoring relationships
- Learning experiences that support the development of students' identities through a connection to culture and Country
- Collaborative partnerships outside the school to enhance cultural connection and ensure alignment of learning.

The recurring theme throughout the literature and identified exemplar programs was that all effective engagement strategies revolve around relationships centred on cultural connections. Teachers' authentic relationships with Indigenous students were crucial to a positive school experience.

Rather than just acknowledging the importance of the student's Indigenous identity, this view of relationship goes beyond personal acknowledgement. Indigenous students and teachers have a familial relationship in the classroom, which is characterised by cultural interaction.

Additionally, the Whole Learner Report,¹⁹¹ emphasises that recognising and nurturing students' self-worth is essential for their overall development, as it fosters confidence, motivation and a sense of belonging, this is particularly true for Indigenous students whose diverse strengths may not be fully acknowledged within traditional assessment frameworks. Supporting Indigenous students through transition points of school and staying engaged in education is contextually dependent.¹⁹² Without authentic relationships that are attentive to students' contexts, providing appropriate and necessary support is unlikely.

As articulated throughout this research, cultural interactions play an important role in the relationships students form at school and their communities, and teachers should integrate these understandings into their daily classroom practices. Authenticity and cultural understanding are both reflected in this relationship. By taking these actions, the Indigenous students are informed that their culture is welcome within the classroom and that it has a place there.

Final thoughts

To achieve success, transition programs specifically tailored to Indigenous students should be developed in collaboration with community partners or Indigenous community-controlled organisations.

Investing in and maintaining relationships with Indigenous students, their families, the community, and local Elders is imperative; culturally aligned mentoring programs and practices should be implemented; curriculum, pedagogy, and activities should incorporate students' cultural practices, ways of learning and knowledges; and school staff and environments should be culturally representative.

SCHOOLS

Must provide a learning environment that provides Indigenous students with a sense of belonging, safety, and success. For Indigenous students, Country must be a key relationship in all school programs and practices.

STUDENTS

Should be at the centre of school practices, emphasising continuous ongoing relationships based on trust, respect, care, and value.

For education to accept Indigenous staff as part of its cultural responsibilities and to provide Indigenous students with cultural learning, it must recognise the practices and strategies that address these needs.

There is recognition in the education system that Indigenous students may benefit from their own space to assist with transition, retention and engagement.

It also requires structural changes, such as increasing Indigenous leadership in education, embedding community-driven knowledge-sharing, and reforming assessment methods to value diverse epistemologies.

By implementing these changes, the education system can move beyond tokenistic inclusion and towards genuine recognition and validation of Indigenous knowledge systems.



Endnotes

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