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Professional Learning and Teacher Identity in Indigenous Education

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Introduction

Late in 2019, the education ministers from across Australia came together to announce the goals for the upcoming decade, the Mparntwe Declaration (Education Council, 2019). Included in the 'commitment to action' is the renewed call to 'empower' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to 'reach their potential', and for all involved in education to work towards 'closing the gap' (2019, p. 16). Thus, it is explicitly acknowledged that education outcomes for these students 'remain behind those of other learners' in key aspects of schooling. Linking with this, the

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recent annual 'closing the gap' report to parliament notes that the ambition to halve the gap on literacy and numeracy by 2018 is yet to be met (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). Moreover, 25% of Indigenous students in years 5, 7 and 9 remain below the national minimum standards in literacy, and 17–19% remain below national minimum standards in numeracy.[1] While there is scope to be critical and cautious of the 'gap policy' framing (c/f Lingard et al., 2012), this nonetheless offers the reminder that the interests, experiences and achievements of Indigenous students, their families and communities are not well served by the education sector. This is not a new phenomenon, with little progress being made since the 'gap policy' era was initiated in 2009 alongside the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals.

As would be expected of high-profile policies that impact on an important part of the Australian population, there has been considerable attention, funding and effort exerted across the education sector to address these ambitions over the last decade. A potentially significant contributor to this process, then, has been the upskilling and knowledge base of those on the front-line, the teachers that work with Indigenous learners. Said another way, professional learning was positioned as an essential component, if the policy goals—the commitment to action and targets—were to be achieved. However, and regrettably, 'research has shown that many [professional learning] initiatives appear ineffective in supporting changes in teacher

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[1] The authors note that Indigenous is used to refer to Australia's First Nations Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples, the plural serving as a reminder that the terms refer to culturally diverse communities, and people will identify with their cultural identities accordingly (Gillan et al., 2017, p. 1).

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practices and student learning' (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. v). As will be outlined further in this chapter, this appears to be the case, as largely ineffective professional learning initiatives designed to improve the experiences and academic achievements of Indigenous students have dominated activities in this space. This is itself a telling finding of the Aboriginal Voices (AV) team. However, arguably more concerning are the underlying reasons that may explain why this is the case, with this systematic review pointing to the ongoing effects of deeply embedded ontological and epistemological race-based assumptions and practices.

Teacher professional learning (henceforth PL) has been described as 'both a policy problem and a policy solution', a double-edged dilemma that concurrently offers the promise of a panacea for long-standing concerns with inequities in schooling, while concurrently being weighed down by techno-rational understandings of teacher 'quality' and 'accountability' (Mockler, 2013). What might this look like in practice? All too often PL initiatives may offer educators and schools 'bolt-on' and 'toolkit' style approaches to improving teaching and learning. The emphasis is typically on the teachers' acquisition of knowledge and skills (Mockler, 2013). Kennedy (2016) has described this in terms of the underlying theory of action, entailing addressing a 'problem of practice' that requires the development of new or different knowledges, followed by engagement with strategies and resources to be used when returning to the classroom. It is a formula that gestures to good 'bang for your buck', the opportunity to incrementally polish the schooling practices, and this can all readily be conceptualised as a way addressing the needs of targeted groups such as Indigenous learners.

However, this dominant model of PL fails to account for the significance of 'identity-work', the point that educator practices stem from how they conceptualise themselves as teachers, the purposes of schooling and their understandings of students (Mockler, 2013; Netolicky, 2020). In Kennedy's (2016) view, this is grounded in concerns to do with teacher motivation, the how and why that may underpin (dis)engagement in PL, as this then forms the basis of PL's translation into actions in the classroom. Said another way, PL not only can, but should, be working towards something more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Truly

effective PL provides opportunities for educators to engage more deeply with philosophical, ethical and political questions connected with schooling, the work of teachers and the experiences of learners.

This is a conceptualisation of effective PL that resonates powerfully for the non-Indigenous lead author of this chapter. It was as participating in mandated PL experiences such as 'hidden histories' in 2008, as a high school history in teacher in suburban Brisbane, that provoked deeply questioning teacher identities and pedagogical practices, and eventually led to his engagement in doctoral research. In this case, it was the absence of identity-work being scaffolded in useful or meaningful ways during the 'hidden histories' PL, and in particular the trivialising, ill-informed or hostile comments from teachers on staff, that invited him to consider what then took place in the classroom when working with and in support of Indigenous learners in the school. On reflection this is perhaps not quite as surprising now, as it was at the time. And as will be shown later, an emphasis on teacher/professional identity-work is often an absence in the PL reviewed for this chapter, and this goes a long way towards explaining why there has been scant improvement concerning the experiences or achievements of many Indigenous learners around Australia over the last decade.

What Is Good Practice PL?

A decade ago, an influential article from Desimone (2009) reiterated the valuable contribution of PL in support of improving teacher 'quality', increasing teacher 'effectiveness', and how this advances the academic achievements of learners. Hence, a good understanding of the qualities that underpin PL that achieves these ambitions was noted as being crucial. She went on to outline a model with five 'critical features' that include:

1. Content focus
2. Active learning
3. Coherence

4. Duration
5. Collective participation (Desimone, 2009, p. 185).

As Desimone explains, this is a model that accepts a positivist approach, calling for PL to be designed to understand and (importantly) measure how and why learning is effective (or occurs at all) for participating educators (Desimone, 2009, p. 187). Writing more recently, while emphasising the strengths of the evidence-base that supports the utility of the model, she also concedes that several large-scale studies have shown 'disappointing results', highlighting the challenges of operationalising the five features into effective PL practices (Desimone & Garet, 2015, p. 253). Kennedy (2016, p. 971) shares similar concerns, pointing out that despite this model being widely used, the features are 'unreliable predictors' of PL success. It is perhaps with a view to some of these limitations that Darling-Hammond et al. (2017, p. 4) have recently reworked the model to include the following:

- Use of models and modelling
- Use of coaching and expert support
- Opportunities for feedback and reflection

According to these authors, effective PL will be designed to simultaneously incorporate many of these features (inclusive of those from the Desimone model).

The value and important role of PL are acknowledged all around the world, and much can be learned from studies of PL that are focused on or across different contexts. However, it is also pertinent to keep in mind the limitations of doing so, as the veneer of globalising discourses and education policies can serve to unhelpfully obscure the particularities of national systems and cultural milieus (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In the case of Australia, recent emphasis is on establishing 'growth-focused professional learning environments in which teachers can interrogate and improve their practice, based on knowing research and knowing their students' (Netolicky, 2020, p. 17). In part, this accepts that the 'the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for optimal teaching' are not fully established during teacher education (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 358).

The contribution of PL to help promote 'equity and excellence' in schooling was acknowledged with the 2012 release of the *Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022). The Charter includes the following definition:

> Formal and informal learning experiences undertaken by teachers and school leaders that improve their individual professional practice, and a school's collective effectiveness, as measured by improved student learning, engagement with learning, and wellbeing.

On the one hand, this could be viewed as a useful way of conceptualising PL that is expansive and open to interpretation, as it invariably needs to be. On the other hand, this could be thought of as pointing out what is fairly self-evident, and hence it doesn't invite much more than surface level engagement with PL. It is certainly not the sort of framing that would require educators or learning communities to consider in depth the complexities of addressing the more specific experiences of, for example, Indigenous students. Rather than a generic, and potentially unhelpful conceptualisation of PL, a more focused definition may require educators to critically reflect on deficit theorising with a view to replacing this understanding with the sort of 'agentic thinking' that helps redefine classroom relational practices as the fundamental cornerstone of effective teaching and learning (Bishop et al., 2014, pp. 10–11). This approach to PL moves closer to purposefully considering the identity-work that is required for many educators to reconceptualise how they understand themselves, their relationships with students and the work undertaken in schooling.

Teacher identities are not fixed or stable over time, rather, they are more helpfully understood as continuously being 'work in progress'. Professional learning is one of the contributing factors that shapes the identity-work educators experience, and as Mockler (2013, p. 42) outlines, this is because it can provide opportunities for the professional and personal to rub up against each other. In this sense, and ideally, PL opens up space for educators to question what they do, why they do things particular ways, the purposes of schooling, why things could or should be

different, and so on. The linking of PL with identity-work in this way shifts the emphasis onto notions of 'becoming', a valuable nuance that moves beyond 'technical-rational' conceptualisations of educators (Mockler, 2013, p. 42). It is this line of thinking that Netolicky (2020, p. 18) takes up in calling for transformational PL, initiatives that work towards impacting on 'what teachers and school leaders think, believe, feel, and do'. In short, those involved in education need to believe in the reasons for change, prior to seriously engaging with efforts to make changes to their established practices (ibid). This is an approach that resonates with Kennedy's (2016, p. 974) call to further refine the current dominant models of PL:

> [W]e need to replace our current conception of 'good' PD as comprising a collection of particular design features with a conception that is based on more nuanced understandings of what teachers do, what motivates them, and how they learn and grow.

The Approach for the PL Systematic Review

According to Dixon-Woods (2016), systematic reviews vary in approach and framing, with some located more towards the 'conventional' end, some more 'interpretive' and many hybrids in-between. The distinction stems from the purpose of the study. More conventional approaches are designed to sort through the scope, scale and quality of available evidence. Whereas some SRs are more concerned with conceptual and theoretical development. The 'specific purpose of the review is critically important' (Dixon-Woods, 2016, p. 385), which for this SR was framed as an 'interpretive synthesis' that sought establish a conceptual understanding of PL designed to improve the experiences and academic achievements of Indigenous learners. The question that guided the SR was influential:

> What evidence demonstrates that PL can effectively change teachers' understandings, beliefs, and attitudes, and from this, improve the schooling experiences and achievements of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

The question was informed, in part, by Gillan et al. (2017) reminder that addressing deficit and race-based assumptions remains a fundamental challenge for the sector.

The research question was also partially prompted by the success of the *Te Kotahitanga* longitudinal study of culturally responsive schooling in New Zealand (Bishop et al., 2014). This PL initiative explicitly rejected deficit theorising, and over time demonstrated that educators could learn how to establish and maintain respectful and productive relationships with Māori students (Bishop et al., 2014, p. 7). *Te Kotahitanga* established an evidence-base that accounts for the benefits associated with explicitly addressing deficit theorising by evaluating and documenting changes in the teachers understanding, beliefs and attitudes. Additionally, *Te Kotahitanga* actively fostered culturally responsive approaches to schooling; teaching and learning that is intellectually demanding, engages with intercultural knowledge and fluency, and raises the socio-political consciousness of students (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Thus, for this SR, attention was focused on the PL evidence-base that addressed curricular and pedagogical practices that engaged with the politics of knowledge construction in relation with the local context of learning. In essence, while student improvement on assessment may be part of this evidence-base, this was not viewed as the only or most suitable measure of positive experiences and achievements for Indigenous learners.

The Research Strategy

As part of the broader Aboriginal Voices project, this review of research on professional learning followed the established protocols and methodological framing outlined in Chap. 2. However, there were also some elements that are particular to this systematic review, notably the inclusion of research on the delivery of PL activities. The database search located 1144 references, and after duplicates were removed, this was reduced to 1055. The abstracts for all of these sources were then manually reviewed by two team members. The exclusions were based on the following criteria:

- The research centrally involved initial education teacher students.
- The research focused on the PL experiences of the researcher.
- The research design/methodology did not include an explicit focus on a PL activity/intervention.
- The research did not focus on concerns with the experiences or achievements of Indigenous learners.
- The research focused primarily on the learning/development of Indigenous staff, parents or community.

This process removed 1017 sources from the list, leaving 38 references. A further 3 were subsequently removed as physical copies of these could not be found or accessed. The remaining 35 sources were then used to identify and add a further 17 sources based on the inclusion criteria. This resulted in 52 sources being included in the initial phase of reading and evaluating for final inclusion. A further 21 sources were removed following this phase, based on the limited focus on PL aiming to improve the schooling experiences and achievements of Indigenous learners. It was also during this phase that some sources were retained despite falling somewhat outside the explicit inclusion criteria. Notable in this regard are the retention of Fredericks (2008) research on 'cross-cultural awareness training' in the health sector, Osborne's (2013) critical reflection on the roll-out of the MindMatters initiative, Craven et al. (2014) review of PL research, and Burgess (2017). All four of these sources were viewed as making worthy contributions in relation to the SR research question (see Fig. 6.1 for a flowchart of this process).

Each source was then closely read, with defining features recorded alongside of initial notes regarding some of the strengths and/or concerns. This was a process to establish markers of similarity and difference, for instance, the context of research (urban, remote, regional or a mix), methodology (qualitative, quantitative or mixed), the length of the study, the focus (math, literacy etc.) and the positionality of the researchers. This was followed by a thematic analysis to evaluate for quality based on six criteria, with each source receiving a 'score' out of
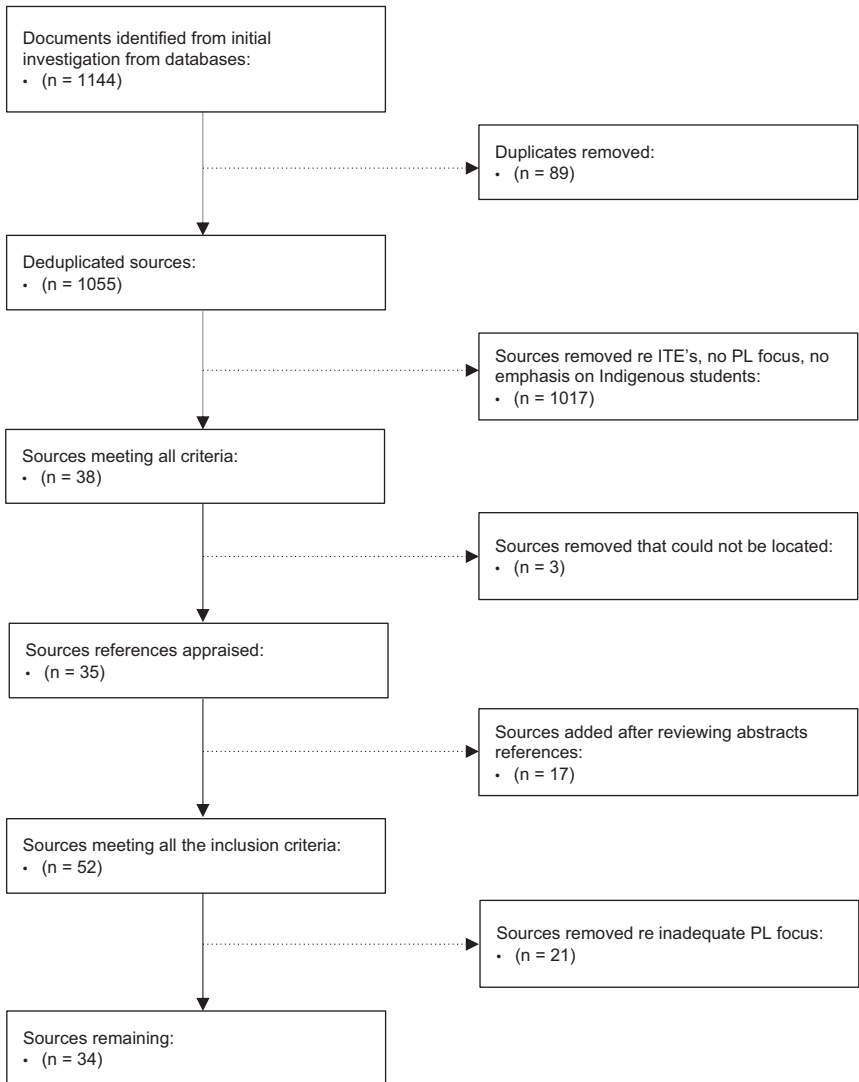
Fig. 6.1 PRISMA flow diagram representing inclusion and exclusion process. Note. Adapted from Fig. 1, in 'The possibilities and practicalities of professional learning in support of Indigenous student experiences in schooling: A systematic review', by G. Vass, K. Lowe, C. Burgess, N. Harrison, N., Moodie, 2019, Australian Educational Researcher, 46(2), p. 348

6. These included further considering the methodology, theoretical framing, ethical dimensions, the depth of the PL details and contribution to the field.[2]

Five Themes

The Challenges of Context

Over half of the studies focused on regional (or rural) and/or remote settings, and the majority of the remaining addressed a mix of urban, regional and/or remote locations. Only one project focused exclusively on an urban (or 'metropolitan') setting (Young, 2010). Thus, the specificities of supporting and working with Indigenous learners within urban or metropolitan contexts, who constitute over 70% of the national student population, remains largely overlooked. It is also perhaps unsurprising, given the high Indigenous student enrolment, that emphasis on PL research from the Eastern states was largely reported on. More broadly, with 29 of the 31 studies coming from just four states (Qld, NSW, WA and NT), the research base may uphold a perspective of Indigenous peoples as living primarily in locations distant from urban centres.

The SR also reveals broader methodological concerns that stem from this. For example, while there may be good reasons for obscuring details about the research context, the absence of contextual specificity is also problematic. This is because the school location influences the understandings, beliefs and attitudes that teachers hold. Thus, if an educator comes from an urban, and likely high socio-economic background, but then find themselves teaching in remote or regional settings, accounting for this movement should, ideally, be part of the PL and research narrative. In essence, if PL is to genuinely and positively effect change in how some teachers understand themselves in relationship with Indigenous

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[2] Some of this material was 'grey literature', such as conference papers or professional magazine stories, hence for many 'quality' was linked to the source context.

peoples and local communities, finding ways of accounting for the importance of context alongside of carefully protecting learning communities may require further attention.

Research Design Considerations

A preference for small scale, qualitative methodologies that followed an action tradition was evident. This is, up to a point, unsurprising given it provides opportunities for educators to be involved as researchers—as knowledge holders and makers from within the research site. Hence, this is typically a collaborative and localised approach which is well suited to Indigenous-focused PL. This is because it enables educators to confront their values, beliefs, the current institutional arrangements in their setting, and from this to change schooling practices (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009, p. 59). While this gestures to the potential for this approach to focus on identity-work, if this is not made explicit and the reflective activities scaffolded and purposeful as central to the PL, it is likely to fall short of taking full advantage of this potential. This was however, either not often core to the PL, or was not reported on.

The PL reported on by Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) offers a strong illustration of how and why this approach can constructively help with improving schooling practices for Indigenous learners. It is inclusion of this reflective and evaluative component that distinguishes this contribution, with the participant narratives exploring the intertwining of personal and professional learning. The paper offers a compelling reminder why more than attendance or test scores need to be addressed in PL. It was arguably the involvement of local community with the PL, and changes in the relationships between educators and people from the community, that were of central import. A crucial facet of effective PL was also reflected in studies from Ewing et al. (2010), Burridge et al. (2012) and Warren et al. (2009). In the case of the latter, interviews (rather than an action style research) were used to explore the benefits of PL strategies that explicitly address power hierarchies and decision-making practices by focusing on the involvement of local Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) working with educators.

Balancing the Depth of Detail About PL

In general, the reviewed sources provided limited depth and detail about PL activities. In part, this gestures to a curious quandary regarding publication conventions and potential audiences. For example, in sources that may be more directed towards educators, there may be a tendency to provide truncated or muted details about theory and methodology, such as Young (2010) and Trinidad and Broadley (2010). In sources that may be more directed towards researchers, there may be an inclination to gloss over the nuts and bolts of the activities central to the PL initiatives, such as in Warren and Quine (2013) and Owens (2015). In conference papers, such as Baturo et al. (2007) and Helmer et al. (2009), the scope, scale and complexity of the discussion can be impacted on. And in reports, such as research commissioned by government as with Burridge et al. (2012) and Burgess and Cavanagh (2013), there may be constraints on the extent to which the authors present critical accounts of what has transpired.

Illustrative of how the publication source may influence the construction of texts, are the contributions linked with the Canadian derived web-based literacy program, ABRACADABRA (ABRA for short). For instance, the paper from Harper et al. (2012) notes that a one-day training session was offered, in anticipation that departmental guidelines for PL would then establish a culture of collaboration. A few structural details are provided, such as the running of 30 minute sessions four times a week for the following four months, with two site visits from the researchers. In this case, the methodology and findings are privileged, at the expense of detailing the PL activities that took place. While understandable in many respects, this also presents only a partial account of what took place.

In another publication, a few further details are provided, such as ABRA involving 32 instructional activities embedded in 17 stories, with teachers guiding whole of class or individual students through a progression from basic to complex. For this paper, Harper (2012, p. 452) explains that as high levels of researcher support had been linked to positive outcomes, her intention here was to outline a small subset sample to consider examples where low levels of support are offered. The focus is on the

emotional labour involved in undertaking the PL, and while this presents an encouraging account of how resourceful and independent educators can be, it offers little further understanding about the PL itself. This was also the case for the other two sources included in the SR, reporting on the pilot study in the conference paper from Helmer et al. (2009) and the Helmer et al. (2011) publication that focused on the experiences of the researchers and PL coaches. While it may be disconcerting that such limited detail about the PL is accounted for across the four sources, this should serve to raise questions about 'our' publication practices.

Explicit Engagement with Theory

Further questions can be asked about methodological and publication practices when considering that only a little over half of the sources explicitly engaged with theory. This is perhaps most surprising when considering the preference for small scale action style research, which are often grounded in social justice concerns and guided by critical pedagogical approaches. As highlighted by Baynes (2015), researchers and participants may come together in efforts to rekindle or recharge the moral aspirations that motivated involvement in schooling in the first place. Despite making valuable contributions in other ways, the texts from Burridge et al. (2012) and Burgess and Cavanagh (2013) are illustrative of the marginalisation of explicit engagement with theory, with the corollary of this being the peripheralisation of issues to do with power and decision-making. A worrying point in view of both projects stemming from research collaborations (commissioned projects) with government departments.

Explicit engagement with theory is important and useful, as shown in more recent publications from Burgess and Cavanagh (2016) and Burgess (2017). The latter text offers a 'problematising [of] cultural competence' that assists with the development of a more complex reading of deficit schooling practices, prior to considering cultural pluralism, and then naming and addressing issues linked with power. Similarly, Burgess and Cavanagh (2016) make use of Wenger to analyse the benefits of praxis, those efforts to act on and in the world with a view to transforming it. In our view, explicit engagement with theory is a vital component that

elevates reporting on research as being more than descriptive. Explicit engagement with theory enables, for example, more robust accounts of why actions may or may not be effective, considering impacts from multiple perspectives, and revealing the complexities and contradictions concerning issues of power and decision-making.

The Ongoing Difficulties of Accounting for Race and Intercultural Complexity

Ongoing concerns to do with power and decision-making then lead to questions regarding the presence, depth and positioning of issues to do with race and intercultural complexity in PL. For example, while issues of race and power are named by Baturo et al. (2007) in the introduction and conclusion, the approach is brief and the focus is reserved for adult to adult dynamics, overlooking the import of teacher-student relationships. Similarly, Harper et al. (2012) raise conceptual questions about the 'cultural appropriateness' of ABRA, but this does not subsequently extend to theorising interpersonal relationships or pedagogical practices. While Beveridge and McLeod (2009) are motivated by, and name, concerns to do with social justice and (in)equities, there is no direct engagement with deficit theorising or the efforts of teachers to racially or culturally locate themselves. Also falling short of deeply considering institutionalised forms of racism and the reproduction of race, Warren et al. (2009, p. 214) explain that is 'youth and inexperience' that underpins current poor practices and helps explain the 'negative beliefs and attitudes' that are linked with 'Indigenous underperformance'.

There were however also contributions that more meaningly account for racialised power and decision-making. For example, Osborne's (2013, p. 182) paper about the MindMatters PL addressed 'mental health, and social and emotional wellbeing' across the learning community. Communication and relationships between educators and community members were central to establishing a network built on understanding, respect, confidence and agency. Important with this PL were efforts to purposefully interrupt enduring power relations, with a view to rebuilding intercultural relationships and practices. Similarly, Fredericks (2008)

makes visible the significance of 'educating for cross-cultural interactions' by demonstrating the benefits stemming from genuinely listening to, learning from, and working with Indigenous people from within the local community (p. 85). Fredericks is critical of PL that typically focuses on 'Otherness' in ways that reproduce deficit theorising by failing to adequately account for dominant structural and systemic arrangements and practices (Fredericks, 2008, p. 88).

Conclusion

If schooling is to genuinely interrupt the processes and practices that underpin and explain the harmful experiences and poor academic achievements that many Indigenous learners leave schooling with, then efforts to foster (anti)racist and/or colour-conscious skills and knowledges must be central to teacher education and PL (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014). As noted earlier, it was anticipated that this would be a feature of some, if not the majority, of PL activities reported on for this review. However, it appears that this is not the case; rather, it would be the exception. It is, perhaps, worth noting that there may be a range PL activities that educators encounter that do name and address deficit theorising, and work towards engaging in depth with issues of race and intercultural complexity. However, these were not identified for the SR as they (likely) failed to focus specifically on Indigenous education, and importantly, they also may not have adequately focused the PL initiatives on curricular and pedagogical practices for targeted initiatives such as literacy, numeracy or science.

This is, then, a timely reminder of the importance of identity-work in connection with effective PL. Educators must be provided with PL opportunities to focus on and reconceptualise what they 'think, believe, feel, and do' (Netolicky, 2020, p. 18) when working with and in support of Indigenous learners. The relational is of crucial importance. Moreover, in addition, they need to be provided more than opportunities to simply improve their skills and knowledges as, for example, Math, English or

Science teachers. They require PL opportunities that are transformational in terms of the philosophical, ethical and political questions connected with knowledge-making practices within these disciplines, how these are positioned within schooling, their work as teachers within these processes and practices, and the experiences of Indigenous learners within this context. Questions of relevance are also significant.

Overall, there was a paucity of evidence that shows PL initiatives as actively embracing this identity dimension. Of working with and in support of teachers in their efforts to reconceptualise their understanding, beliefs and attitudes of themselves as educators or in terms of their relationships with Indigenous learners. However, the SR does serve to highlight that Indigenous epistemologies/methodologies and the genuine involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do make a difference. The inclusion of these facets improves outcomes for the educators and the Indigenous learners in their classrooms. In this regard, Burridge et al. (2012), Burgess and Cavanagh (2013, 2016), Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009), Ewing et al. (2010) and Armour et al. (2016) illustrate 'quality research' in response to the SR question. These are collaborative initiatives that not only make concerns to do with power more explicit, they worked with and model intercultural practices, and the end results are improved in connection with this. It is encouraging that there is an emerging evidence-base that shows how and why 'good practice' PL can be operationalised within Australia, and specifically, with Indigenous learners in mind. While the significance of this noteworthy and should be taken up by many, to do so and on the scale required to effect serious and sustainable change, will likely require the sort of political leadership, courage and trust that has long been called for. As highlighted more than 20 years ago in the concluding words of Rigney (1999, p. 119):

From an Indigenous perspective, my people's interest, experience, and knowledges must be at the center of research methodologies and the construction of knowledge about us. Incorporating these aspects in research we can begin to shift the construction of knowledge to one that does not compromise Indigenous identity and Indigenous principles of independence, unity, and freedom from racism.

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