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AUSTRALIA

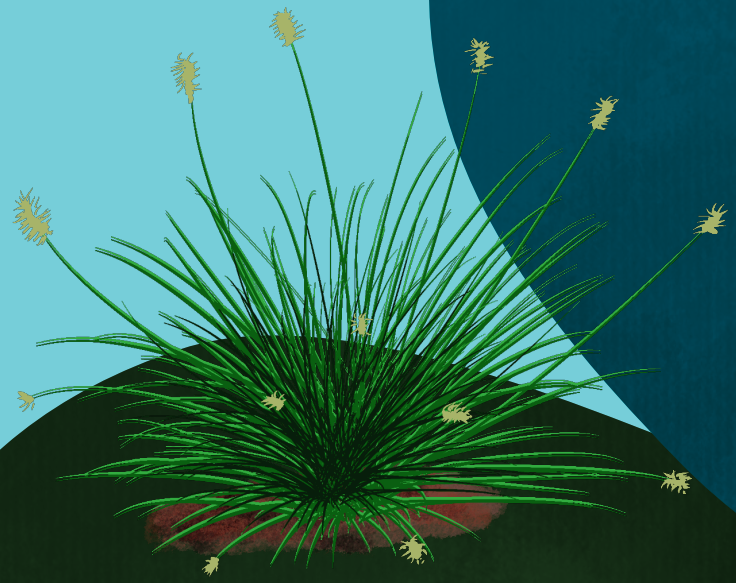
NIYEC
NATIONAL INDIGENOUS YOUTH EDUCATION COALITION

Claiming Space and Shifting Narratives

Weaving co-agency, belonging and relationships through First Nations self-determined education

Cycle 4: The Power of Recognising More

October 2025



Contents

This report was commissioned by Learning Creates Australia and undertaken in partnership with the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (NIYEC) following a literature review conducted as part of Cycle 4 of the Power of Recognising More Action-Research Study, a First Nations-led cycle of work. It was authored by Alinta Williams, with commentary and reflections contributed by young First Nations researchers, Alyssa Richardson and Anjali Ali.

Acknowledgement of Country

We honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, paying our deepest respects to Elders, past and present. We give thanks to Country - to the land that holds us, the waterways that sustain us, the skies and creators that watch over us and the native plants and animals that share this place with us. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been learning, teaching and sharing knowledge on Country for over a thousand generations. We thank them for their ongoing custodianship of Country, and for continuing to protect culture, language and ways of being. We eternally remain accountable to Country and them - Sovereignty was never ceded.

Terminology and Positioning

The terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, First Peoples, Mob, Blak and Indigenous are used interchangeably in this report to acknowledge some representations of the diversity in Indigenous communities. This aims to reject singular colonial identifiers often used to describe the many Indigenous language groups in this country.

Living in so-called Australia, we regularly hear about what isn't working for First Peoples in education. Deficit surveillance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people continues to be the dominant narrative. This report highlights and celebrates schools and programs built on respecting Indigenous knowledges, often marginalised by western systems. It aims to reclaim that narrative to celebrate the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples.

Foreword: The Power of Recognising More

We write this foreword as two young First Nations researchers, recent school leavers, and Research Associates with Learning Creates Australia. Being part of this study has allowed us to contribute not only as young Blak learners, but as Blak researchers – a role that feels deeply meaningful because it honours our generational knowledge, voices and experiences in shaping the future of our education.

The Power of Recognising More study has been led by Learning Creates Australia, with the First Nations Action-Research Cycle being delivered in partnership with the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (NIYEC). Through this work, space has been reclaimed for First Nations perspectives to be centred, recognising that genuine change must be guided by our voices, knowledge systems, and lived realities.

As part of this project, we contributed to the literature review with Dr Josh Cubillo. This gave us the opportunity to reflect on what research shows about the experiences of our young Mob, particularly around transitions in education and the initiatives being developed and implemented across the continent to support our learners.

We see the strengths in our culture and knowledge, the way it is strongly rooted in place yet transforms as it shifts across our Lands. Our knowledges and ways of being are highly unique yet deeply interconnected across the continent. What is best for our young people in education is rooted in place and culture, shaped by our communities for our communities. It's not about appealing to western centric ideals of success but following our ways for our mob. We saw clearly both the strengths within our communities and the challenges we continue to face across many contexts. For us, the themes of co-agency, belonging, relationships, and self-determination are not abstract ideas – they are what make the difference in whether young Mob feel seen, supported, and able to succeed. Having just left school ourselves, these lessons are not distant theories but lived truths.

This report carries forward the practical insights from that review. It is not only about theory, but about offering tools and approaches that systems, educators and communities can use to make real change. That is what makes this work meaningful: it translates learning into action. Something that has been deeply important to us through this work. We want to acknowledge those who have guided and supported us in this journey. To the First Nations Steering Group – thank you for your cultural leadership and wisdom. To Alinta Williams for authoring this action report, and to Dr Josh Cubillo for your mentorship, we are grateful. We especially acknowledge our Learning Creates Co-Chair, and CEO of NIYEC Hayley McQuire, whose leadership brings vision, strength, and unwavering commitment to ensuring young First Nations voices shape the future of education.

As proud Tagalaka and Alyawarr women, this work is deeply personal to us. We carry with us the stories and aspirations of our communities, and we hope this report honours those by supporting better futures for all young people. Our message to readers is simple: listen deeply to our young Mob. Recognise our strengths, identities, and communities as essential to our learning journeys. Change is possible when education honours culture, belonging and self-determination. We invite policymakers, educators, and communities to take forward the findings of this report and embed them in practice – so that all young people, especially our young mob, can thrive.

Alyssa Richardson and Anjali Ali,
Research Associates, Learning Creates Australia

‘If there are any First Nations kids reading this, I want you to know that the education system ain’t built for us. But don’t let the system make you believe that you are not gifted or talented enough. Don’t let anybody or any system destroy your dreams. Walk with purpose and speak your truth.’

– Taylah Gray, Wiradjuri woman and lawyer[1]

Preamble: The Power of the First Nations Learner

As you read this action report, we ask you to think about Taylah Gray's words. Taylah, a proud Wiradjuri woman and lawyer speaks directly to First Nations young people and calls for them to walk with purpose and speak truth as they navigate the education system.

We cannot allow the perpetuation of experiences of exclusion and inequity in education. Instead, we need to ask how we can promote a shift toward the type of educational ecosystem where First Nations students can be their whole selves, where their learning environments prioritise wellbeing, belonging, connections and relationships. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples we have the strength, vision and knowledges to create these spaces, with self-determining practices and sovereignty at their foundations. As you will see in this report, these self-determined learning environments are gaining momentum across so-called Australia, despite the weight of the colonial project.

In reflecting on the literature review as a Ngunnawal, Ngambri and Wiradjuri woman and educator, there was a lot to celebrate. I acknowledge the work of Dr Josh Cubillo, Alyssa Richardson and Anjali Ali, whose research insights will provide pathways for the future of educating for change. However, drawing on my years in education, as a primary school teacher and now as a First Nations organiser at the Australian Education Union AEU) Victorian Branch,

I know that the examples and case studies in the research are the exception and not the rule. I'm reminded of my time as a Prep teacher, of a young person in my classroom who had such deep knowledge of his Country and who was so proud to be a young Aboriginal boy. Yet the education structures he was learning within fixated on standardised assessment outcomes, and his knowledges were not valued or reflected within their rigid parameters. As an Aboriginal teacher, I felt a deep responsibility to ensure that he could be strong in his identity, that he didn't have to give up a part of himself to be a "good" learner. It is a common story we hear from First Nations young people, that to be successful in school, they need to assimilate and therefore feel a deep loss and disconnection from their sense of self.[2] This report explores the impact of the entrenched ways in which education systems measure success and how integrating Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing[3] in schools and programs such as those mentioned in the research can provide possibilities for change.

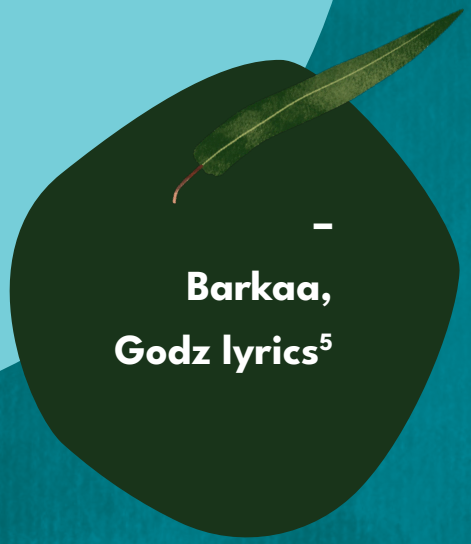
In my current role I work with many First Nations educators, whose stories I was privileged to gather and share with the Yoorrook Justice Commission,[4] the first formal truth-telling inquiry into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria. Now that Yoorrook has released their reports and recommendations, we have easily accessible stories of First Nations young people and Blak educators navigating western schooling systems.

We also have solutions. Now, as ever, there is no excuse to ignore the need for change. And while structural change is called for within education departments and government systems, , there are possibilities for grassroots change on the ground that can make a real difference. This difference is not an easy road, nor is it something new we're fighting for. I would like to acknowledge all of the people that have come before us, and those that are still fighting for educational justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country. It would be impossible to do this work without those who stood up and showed up again and again despite uncompromising barriers.

I hope you, too, are able to take away something tangible and action-based from reading this report. At its heart, this work is about the power of the First Nations learner, and the families and communities that surround them, to reclaim space and shift the narrative in education. If you are young Mob reading this, I hope you can take strength in knowing how strong and deadly you are, and, just like Barkaa says, always know that you've got nothing to fear because your Ancestors are always near.

Alinta Williams

“Let me tell you something that I think that you should know ‘bout
If you stuck in the traps, I promise you there’s a way out
Everything happens for a reason, watch it play out
And if you doubted my come up,
I’ma chin up and say hey now
Baby it’s all breezy over here
I got Ancestors here with me so I ain’t really got fear
Everybody in ear telling me that I’m the one
But without all of the mob then I ain’t really got non
I’m only here cause my people where the ones to lift me up
So I’ma rep it for my mob, young tidda really gon stunt
If you think that you ain’t nothin’ go look in the mirror Bub
And say to yourself you ain’t stoppin’ here
till it’s all said and done”



–
Barkaa,
Godz lyrics[5]

Introduction: Transformation and reclamation

We know that education can be transformative. Justice and equity in education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people will only happen through transformative practice, through connecting and enacting these necessary threads of co-agency, belonging and relationships and the key concepts of self-determination, education sovereignty and solidarity.

The interwoven threads of co-agency, belonging and relationships and the examples given within each tell the stories of Indigenous led programs where we see ways to reimagine schooling for Indigenous young people. The impact of community driven initiatives that centre self-determination, sovereignty, resistance, strength, and resilience is clear. As Hayley McQuire states,

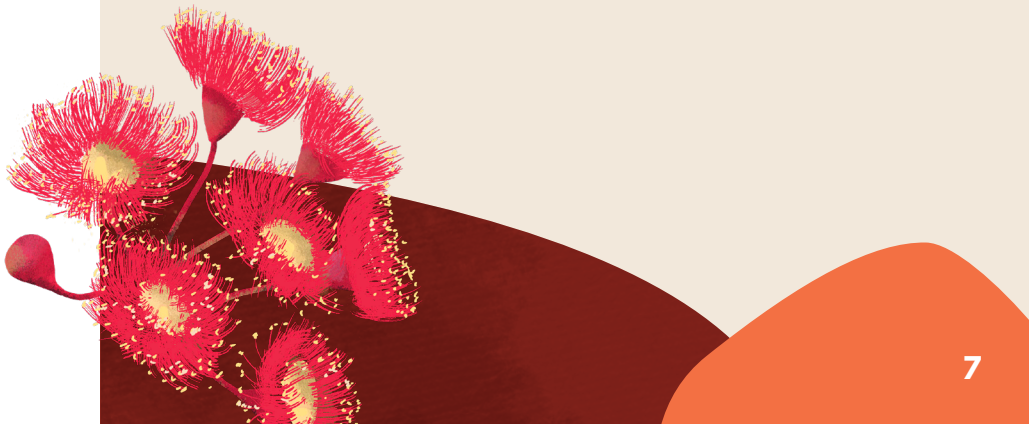
What our young mob are calling for isn't necessarily "new", it's reclaiming a system of learning ingrained in our Culture that has and continues to exist. A system which fosters the connection and understanding of the interdependencies that exist in the world. One which is founded on an Indigenous learning and knowledge systems where the purpose is to connect so we can take care of Country and community, a striking contrast to the current education system driven by the economic purpose of competition for jobs in a capitalist society.[6]

The Threads

While the preceding literature review covers a wider scope, this report focuses on the following three threads; co-agency, belonging and relationships, chosen for their practical relevance, accessibility, and potential to drive change.

They were chosen as a focus because they were consistently identified as ways to make transformational change in the research.

The threads do not exist in isolation, they are interconnected and rely on each other to operate.



‘Scar Trees’

This graphic shows the intersections of the threads and key concepts that support reclamation and create transformation in education. The illustration is based on scar trees, a practice that is deeply rooted in our relationships and kinships to Place and People.

Scar trees ‘hold our ancestor stories, they are a direct link to our old people’.[7]

Inspired by Alinta’s Aunty and Cousin - Dr Matilda House and Paul Girrawah House, Ngambri (Walgalu) – Wallaballooa (Ngunnawal) – Pajong (Gundungurra) – Wiradjuri (Erambie) peoples, with scar tree, Kamberri/ Canberra, 2021

Read more here[8]: https://nga.gov.au/stories-ideas/madhan-warrugarra-wirimbirra-gulbalanh/

1 Co-agency

Co-agency in learning refers to the shared or collaborative process of students and educators working together to make decisions, take actions, and influence outcomes in the educational experience.[9]

It's about creating an environment where both students and teachers actively contribute to shaping learning, fostering a sense of responsibility, and empowering students to have a voice and choice in their education. It also encompasses an expansive idea of governance: extending beyond students and young people to include collaboration with families, the wider community and any relevant organisations such as local Traditional Owner-led organisations.

It is essential that the agency of Indigenous young people is recognised and incorporated into learning systems in so-called Australia. This does not mean that First Nations students are now the experts or authorities for all things Indigenous in their classrooms. It means that their whole selves are valued, that their thoughts and ideas are incorporated into the classroom and school culture.

2 Belonging

Belonging in learning is about the way young First Nations people connect with their learning environments.

If students have a sense of belonging, and if they see themselves or their interests reflected in their school then they are more likely to engage.[10] It's important to note and interrogate educators' expectations about what engagement can look like in classrooms. It may be different to the western expectations that are held by some educators. Many First Nations young people report 'having to adapt, assimilate or give up parts of themselves in order to "succeed"'.[11] We must question and examine the way we measure this success in order to create culturally responsive learning environments.

Belonging and wellbeing are intrinsically linked, and for young Indigenous learners connection to culture plays a critical role in fostering their wellbeing. The Mayi Kuwayu study illustrates the 'Cultural Determinants of Wellbeing'[12] that support First Nations learners in the illustration below.

Looking at these determinants, is it easy to see why some First Nations young people do not feel as though they belong in education spaces. These determinants are generally not prioritised in school settings. It is important to critically analyse how we can integrate these in our education spaces.

3 Relationships

Relationships are central to First Nations peoples ways of being. This includes relationships with ourselves and each other, the land we live on and /or Country we connect to, as well as our spiritual or cultural relationships.

Yet, as a consequence of a crowded curriculum, huge administration responsibilities, exclusionary measures and other structural barriers, building strong and trusting student/teacher relationships are often not prioritised.

Co-agency and belonging both rely on healthy relationships. Trusting relationships need to be established before young people and communities can co-design within existing education structures. Young people who had a strong sense of belonging in school often reflect on their relationships with a teacher or educator who they connected with: a teacher who truly believed in them made all the difference. As Bidjara and Birri Gubba Juru professor Aunty Jacqui Huggins reflects when calling for teachers to consider the power they hold in affirming a sense of belonging in their classrooms, 'You know, you have that power to really make or break a child's life in terms of their own identity.'[13]

Key Concepts

Self-Determination

As First Nations people, we have a collective right to self-determination under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As Article 14.1 states, 'Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.'[14] This speaks to a principle of self-determination, that Indigenous people have a fundamental right to control their own lives. Self-determination means that First Nations students should have the agency to shape their own education. Self-determining practices empower young Indigenous people and their families to have a voice in decisions that affect their learning and educational pathways.

Self-determined approaches require a shift in power dynamics. It relies on educators, schools, and Departments of Education to cede power, and to value and respect the knowledges and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, their families and their communities.

Education Sovereignty

Sovereignty has never been ceded in so-called Australia and it has not been lost through the process of colonisation.

Waka Waka scholar Tracey Bunda asserts that 'sovereignty is embodied.' In other words, our sovereignty is carried in our bodies and is enacted in our everyday lives, including our everyday struggles to retain autonomy'.[15]

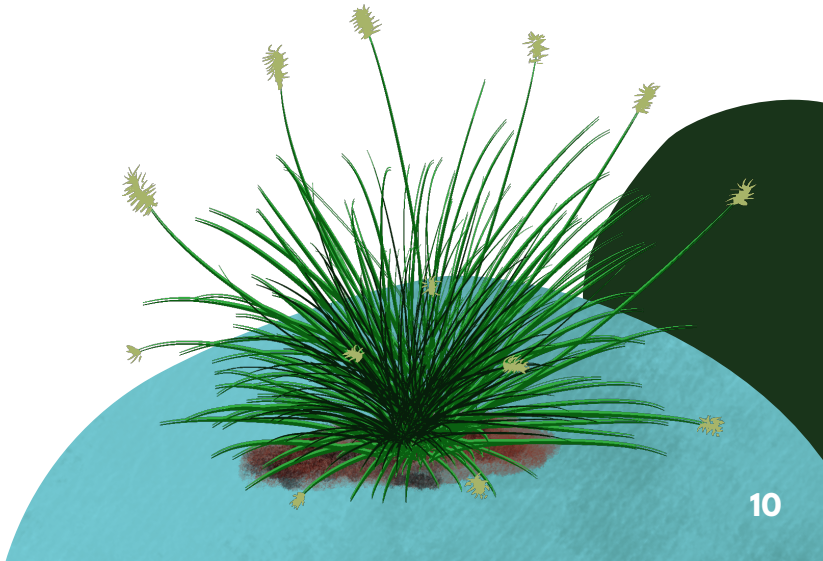
Education and schooling has been used as a tool of oppression since invasion, with colonisation determining whose knowledge was privileged and whose was silenced. Education sovereignty describes our right to challenge the colonial conceptions of education, as Narungga, Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri scholar Lester-Irabinna Rigney (2015) states, 'curriculum didn't arrive on a boat, pedagogy didn't arrive on a boat, it was always here.'[16]

Education Sovereignty underpins the examples within this report, as the schools and programs highlighted seek to shift dominant narratives by providing an education grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being.

Solidarity in Learning

Solidarity in learning speaks to the need for those across the education system to take a role in establishing culturally safe and nourishing learning spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

It goes beyond the mandated standards and cross curriculum priorities, and asks for meaningful interactions with First Nations peoples, cultures, histories and communities across the education system. For non-Indigenous people working within education, it requires a willingness to position themselves in their privilege, to critically examine it, and then take purposeful action to ensure they are not perpetuating the harms of systemic racism.



Methodology

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

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).

The research team was led by an Indigenous researcher, Dr Josh Cubillo, a Larrakia and Wadjigan man from the Northern Territory and Associate Director at the Murrup Barak Institute (University of Melbourne), and was supported by youth co-researchers, Alyssa Richardson and Anjali Ali, to ensure young people's lived experiences and perspectives were embedded.

Firstly - The research team conducted a desktop review to investigate the characteristics of initiatives around the country that recognise Indigenous young people's learning in ways that value belonging, agency, culture, and wellbeing.

It explored questions like:

- What diverse approaches are being used to recognise and validate learning?
- How do these initiatives affect belonging and wellbeing?
- To what extent do they influence engagement and ownership of learning?
- Are there links between recognition and post-school pathways?

Secondly - A literature review identified strengths-based approaches that promote Indigenous student success. Themes were developed inductively and illustrated through a range of Indigenous initiatives across Australia. These examples highlight the breadth and diversity of Indigenous-led initiatives - from bilingual schools and sport-based programs, to on-Country learning, cultural immersion camps, and leadership development.

Thirdly - From this analysis, three interconnected threads emerged as essential for positive change: co-agency, belonging, and relationships. These were understood within the broader principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and solidarity, highlighting how such approaches resist colonial structures and support transformative practice.

Finally - the study produced an action report, authored by Alinta Williams, which distilled these insights into practical examples for schools and programs and the wider learning system. This report highlights Indigenous-led approaches and points towards future possibilities for transformation grounded in sovereignty and educational justice.

Thread 1: **Co-Agency**

THREAD 1 SUMMARY:

Co-agency brings students, families, and communities together to design learning that reflects culture, strengthens identity, and sparks **collective action.**

It is expressed through **governance** that values Indigenous voices, **student leadership** that builds confidence, and community programs co-designed with Elders.

At its heart, co-agency underpins **culturally responsive practice** embedding Indigenous knowledges, histories, and perspectives to create inclusive, identity-affirming learning.

Yet co-agency also reveals the limits of schooling, **challenging the system** that silences Indigenous voices and calling for equity and justice.

Co-Agency

Co-agency continues to evolve in education settings and although it is not a new concept, a range of influences can mean that student, family and community voices are lost in the classroom.

Collective Action

Learning programs and schools where co-agency is a fundamental principle can create a community of learning and practice that is inherently collective in its approach. Collective action can lead to positive change in systems. **The Jabalbina On Country program** is co-designed with Elders through education partnerships. This program runs Healing Camps for young people to connect to Country and strengthen their sense of self and wellbeing. The co-design method ensures that important protocols are respected and cultural priorities are reflected. This approach allows the young person to feel valued, supported and see themselves and their community represented in the program.[17]

Another example is **Children's Ground 25-Year Approach** to Creative and Cultural Development and Wellbeing offers a powerful example of co-agency in action. In communities where culture is embedded in all aspects of life, Children's Ground ensures that learning happens on Country and in First Language. Families, Elders, and educators work together to reignite traditional dance, ceremony, and song, creating books and digital resources that reflect local knowledge and ways of being. This approach centres collective learning, where culture, wellbeing, and education are inseparable and guided by community leadership.

"There is so much deep cultural knowledge that needs to be shared with the next generation. We need to bring back those old ways of doing things. To see it happening in our community with the support from Children's Ground just makes us so proud."
— Purina Anderson, Arrernte Health Specialist[18]

Governance

Schools and programs governance is another consideration in the co-agency thread. **The National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (NIYEC)**[19] advocates for governance systems that recognise the rights, voices, and cultural values of Indigenous students and communities. They promote the idea that Indigenous youth should be actively involved in decision-making processes related to their education - they should be co-agents - ensuring that governance reflects their needs, perspectives, and aspirations.

Student Leadership

When Indigenous young people are involved in decision-making they can meaningfully connect to their education. While the dominant systems of education ask for conformity, it is important to think about the ways in which students can have agency over their learning. While this can be a challenging prospect in a busy curriculum, students who feel listened to, who feel as though they can speak up and that their ideas are taken seriously, will thrive. **The National Indigenous Science Education Program's (NISEP),** for example empowers Indigenous students to take on leadership roles in STEM activities, to foster confidence and a sense of ownership over their educational journeys.

"When you're a participant you look up to the older kids and especially if they're Indigenous it pushes you to go bigger and brighter and basically reach for the sky. Yeah, and it's very valuable to see our people get up there and not be shame and present themselves in a way that is good" – NISEP Student Leader, Casino High

"This event was very valuable to me in terms of boosting my self-confidence and being a leader, learning to take control and be responsible with other students, showing them how to do certain things. It was a good experience" – NISEP Student Leader, Maclean High[20]

Similarly, **The Aboriginal designed and led Bundjalung Youth Leadership Camp/Ngalawaa Bulaan Gii** offers Indigenous high-school students the opportunity to immerse themselves in their culture and enhance leadership skills. Importantly, the program works with local Elders, community members and young people to co-design the camp. This establishes a program strong in culture, and supports the young people to take a collaborative approach in their leadership journey.[21]

When young Indigenous people are empowered to see themselves as leaders, they build their confidence as sovereign people and in their obligation to care for Country, Family and Community.

Culturally Responsive Practice

Culturally responsive practices underpin co-agency, which the literature review identifies as essential to fostering safe and inclusive learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. As the literature review informs us, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)[22] is crucial to all of the approaches mentioned in this report. CRP recognises the importance of Indigenous knowledge, histories, and ways of learning, and goes beyond tokenism by embedding Indigenous perspectives into curriculum, teaching, and school policies. It values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' lived experiences, affirms their cultural identities, and supports their success through relational learning, community involvement, and strength-based practices. By creating culturally safe and inclusive classrooms, CRP challenges systemic bias and works to address long-standing educational inequities. Cultural safety is intrinsically linked to culturally responsive practice, and is often achieved through a commitment to co-agency.[23]

Challenging the System

When thinking about Indigenous young people feeling safe at school, it is important that we critically reflect on how schools operate. Schools were modelled on standardised, factory type arrangements: bells, lunch breaks, toilet breaks, uniformity (think uniforms!) and productivity.

These arrangements persist despite knowing that it is not an ideal learning environment for students. Timetables and schedules are often used as tools of power and their use perpetuates inequity. These unquestioned norms, along with punitive policies and standardised testing maintain harmful power structures. Ask yourself: who do they benefit?

The programs articulated in this section provide relief from the relentless focus[24] on standardised testing and academic results which promotes deficit thinking and positions Indigenous students as a problem that needs to be solved. Too often, schools and education departments ignore Indigenous sovereignty, culture, and knowledge, expecting Indigenous students to fit into a Western model that was never built for them. This kind of system doesn't just exclude, it actively silences and erases. Real change means transformation of the system: centring Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum, addressing the high levels of exclusion, providing training and education to teachers and school leaders, and dismantling the colonial foundations that still shape schools today.

By prioritising co-agency in education, we create a collective space where everyone's voice is heard, leading to collective action and meaningful change.

Thread 2: **Belonging**

THREAD 2 SUMMARY:

Belonging goes beyond murals and Acknowledgements of Country - it requires valuing young people as **whole people,** affirming their cultures and knowledges.

It is fostered through **Indigenous languages, culturally safe spaces,** and programs that integrate culture and identity with academic learning.

Wellbeing and culture is strengthened through belonging that nurtures identity, pride, agency, and engagement in school life.

Challenging the system means confronting exclusionary practices – such as uniform policies and disciplinary measures – that undermine belonging and silence Indigenous students.

Belonging

Belonging is deeply tied to culture, language, and identity – aspects that have been sustained across generations. When schools embrace these, they do more than educate: they nurture whole people and future leaders.

Whole People

'If more students had that positive experience of schooling, perhaps also then they might decide to be teachers themselves to teach the next generation the way that they wanted to be taught. For that to happen, though, they need teachers to engage them in the first place and to be able to work in a way that helps the students feel like they belong within that school.' - Dr Tracey Woodroffe[25]

Warumungu Luritja woman Dr Tracey Woodroffe reflects on the need to create spaces of belonging that go beyond displaying murals and doing Acknowledgements of Country. While representation and visibility matter, these types of visual and symbolic representations should be accepted as the norm in every school, as should embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the curriculum.

Real belonging comes from believing and valuing a young person as a whole person so that they don't have to compromise who they are.[26] For Indigenous young people that means valuing the knowledges and cultures they bring to the classroom.

Indigenous Languages

Indigenous Language is a vital Cultural Determinant for wellbeing and belonging. **Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School (GGFS)** is dedicated to providing a culturally responsive education for Indigenous students through implementing a bilingual curriculum which includes Gumbaynggirr language. GGFS integrates western teaching methods with Gumbaynggirr language and cultural education, providing a holistic learning experience that emphasises both academic excellence and cultural identities. Through doing this, the school aims to enhance the young people's sense of agency and belonging.[27]

'Their safety around culture and language and community is really embedded in everything they do. And that comes home everyday. That transfer of knowledge through the generations, you know, so these little ones that we have now, they're going to be the staunchest little Blak kids going.' - GGFS Parent[28]

The **Torres Strait Island Language Plan** is designed to revitalise and maintain traditional language in the Torres Strait. This coordinated approach aims to promote language use, develop language resources and provide training to students, families, and the broader community. Their work is based on several key principles, one of which directly links traditional language to community healing and strengthening wellbeing. Over time, the effectiveness of the plan will be measured by the growing number of people who speak traditional languages as a part of daily life.

'The richness of our cultural practices, knowledge systems and cultural expressions is a great source of great strength, resilience and pride for Torres Strait and Aboriginal people. For this reason, language and culture are deeply interconnected and core parts of one's identity'. [29]

Culturally Safe Spaces

Many schools have created dedicated spaces where students can feel culturally safe, supported, and connected. These rooms, often led by Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs), provide a break from the pressures of the mainstream school environment and help foster belonging and pride in cultural identity. These spaces can be powerful hubs for support and cultural expression, but it is also important to recognise that they have also been used to separate or isolate students rather than include them.
The key difference lies in how they're designed and used and whether they're genuinely creating a collective space for co-agency and belonging, or reinforcing exclusion.

At **The Mindyigari Centre at Erindale College** in Canberra, belonging is nurtured through a focus on culturally responsive education. The Centre was established with the goal of improving educational, training, and career outcomes for Indigenous students by creating a designated space that fosters a sense of belonging, engagement, and academic success. This Centre provides practical support such as individual tutoring and mentorship for young First Nations students, in a culturally nourishing space.[30]

Wellbeing and Culture

Indigenous young people's belonging encompasses not only social and emotional wellbeing, but also cultural wellbeing. In all of the stories showcased in the literature review, you will find a shared link of nurturing, supporting and celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's connection to culture. As the Cultural Determinants illustrate, developing a sense of cultural belonging strengthens identity, builds self-worth, and encourages active participation in school life.

The Djiriba Waagura team, based in NSW, fosters a strong sense of belonging through their Family Wellbeing, Youth Mentoring and School Incursions Programs. They aim to provide culturally safe spaces for participants and can provide ongoing mentoring and support for students through a cultural lens.[31]

Matty Sims, the programs lead believes that: 'having a strong connection to cultural identity lays solid foundations for our people, empowering and improving our health and wellbeing. Our mission is to build strong communities by nurturing connections to Country and building long term healthy and sustainable relationships.'[32]

These ways of approaching belonging and connection should be the benchmark for all schools and classrooms.

Challenging the System

Despite these positive examples, we continue to witness exclusionary practices that have persisted since schools were established in the colony. NIYEC's School Exclusion Project Research Report states in its Key Findings that; 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been systematically excluded from public schools across Australia'.[33]

Exclusion has occurred through government failures and through 'disproportionate use of disciplinary exclusion measures within schools.' Exclusionary measures can be as routine and unquestioned as enforcing a dress code or uniform policy. A student might receive detention for wearing the "wrong" sock, which can escalate to suspension if the student does not attend.

It is important to ask ourselves why we can't simply celebrate our young people turning up to school, ready to learn. If the first thing they hear when they arrive at school is a reprimand about their clothing, it is little wonder they disengage or feel uncomfortable. If students do not feel welcomed, or like they belong, there is a far greater chance of disengagement.

This is not a 'student problem', this is a system problem. Exclusionary, and inclusionary practice is intrinsically linked to the wellbeing of young people in a school environment.

Thread 3: **Relationships**

THREAD 3 SUMMARY:

Meaningful relationships are built in relational learning environments of care and trust, where wellbeing and connection underpin positive educational experiences.

They are developed through **respect** for culture and include one's **relationship to Country**, both of which affirm identity and strengthen ties with families and communities.

Mentorship fosters guidance, confidence, and belonging, supporting young people to navigate their education and transitions with purpose.

Challenging the system means rebuilding education on trust, care, and reciprocity so all students and families feel they belong.

Relationships

The nurturing of trusting, respectful and caring relationships, between students and teachers, between students and their peers, and between teachers and their students' families and communities is vital.

Relational Learning Environments

Relational learning environments create a pedagogy of care. Positive and mutually respectful relationships grounded in care come from a school culture which focuses on wellbeing and connection. Responding to young people with care and consideration sustains meaningful and positive relationships based on mutual respect rather than power.

The Wadjak Northside Aboriginal Education program in Western Australia fosters cultural pride, educational engagement, and pathways to success within the broader schooling system, ensuring students remain connected to who they are while excelling academically. It is focused on providing culturally grounded education and support services to Aboriginal students and families. From their Dardy Yorga's playgroups to their Elders Groups there are opportunities at every age to connect and build strong and trusting relationships.[34]

Respect

Developing meaningful relationships are key to positive school experiences for young people. How can we truly connect with young people and show them that their culture is valued in everyday classroom life?

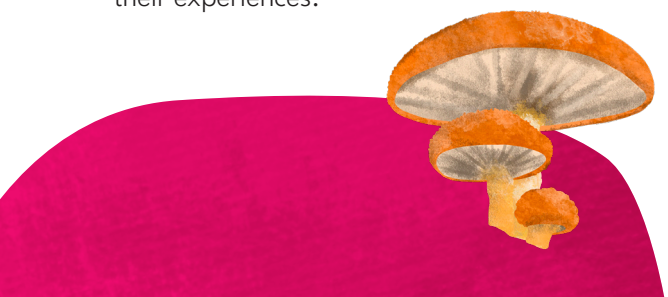
The Whole Learner Report[35] emphasises that recognising and nurturing students' self-worth is essential for their overall development, as it fosters confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging, particularly for Indigenous students whose strengths may not be fully acknowledged within traditional assessment frameworks. Relationships and cultural connections are a big part of how students relate to school and their communities. When teachers show respect and care for their students' culture, it tells Indigenous students that their culture belongs in the classroom and is something to be proud of.

At Warriappendi Secondary School, strong relationships are the foundation of success. The school is committed to improving academic outcomes while fostering cultural identity, pride, and belonging. Small class sizes allow for personalised learning and meaningful teacher-student connections. Warriappendi integrates culture with learning and wellbeing, strengthening ties within the school and with the wider First Nations community. Families and community members are actively involved, which recognises that student success is built on strong, collaborative relationships.[36]

Relationship to Country

Learning spaces that prioritise co-agency, belonging and relationships must recognise and value connection to Country and place. Learning isn't just about what happens in a classroom, it's also about where we are, the land we're on, and how we relate to it. Place should not be just a backdrop - it must be engaged with meaningfully. This recognition supports truth-telling, it is a way to remember and contend with the reality that we are on stolen, unceded land. Prioritising this truth in a school community means going further than including Acknowledgements of Country in an assembly. It asks school communities to embed and nurture a strong relationship to Country in learning systems, which in turn supports all students to respect and care for Country.

Importantly for Indigenous students, fostering a relationship to Country builds belonging and strength in identity. The Country as Teacher research program based at the University of Canberra and led by Jagera man Dr Ben Wilson has three current projects which aim to redefine educational practices through engaging with place-based approaches. **Country as Teacher** has partnered with a number of schools in the ACT. A key part of the program gives educators and young people an opportunity to build a relationship to Country by taking the time to sit, listen and observe in their local environment and then talk together about their experiences. [37, 38]



Mentorship

School transitions can often be challenging for young people. Programs such as **Shooting Stars** support young First Nations women through school transitions through mentorship programs. Each young person has a local mentor from their community to walk alongside them in their education journey. One of the ways Shooting Stars supports building healthy relationships is through its 'Yarning with the Stars' program. These Yarning Circles connect participants, communities and staff and provide a culturally safe space for participants to give feedback. It also helps to inform the program and identify any barriers to participation. The relational way of working is essential to the success of the program.[39]

'Shooting Stars is important to Aboriginal girls because it gives them a safe space where they feel seen, supported and proud of who they are. It builds confidence, keeps them engaged in school and connects them with their culture in a really meaningful way.' Shooting Stars program participant[40]

Challenging the System

Relationships in education have long been shaped by colonial and Western ideals – the ways we've been taught to relate through schools, families, and authority. Too often, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families are asked to leave parts of themselves at the school gate to meet these expectations. Building truly relational learning environments begins with trust, care, and safety.

Trust grows through persistence, respect, and genuine listening – often starting with simple acts: a cuppa morning, an open chat, a teacher who listens. When schools make space for these relationships, families feel welcome and students engage with a stronger sense of belonging.

Racism continues to erode trust, so schools, and the systems that govern them, must take collective responsibility for ensuring culturally safe learning environments. Cultural safety must be embedded not only in classroom practice but also in the structures and policies that shape education. This includes things like accountability measures, cultural responsibility clauses, and sustained commitments to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and staff. It also means recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not a homogenous group, and no one person should be expected to carry the cultural load for a whole school or community.

Reciprocity sits at the heart of this work. It involves valuing the depth of First Peoples' knowledges and understanding what non-Indigenous educators and communities can learn, offer, and unlearn through this exchange. Schools grounded in reciprocity and care move beyond tokenism, creating spaces where everyone learns with and from one another. When relational accountability guides the work, trust and respect replace defensiveness and control – and education begins to transform through relationships that are mutual, grounded, and alive with shared responsibility.

Leading with self-determination

First Nations Self-Determination

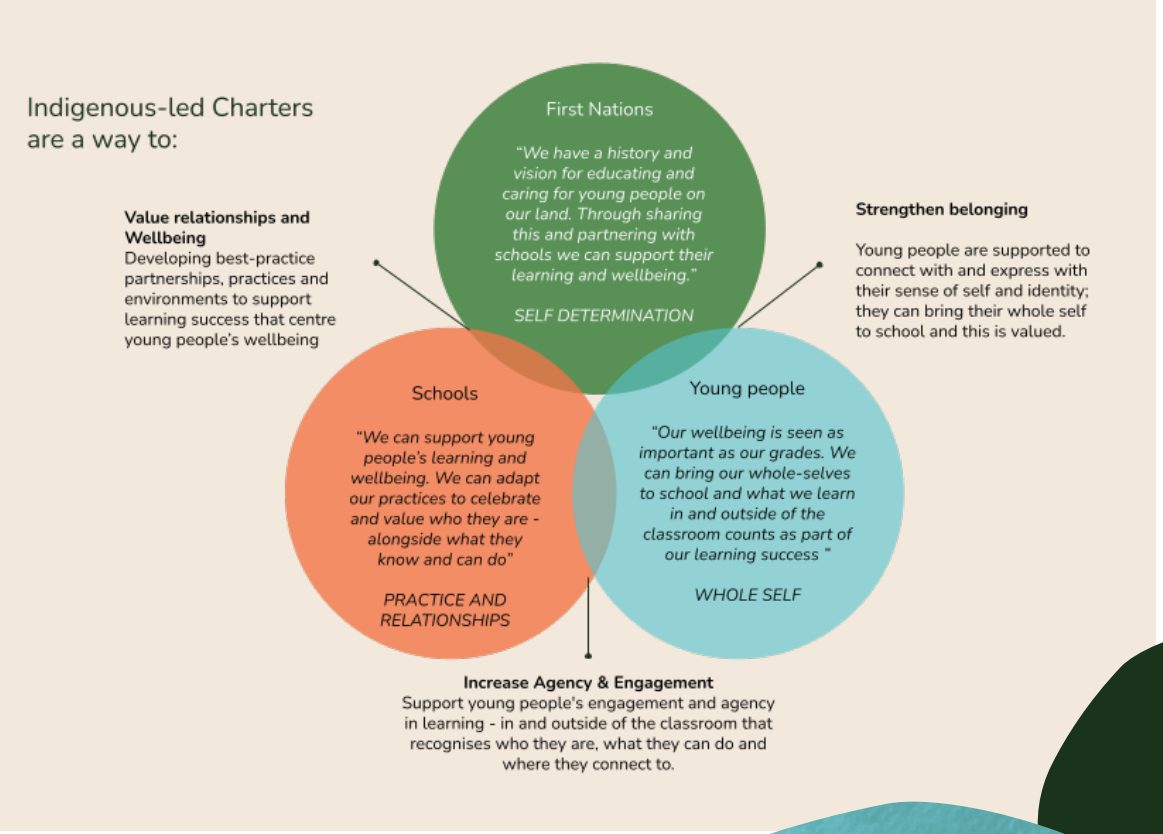
Co-agency, relationships and belonging rely on self-determined approaches. Self-determination doesn't 'just happen' - it takes hard work to get programs such as these running and relies on many diverse and interconnected commitments, knowledges, responsibilities, choices and participations. Most importantly, they are Indigenous-designed and led.

The Tunuba Learning Charter is an Indigenous-led initiative based in Queensland. It is co-designed by Darumbal Elders and community members in partnership with NIYEC and Learning Creates Australia. It centres First Nations knowledge systems and student wellbeing and works closely with a number of Rockhampton-based secondary schools.

Indigenous-led Learning Charters are grounded in frameworks that value Country and Place and are guided by cultural knowledges. The Charters work to redefine education success and create a space for co-agency. They aim to value young people, and work to the Cultural Determinants, previously outlined.

The Charters subvert the status quo, where success is based on attendance and standardised test results to shift measures of success in education.

Below is an illustration of how the Indigenous-led Charters supports and uplifts First Nations learners. There are clear intersections with the threads in this report.[41]



The Impact of Self-Determined Approaches

What we experience at school, as children, shapes our developing understanding of ourselves and the world around us, often for the rest of our lives.

Many of the everyday routines and systems in schools still work against those who don't fit the so-called "norm." These ways of doing things can quietly keep marginalised students, especially Indigenous students, on the outside. So what is school really for? If it's meant to be a space for learning and growth, what happens when students don't fit the system's idea of what a "good learner" looks like? Who gets to decide that, and who gets left behind?

For many Indigenous students and educators, this experience of being excluded or overlooked isn't new. But what if we shifted the focus? What if schools weren't places where students had to adjust to fit in, but places where space was made for different voices, different ways of knowing, and different ways of being? Making that space isn't just about being inclusive, it's about recognising the strength and knowledge Indigenous communities already carry. It's about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having the power to lead, to shape what education looks like, and to decide what matters in the classroom. Self-determination in education is an act of resistance and reclamation.

Conclusion: Solidarity for change

Despite the growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly underrepresented in the education workforce. This imbalance, an ongoing impact of colonisation, has real and lasting effects on First Nations students.

Having been historically excluded from educational opportunities and marginalised by institutional racism when included, First Nations people continue to be negatively impacted in their capacity as teachers, education support staff, and other school based roles. Solidarity with First Nations students, families and education workforce requires a commitment to taking action against exclusive and inequitable practices.

As you have read in this report, many First Nations young people face constant social and cultural barriers in their schooling experiences. They are often expected to stay silent about racism and injustice just to survive the system. Despite a supposed 'focus on equity', social structures and systems of education remain inequitable. This is why it is imperative that we question the dominant narratives, starting with checking our own bias and assumptions.

In their poem 'Call a spade a spade' Mununjali Yugambeh writer Ellen Van Neervan calls for truth telling and action. Ven Neervan cautions against perpetuating silence and asks non-Indigenous people to recognise their responsibility to acknowledge past and ongoing injustices that impact Mob.[42]

Call a spade a spade
a heart a heart
a diamond a diamond
a club a club
call it invasion not settlement
call it genocide not colonisation
call it theft not establishment
don't call January 26 Australia Day
don't shy away from telling the truth
don't say 'no worries' say 'I worry'
for the future of our country,
our environment if we fail to listen and to act
don't say 'we're full'
say 'we're open'
call yourself an ally
call yourself a mat

–
Ellen Van Neervan,
Mununjali Yugambeh
writer

To create meaningful change, schools and system leaders must question what knowledges have been silenced or prioritised, and what power structures enabled that.

The challenge is to think more deeply about one's positioning, and how power structures play out not only in classrooms but across schools, systems and communities. We have to ask ourselves:

What power do I hold here? – as a teacher, a leader, a policymaker, or a partner in education? How do I use that power? How do my beliefs, habits and decisions affect young people, especially those from different backgrounds?

These questions aren't always easy. But they matter. We all carry bias, assumptions or beliefs that shape how we teach, how we design policies, how we fund programs and what we expect from learners. Being open and willing to check those biases – and honestly reflect on them at both the personal and systemic level – makes room for transformative practice that shifts not only classrooms but the broader ecosystem of learning.

Indigenous knowledges should play an integral role in shaping our education systems. If we are to have a genuinely culturally responsive curriculum which values Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, then we must address the ongoing refusal within many parts of the system to meaningfully teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and perspectives. Leaders and teachers alike have the capacity to source, learn and embed knowledge when planning across subject areas. The same expectation applies here: research, learn, and engage with local Indigenous communities and organisations to build understanding.

System actors at all levels – from teachers and school leaders to policymakers, curriculum designers, and funders – must stand in solidarity with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, many of whom still lack access to the culturally responsive programs. In the quote below, Aunty Judi Wickes, a Wakka Wakka-Kalkadoon woman reminds us:

'When I re-imagine what school could look like for our young people in future generations, I see an educator workforce that is as diverse as the students in their classrooms. I see Indigenous young people eagerly attending school because it is a place that makes them feel strong and good about themselves—as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. I see our young people not seeing failure or success as connected to how they are constructed racially. And finally, I see an educator workforce who are willing to engage in authentic relationships with Indigenous young people, families and communities. Not because it is mandated, but because they see it as an important aspect of their work as educators'.[43]

Her vision encompasses the three threads of co-agency, belonging and relationships. It calls on all of us – across classrooms, institutions, and systems – to value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people by building authentic solidarity and ensuring our structures, practices, and policies actively honour Indigenous knowledges.

Final thoughts: Leading change through action

In the foreword, we wrote as two young First Nations women stepping into research with the same courage we asked of our younger selves at school: to be seen, to be heard, and to shape what comes next.

After journeying through this report and the many examples of co-agency, belonging and relationships in practice, our takeaway is simple: The knowledge has always been here. What's needed now is shared responsibility – by students, families, educators, leaders and systems – to listen deeply and act with it in mind.

These final words are our handover. They connect the why to the how, and introduce a practical tool designed to help you move from reflection to commitment. The tool that follows is strengths-based and offers a chance for new conversations to take place, alongside Elders, community, families and young people. It's not a scorecard. It's a way for those working across the education sector to notice what's working, name what's missing, and agree on small, specific next steps. If you use it well, the "threads" in this report won't stay on the page; they'll show up in timetables, budgets, policies, classrooms and relationships all for the benefit of our Mob.

We began this report calling for deep listening and practical courage. We end with the same. If you are a student, family member, educator, leader or policymaker reading this, your next step doesn't need to be perfect – it needs to be with us.

Anjali Ali (left) **and Alyssa Richardson** (right)
Research Associates, Learning Creates Australia

What we've learned from the threads

1. **Co-agency** is visible when co-designed decisions appear in the timetable, budget and practices – not just in meeting notes.
2. **Belonging** is felt when a young person doesn't have to trade parts of themselves to "fit" school, and when measures of success include cultural determinants of wellbeing.
3. **Relationships** work best when care is embedded in daily practice and mentors support students closely through key transitions.

Practical Guide: Weaving co-agency, belonging and relationships through First Nations self-determined education

TIPS TO GET STARTED

- **Co-decide, don't consult.** Bring First Nations students, families, school leadership, staff and local knowledge holders into decision-making – not after the plan is written, but before.
- **Shared goals:** Make your first meeting a discussion about shared purpose - outline some goals, discuss where you think you're at and what you hope this will achieve. Agree on your meeting times and places and if there are any perspectives missing from your working group team.
- **Plan your rhythm:** Decide how often you'll meet (e.g. every term or every 30/60/90 days) and who will keep things moving.
- **Start with strengths.** Name the practices already weaving co-agency, belonging and relationships in your place. Then think about how to build on this by printing and filling in the templates across the next three pages.
- **Move at two speeds.** Make one today/this term change you control (e.g., staffing, timetable shift), and one system-facing change you'll advocate for (e.g., policy, assessment-design, funding). Jot it down on the right hand side.
- **Make it visible.** Translate agreements into calendars, work plans, and role descriptions so commitments survive turnover.
- **Review together.** Re-yarn on a term-to-term or a 30/60/90-day cycle: Think about what changed? What got in the way? What's the next right step?

Meeting Date:

.....

Decision: One immediate change (this term)

.....

.....

Decision: One system-facing change to advocate for

.....

.....

Review: What happened since the last meeting?

.....

.....

.....

Our next review meeting date:

.....

THREAD 1: Creating CO-AGENCY			
Signals of change	**What's missing or getting in the way?**	**What are we already doing and want to nurture?**	**What are the next steps we can take?**
Collective action: Students, families and Elders co-design learning and events; decisions show up in timetables, budgets and assessment; community voices shape daily practice.			
Governance: Shared decision-making structures with young people, family and community representation; transparent processes and feedback loops.			
Student leadership: First Nations student leaders influence programs and policies, not just represent peers; leadership pathways and mentoring are embedded.			
Culturally responsive practice: practices are co-created with knowledge holders; assessment recognises community-valued outcomes; teaching is strengths-based.			

SUMMARY (pages 12-14)

Co-agency brings students, families, and communities together to design learning that reflects culture, strengthens identity, and sparks **collective action.**

It is expressed through **governance** that values Indigenous voices, **student leadership** that builds confidence, and community programs co-designed with Elders.

At its heart, co-agency underpins **culturally responsive practice** embedding Indigenous knowledges, histories, and perspectives to create inclusive, identity-affirming learning.

Yet co-agency also reveals the limits of schooling, **challenging the system** that silences Indigenous voices and calling for equity and justice.

THREAD 2: Embedding BELONGING

Signals of change	What's missing or getting in the way?	What are we already doing and want to nurture?	What are the next steps we can take?
Whole Person: Wellbeing, identity and culture are core measures of success. Students define and demonstrate learning in multiple ways.			
Indigenous Languages: Language learning is supported e.g. with bilingual resources; community language mentors.			
Culturally Safe Spaces: Dedicated, student-led spaces that include e.g. staffed by IEOs; open-door policies; clear purpose.			
Wellbeing and Culture: Cultural determinants of wellbeing drive programs e.g. on-Country, arts, kinship activities; families welcomed.			

SUMMARY (pages 15-17)

Belonging goes beyond murals and Acknowledgements of Country - it requires valuing young people as **whole people,** affirming their cultures and knowledges.

It is fostered through **Indigenous languages, culturally safe spaces,** and programs that integrate culture and identity with academic learning.

Wellbeing and culture is strengthened through belonging that nurtures identity, pride, agency, and engagement in school life.

Challenging the system means confronting exclusionary practices – such as uniform policies and disciplinary measures – that undermine belonging and silence Indigenous students.

THREAD 3: Supporting RELATIONSHIPS			
Signals of change	**What's missing or getting in the way?**	**What are we already doing and want to nurture?**	**What are the next steps we can take?**
Relational learning environments: making spaces and dedicated timing for yarning, mentoring, family and community connection.			
Respect: Everyday practices, curriculum, and interactions reflect respect for culture, with families and communities as partners in learning.			
Relationship to Country: Learning connects to Country through place-based activities, caring for Country, and truth-telling.			
Mentorship: Culturally grounded mentoring supports students through school transitions, led by community, Elders, and peers.			

SUMMARY (pages 18-20)

Meaningful relationships are built in relational learning environments of care and trust, where wellbeing and connection underpin positive educational experiences.

They are developed through **respect** for culture and include one's **relationship to Country**, both of which affirm identity and strengthen ties with families and communities.

Mentorship fosters guidance, confidence, and belonging, supporting young people to navigate their education and transitions with purpose.

Challenging the system means rebuilding education on trust, care, and reciprocity so all students and families feel they belong.

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