The Australian Educational Researcher
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00718-z

Indigenous voices: reimagining Indigenous education through a discourse of excellence

Marnee Shay[1] · Jodie Miller[1] · Suraiya Hameed[1] · Danielle Armour[1]

Received: 20 June 2023 / Accepted: 23 March 2024

Abstract
The persistent deficit positioning of Indigenous students has meant that the combined terms 'Indigenous education' and 'excellence in education' have been kept separate in mainstream discourse. Excellence in education is an under-theorised concept that must consider intercultural and diverse perspectives. Consequently, this paper aims to understand excellence in education through Indigenous peoples' perspectives regarding how excellence in Indigenous education is (or could be) enacted in schools. This paper reports on findings from a pilot study with Indigenous community members, principals, teachers, and support staff. The research aimed to address the question: How do Indigenous education practitioners define excellence in Indigenous education? This qualitative study used appreciative inquiry, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and multiple contextual and localised examples from everyday community members, educational practitioners, and leaders. The data show that employing a language underpinned by strengths can change the conversation, expectations, and aspirations in Indigenous education, as framing through excellence may shift the ideology of policy and, thus, the interpretation of enactment in Indigenous education.

Keywords Indigenous education · Excellence · Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education · Appreciative inquiry

Introduction

Education is a construct that can provide social, cultural, and economic inclusion or exclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, who are the First Nations peoples and considered amongst 'the oldest living cultures in the world' (Walter et al., 2017). Access to good quality education is a well-known

✉ Marnee Shay
m.shay@uq.edu.au

[1] School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia

Published online: 26 April 2024

marker for social, health, and economic outcomes (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). However, the Australian Government continues to struggle to deliver equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2020a). Policy approaches, scholarly literature, and school practices in Indigenous education remain saturated with deficit discourses influenced and constructed by Australia's colonial histories and narratives (Hogarth, 2018; Phillips & Lampert, 2012). A search within academic literature and across Australian education policy for the combined terms 'Indigenous education' and 'excellence in education' demonstrates a conceptual, ideological, and practical distance between these concepts within mainstream discourses. We argue that these two terms are usually disconnected because of the existing corpus on how Indigenous students' knowledge and education are perceived within Australian society.

Indigenous students are often considered a problem in educational research and government policies (Hogarth, 2017). This is concerning, and what should be the focus of policies and research is the failure of schools to engage Indigenous students and deliver high-quality education programs (Sarra, 2011; Shay & Oliver, 2021). The persistent deficit discourse is framed by broader colonial ideologies that continue to racialise Indigenous peoples 'as a deficit model of humanity' (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xiii). The literature is saturated with research ostensibly aimed at finding solutions to these problems and, in doing so, has reproduced discourses of failure, underachievement, and disengagement (Hogarth, 2017). Almost two decades ago, Harrison (2007) highlighted the abundance of research in Indigenous education that has resulted in very few improvements in outcomes for Indigenous students. Not much has changed to date. Harrison and many others allude to the need to reframe, resituate, and reconstruct the dynamics in Indigenous education.

In examining excellence in education, we found it generally an under-theorised concept. Excellence is a frequently used term in broader education policy and scholarly literature. Although, when conceptualised through Western institutions, there is a consistent reference in the use of the term excellence concerning academic markers of educational performance (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2014). Furthermore, the concept needs to include intercultural and diverse perspectives of what excellence in education can consist of. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD henceforth) advocates that the promotion of 'excellence, equity and inclusion are key aims for education' (Schleicher, 2014, p. 11) and that this is a priority for the global community.

Conversely, how excellence is measured through the 'quantification of excellence', constructed through international testing undertaken through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), and the IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS), means that the testing of numeracy and literacy are the primary foci (OECD, 2018). It could be argued that these measures are heavily situated within Western constructs and are developed with limited input by Indigenous peoples. The study reported in this paper aims to understand excellence through Indigenous peoples' perspectives and explore how Indigenous peoples see excellence in Indigenous education being enacted in schools.

This paper reports on findings from a pilot study aimed to explore the concept of excellence in Indigenous education, centring the voices of Indigenous peoples and understanding how those tasked with Indigenous education policy enactment (principals, teachers, and support staff) conceptualise practices of excellence in Indigenous education. This was a qualitative study, with appreciative inquiry underpinning the project's design, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and multiple contextual and localised examples (Punch, 2009; Yin, 2013). To ensure conceptual clarity about what our research is concerned with, although the concept of Indigenous excellence may arise in the data, this study sets out to conceptualise what excellence in Indigenous education is or could be. The aim was to shift the focus from Indigenous performance and achievement to school performance and achievement in Indigenous education. Many educational fields strive for excellence in how the area and practice grow and develop. Therefore, this research aimed to undertake an exploratory conceptualising approach through appreciative inquiry (see Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018; Ludema et al., 2006; Reed, 2007; Willoughby & Tosey, 2007) about what excellence in Indigenous education is from the perspectives of everyday community members, educational practitioners, and leaders. The findings address the following research question: How do Indigenous education practitioners define excellence in Indigenous education?

Who we are—positionality matters

The first author (Shay) is an Aboriginal (Wagiman) woman, born and raised around Southeast Queensland, who has a youth worker and teaching professional background before training as an academic. The second author (Miller) is a non-Indigenous Australian, who grew up in Southeast Queensland, with Irish and English heritage and was first in her family to be born in Australia. Before working in educational research, Miller was a primary school teacher. The third author (Hameed) has Indigenous (Malay) ethnic roots in Singapore. She was a school leader before becoming an academic in Australia. The fourth author (Armour) is an Aboriginal woman with cultural links to Kamilaroi Country in Northern NSW through her paternal Grandmother. She was raised on Bundjalung nation and worked as a teacher in urban and remote settings before working in the university sector.

Why excellence in Indigenous education?

Excellence is a term that some Indigenous peoples are increasingly using in Australia. For example, the establishment of the 'National Centre for Indigenous Excellence' in Redfern, where the centre clearly states that they wanted to be a point of difference in shifting the culture to a strengths-based approach by starting 'from a place of excellence and building from a foundation of positives' (National Centre for Indigenous Excellence, 2022). In an opinion piece published initially through an Indigenous media outlet, IndigenousX, Torres Strait Islander educator McGrath (2014) states, 'Indigenous excellence is everywhere, in more ways, places and forms

than most Australians know exist. We just need to know how to see it'. These are just some examples of Indigenous peoples using the term excellence on public records. The absence of scholarly literature and educational policy on the term excellence in Indigenous education indicates a gap in conceptual understanding of what excellence in Indigenous education means for Indigenous peoples, how it is applied, and how it is culturally constructed.

For some time, there has been a persistent problematic construct between the linking of excellence in Indigenous education to sports and the arts, whilst other aspects of achievement for Indigenous students are excluded. This discourse has surfaced from research that indicates extra-curricular activities such as sports and cultural activities contribute to positive self-identity for Indigenous young peoples (Gray & Partington, 2012; Purdie et al., 2000). This is likely interconnected with broader messaging perpetuated by the media and socially about the areas in which Indigenous peoples 'excel' (Shay et al., 2021). What is concerning about this is the narrow focus on what is considered excellence in education for Indigenous students and how these constructs play out in school settings.

The term Indigenous education was defined in this study through current Indigenous education policy imperatives and the existing body of literature that has focussed on specific practices that have been put forward mainly by Indigenous education bodies for some time now. The dimensions of practices include: embedding Indigenous knowledge, languages, and perspectives into schools and curricula; cultural capability of the teacher workforce; pedagogical approaches that support diverse Indigenous learners; working collaboratively and in partnership with Indigenous communities; improving literacy, numeracy, and attendance rates of Indigenous students; promoting a positive sense of identity; strong leadership that supports Indigenous education imperatives; and, increasing the number of professional roles undertaken by Indigenous peoples in schools (Lowe et al., 2019; Shay & Oliver, 2021).

What is excellence in education and who defines it?

The concept of excellence in education has been under-theorised, with Walker (1996) highlighting the subjectivities in how the term excellence is defined, understood, and applied. Furthermore, it often lacks a holistic view of what educational excellence can include, emphasising academic merit over other educational endeavours and outcomes. The cultural construct of excellence in Indigenous contexts within the national and international landscape is also very limited. Within literature especially associated with Indigenous education, the term 'excellence' has emerged from Indigenous communities within Australia as a way of addressing the deficit mindsets and approaches toward Indigenous education (Hameed et al., 2021). However, there is still a clear lack of understanding of the essence of excellence within Indigenous contexts, especially within social media, policies, and practices nationally, as these domains have been saturated with deficit discourses for some time (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Fredericks & Bradfield, 2021; Hogarth, 2017).

Gooreng Gooreng education trailblazer, Chris Sarra, challenged the notion of how broader Australian society has come to know what it is to be Aboriginal and 'examine the more positive Aboriginal perceptions of "being Aboriginal" and the impact of reinforcing this in an Aboriginal school setting' (Sarra, 2011, p. 1). Whilst Sarra's work achieved a disruption to the reproduction of deficit ideologies in different educational contexts, there is a lack of strengths-based approaches in Indigenous education more broadly, which emphasises the strengths of Indigenous students, their families, and communities. What is sorely needed is a definition of excellence that underpins Indigenous education initiatives, programs, and interventions, in Australia, and in a global setting, particularly from Indigenous perspectives. This should include a revision of programs and research that are underpinned by strengths-based approaches to consolidate what we do know, allowing for the development of an informed map for how the field might evolve. There is a need to recognise the systemic issues in policy and practices, one that emphasises the problem in the situation as the problem, as opposed to Indigenous people being the problem (Shay & Oliver, 2021).

The sentiment of shifting deficit discourse was echoed through the voices of young people behind the Imagination Declaration[1] who have appealed to politicians 'to establish an imagination agenda for Indigenous kids and, in fact, for all Australian children', which stops 'looking at them as a problem to fix' (Shay et al., 2019, para 27). These young people have challenged the Prime Minister and Education Ministers in Australia to go beyond the deficit framing in the establishment of the education policy about their future, providing evidence that there is a groundswell from a range of stakeholders, including young people themselves, to dismantle the use of deficit framing in Indigenous education. In addition, the Imagination Declaration echoes the sentiment from Indigenous communities to move beyond deficits and stereotypes.

There is a disjoint between excellence and Indigenous education within research and policy initiatives and practices. This divergence is interrelated with Australia's colonial roots, which have ensured the racialisation of Indigenous Australians constructs a narrative of deficit and inhumanity to uphold the interests of the colonisers in possessing the land (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The disjoint clearly demonstrates the contested nature and disjuncture of these concepts' ideological, conceptual, and practical application within mainstream discourses. It is emerging that some Indigenous communities within Australia view 'excellence' as a way forward in addressing the deficit mindsets and towards a strength-based approach to Indigenous education. However, within mainstream social media, policy initiatives, and educational programmes within institutions and organisations, the term still lacks the depth of understanding to recognise Indigenous voices, knowledge, and strengths to inform

[1] Following the Uluru Statement From The Heart, in 2019, a group of young Indigenous people have gathered in East Arnhem Land for the Youth Forum at Garma Festival (hosted by the Yothu Yindi Foundation). The forum was facilitated by AIME and resulted in a declaration for the Prime Minister and Education Minister's across Australia—The Imagination Declaration. AIME Mentoring (2021) retrieved from https://aimementoring.com/wp1/uncategorised/imagination-declaration/

the changes needed in the system to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous young people.

Appreciative inquiry and Indigenist theory

Appreciative inquiry (AI henceforth) and Indigenist theory (Rigney, 2001) provide the conceptual framework for this study. AI uses strengths approaches to build positive ways of working rather than focussing on problems (Reed, 2007). Underpinned by social constructivism (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018), 'AI involves identifying "the best of what is"—that which enhances cultural identity, spirit and vision—in order to construct with the participants a vision for their desired future' (Willoughby & Tosey, 2007, p. 503). AI provides the philosophical and methodological framework for this study that does not propose that excellence in Indigenous education is an existential concept waiting to be discovered. Instead, AI and Indigenist theory guide the relational approaches and space for Indigenous peoples and a broad range of educational practitioners to reflect on what is working well currently and what Indigenous education could look like at macro and micro levels through a social constructivist lens. This approach is critical, as Watkins et al. (2011) assert, 'the strongest and most effective way to imagine our future is to engage in continuous dialogue and exploration from an open and curious mindset' (p. 10). In this study, participants are provided with questions and tools to engage in a reflective, imaginative process focussed on the positive aspects of excellence or what it could be in Indigenous education.

As AI recognises the simultaneity of inquiry and change (Ludema et al., 2006), AI requires researchers to contrast problem-based approaches that are often effective at articulating problems by including elements that stimulate conversation for change. Employing AI for this study aligns with the overall aim of shifting deficit discourses in Indigenous education and is supported by evidence from the fields of organisational development and psychology that changing the conversation and inquiry has the potential to shift outcomes (Reed, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011; Watkins et al., 2011). Results could be both in how educators perceive and enact their work in Indigenous education and the impact on how Indigenous students, their families, and communities are perceived and interacted with by individuals in schools and schooling systems.

Indigenous voices—participants

A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants (Punch, 2009). Commonly used in qualitative research, particularly case studies, purposive sampling allowed researchers to be guided by Indigenous voices as an authority on 'excellence' in Indigenous education. Due to the requirement to complete the study within 12 months, the project completed three in-depth case studies.

Demographic diversity in participant selection in these case studies is significant as each setting brings its own strengths and challenges. The appreciative inquiry

Table 1 Indigenous participants across school sites

School site	Indigenous participants
School 1 (urban)	3
School 2 (rural)	5
School 3 (regional)	4

approach utilised in this research was strengths orientated. We intended to gather views and perspectives in situ, focussing on micro and meso exploring the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Indigenous peoples are often homogenised racially and culturally. Ensuring representation across geographical demographics builds on the existing literature, which calls for localised and contextualised examples from practice for educators and policymakers to learn from (for example, see Leat & Thomas, 2018; Mulenga, 2022).

Schools that the research team had relationships with were purposively selected so that these could continue to be built upon and ensure the feasibility of the study and on-time completion. One school was in a major urban city, and two were in an outer-regional area, with one site in very close proximity to a discrete Aboriginal community. All these sites were in Queensland, Australia, with high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Indigenous staff worked closely with the research team at each site to identify participants to share their experiences and work within the case study example. Overall 30 participants were part of the study, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, school leaders, and community members. Twelve Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 18 non-Indigenous voices were captured across the three school sites. As this paper seeks to centre Indigenous voices, only data from this cohort will be presented in this paper. All participants are given pseudonyms. Table 1 displays the Indigenous participant numbers in the case school.

Collaborating yarning methodology

Several methods were used in storying the case studies. Use of yarning, an Aboriginal conversational style of sharing knowledge and experiences (Bessarab & Nga'ndu, 2010; Shay, 2021), was utilised to develop ways of identifying and understanding excellence in Indigenous education in practice with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. Methodologically, collaborative yarning methodology (Shay, 2021) was used, whereby participants (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) would yarn through a series of topics exploring excellence in Indigenous education and their responses would be recorded textually on a storyboard or audio recorded at the request of the participant. The yarns recorded on the storyboard allowed participants to cross-check data and commence analysis as it was being collected to ensure accuracy. The audio-recorded yarns did not go back to participants for cross-checking due to time constraints on the project. Yarning in documenting the case study

from multiple perspectives included semi-formal questions about the practice, collaboration with Indigenous peoples in the process, resourcing required, and enablers.

An analytic induction was used in analysing the data (Punch, 2009) due to the small number of case studies being conducted. Analytic induction allowed the emergence of an initial definition of the phenomenon to be explained and, for some cases, to be investigated, examining explanatory features (Punch, 2009, p. 173). Member categorisation analysis was also used to provide a rich and deeper understanding of how participants from various social and cultural memberships worked towards success and excellence in Indigenous education. Member categorisation analysis is known in the social sciences for its ability to critically examine and understand how participating members within a case study's relationships interact (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2016). This allowed this project to understand how success and excellence are defined in Indigenous education and how they are operationalised within a cross-cultural environment.

Key findings

The following presents the analysed data from the yarning sessions in line with the research questions. The research question, 'how do Indigenous education practitioners define excellence in Indigenous education' focusses on building a new understanding in relation to how Indigenous people define excellence in Indigenous education. Thus, the data presented in this section are only drawn on the voices of the Indigenous participants. As the data were analysed, it became clear that participants would provide conceptual insights with practical examples from their school practices or what they aspire to. The data speak to how this cohort defined excellence in Indigenous education and provided examples of what Indigenous education might look like underpinned by the concept of excellence.

'Our people do excel and are excellent' (community member/parent)

How is excellence in Indigenous education defined by Indigenous peoples?

Yarning sessions began focussing on how participants defined excellence in Indigenous education. We had anticipated mixed views about how the term excellence is currently used in an educational setting and what this means for Indigenous people. Many participants said they themselves rarely used the term ('excellence'); rather that they used the term 'deadly'. In Australia, the term 'deadly' is an Aboriginal English word used by Aboriginal people to describe something as excellent, fantastic, or really good (Shay & Oliver, 2021). Even asking participants to consider both terms, excellence and deadly, the vast majority indicated that the words were rarely used about Indigenous students in their schools. Some participants echoed the perception that excellence was seen as a pinnacle goal instead of a process-driven one.

We asked participants to consider how they would define the term 'excellence' in Indigenous education for their young people, educators, and leaders. Three central themes and nine sub-themes were identified (see Table 2). Whilst we acknowledge

Table 2 Central themes and sub-themes: Indigenous voices defining excellence in Indigenous education

Central themes	Sub-themes	Percentage
The young person	Nurturing culture and identity	92% (11/12)
	Building young people up	50% (6/12)
School culture and leadership	Culture of inclusivity and belonging	50% (6/12)
	Strong leadership	25% (3/12)
	Indigenous leadership	8% (1/12)
Relationships	Relationships	33.3% (4/12)
	Walking together	25% (3/12)

that one participant discussed the Indigenous leadership sub-theme, it has remained included in this analysis as there is such a limited understanding of how Indigenous people define this concept, so all voices are seen as equally important.

Theme 1: the young person

Most participants shared their views regarding defining excellence that centred on the young person. The following presents sections from yarning sessions across participants to weave a story of multiple voices as to how excellence can be defined. There was often a crossover in how data appeared in themes, demonstrating the interrelatedness of these themes and how Indigenous people in this study reimagined Indigenous education through a discourse of excellence.

Subtheme 1: nurturing culture and identity

The essence of how identity was discussed in the context of excellence in Indigenous education is how identity can be a protective factor for Indigenous students in their resilience in navigating school settings. However, it was also about belonging and pride in a space that still perceives Indigeneity as a deficit attribute. For example, Uncle Frank shared, '*[In our school], once students knew their identity, they excelled. Nurturing identity and culture is very important, growing young people in an environment where being Indigenous was negative but turning that into a positive is reimaging the story for all Indigenous students*'. This was further strongly reinforced by Uncle Jim, who recognised that '*for Indigenous kids and for students who are thought to be in the bottom echelon of education, I think that's [culture and identity]… that's probably the only thing that gets them up and gets them to school. Because I mean, everyone needs to belong somewhere*'. For Kireene, culture and identity are '*very important to our people because if they don't know who they are or where they're from, they're lost*'.

Katelyn discussed why being strong in culture and identity is fundamental for all schools: '*Culture is what makes us who we are. And it is important to recognise the First People of this country and the Aboriginal people of this country are who we*

are and especially where our school sits…' Aboriginal teacher, Brooke, unpacked this further: '*Our white kids know where they fit in society. Many of our kids don't, sometimes they're not accepted in different communities. Kids who are fair like me don't fit with white or black. Identity is important for all kids. All kids need to fit – we are social creatures*'. Aunty Millie explained some practical ways schools do (and can) provide spaces that enhance identity work in schools: '*Culture and identity play an important role in students believing in themselves and striving to be the best version of themselves… Students have to know that they are included and recognised as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people… own space…to call their own [is important]. They like to be there*'.

Subtheme 2: building young people up

The theme of building young people up aligns with supporting young people's goals, achievements, and aspirations, and one person articulated this as empowering young people. Kireene discussed the connection between school and community as critical in building young people up. Kireene stated, '*I think we should have more activities and structural stuff for them after school to enable them to be encouraged by the local community. And to have that community support to say, "Hey you can do that. You know, we're here to help you. Let's rise together*"'. Uncle Frank discussed more school-based approaches to building Indigenous young people up, such as: '*letting our senior students take a lead role*' and '*encouraging Indigenous students to give feedback to teachers. Empower them to have a say*'. Aunty Millie articulated building young people up as: '*valuing education and its power to become what you want to be… [this can be] showcasing excellence – bringing back Murri students who have been successful, have had a good experience at school, and have a connection here to showcase excellence*'.

Theme 2: school culture and leadership

The culture of the school and the effectiveness of school leadership were the next prevalent themes to emerge in understanding how this group of Indigenous educators and community members conceptualised excellence in Indigenous education being enacted. Inclusivity is interconnected with the first emerging theme, which outlined strong data about identity and belonging. Not all Indigenous peoples in this study reported an existing inclusive culture. Elizabeth explained: '*There are certain rules for non-Indigenous [people] compared to Indigenous [people]. There is still that barrier of racism within the school that's been here since I went to school, when my parents went to school. It's the arrogance from certain staff who are also working as teachers and that you know are racist*'. Whilst Elizabeth was the only person to overtly discuss racism within the school setting, half of the participants did not mention racism or leadership.

Katelyn was clear that '*great leadership*' is key to aspiring toward excellence in Indigenous education. Katelyn further explained what great leadership in Indigenous

education looks like in practice: '*We have a very great leader here, our head of campus. He allows me in my role to look beyond and work. There's really… the restraints are not there. I'm able to look outside the box and work outside the box but in an educational… context*'. Brooke also talked about inclusivity as: '*making sure everyone is reflected in curriculum and pedagogy*' and understanding the criticality of '*leadership [and] training non-Indigenous staff – proper*'. For Uncle Frank, leadership means letting Aboriginal people lead – '*embracing Aboriginal kids/workers for leadership in the school*'. Aunty Millie further talked about the leadership Indigenous peoples already do in the school, and the positive impact that results in employing Indigenous peoples: '*Enrolment [of Indigenous students] has doubled since I got here*'.

Theme 3: relationships

Relationships were the third key theme to surface from the analysis of this data. Although this theme emerged from data where participants referred directly to relationships, relationships are referred to indirectly in other data. For example, Brooke talked about having high expectations of her students, and this was described as her being '*harder on Indigenous kids than non-Indigenous young people. I know how hard it is to break those expectations and pattern that's been set out for you [as an Indigenous person]*'. Brooke indicated that these high expectations are possible because of her relationships with these same students. Kireene also talked about the critical relationships between students and teachers: '*I reckon if the children love the teacher, they will want to come to school. It's up to how the teacher is engaging with the children… you don't want to come to school if you've got a grumpy teacher*'. Elizabeth shared that her schools need to be '*getting rid of staff that are racists, that treat our children differently to non-Indigenous students*'.

Missy talked about the quality of relationships and the importance of engagement with Indigenous students and families being grounded in relationships over the priorities of the school: '*It really does come down to building a relationship with the students, with the families, and showing them that it's not just another number and schools are very good on ticking that box for a number and even like when you're enrolling someone "do you identify" [question] Yes. Boom—that's another number that can be another teacher but then not utilised the best way*'. Missy is saying that there is an opportunity for schools to enter positive relationships from the enrolment process. Still, she sees the school taking funding for Indigenous enrolments and not being used effectively. Uncle Frank outlined the importance of Indigenous people and the knowledge that Indigenous people bring to a relationship: '*Sit and talk about issues such as car stealing and come up with shared ideas. We know what's best for our kids—include us in the conversation. If you've got a degree that's good but I've got a degree in life—being Aboriginal*'. For schools to access this knowledge that Uncle Frank speaks of, Brooke explains that they need to '*respect [community member's] time and knowledge. Pay people properly—65 000 years of knowledge that people expect for free. Don't expect it for nothing*'.

Significance for schools and educators

Three distinct themes emerged from the data from Indigenous participants in this study: the building of young person's identity; leadership and culture of inclusivity; and relationships. The most significant data came from a participant's emphatic proposal that nurturing cultural identities in schools is of the greatest importance in striving for excellence in Indigenous education. Whilst there is an abundance of research in the field of Indigenous education broadly (Lowe et al., 2019), there are limited studies that investigate that the role of identity affirming and outcomes for Indigenous students (Shay & Sarra, 2021). Jenlink and Townes (2009) advocate the need for a focus on identity in schools, particularly for students who belong to minorities. They further discussed the discourses of recognition and that often, minority students are recognised in their identities as perceived and reflected by dominant cultures.

Brown and Shay (2021) made an empirical argument for focussing on identity-building toward well-being in schools as an alternative to mental health approaches that dominate in schools. In Australia, approaches to counter mainstream ideas about Indigeneity are necessary due to the ongoing colonial and racialised constructs that continue to impact Indigenous students (and indeed staff) negatively in education settings (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). The focus on identity and culture in schools is supported by limited research undertaken in Australia. Most notably in Australia, Sarra (2014) established the criticality of shifting the ways that broader deficit ideologies impact how Indigenous students perceive their identities as Indigenous peoples. Sarra's scholarship emphasised the possibilities rendered when Indigenous peoples are given a positive framework to understand their cultures and identities. Lowe et al. (2021) completed a systematic review examining access to cultural and language programs and their impact on the learner identities of Indigenous students. They found an 'apparent causal connection between students' access to authentic, community-centric programmes and schooling engagement' (p. 89). Therefore, as outlined by Indigenous participants in this study, this priority is also well supported by the available research literature.

The second key theme, leadership and culture of inclusivity, is also consistent with research on the impact of leadership on inclusive school cultures and Indigenous education. For example, Trimmer et al. (2021) reported on findings from a systematic review that investigated the impact of school leadership on engagement and outcomes for Indigenous students. Trimmer et al. (2021) reported that existing evidence showed a need for the appointment of 'culturally competent leaders in Indigenous schools who are capable of implementing a shared model of leadership' (p. 31) and that the concept of 'co-leadership' is needed to work in meaningful partnership with Indigenous leaders. The importance here is about having leaders who are committed to 'authentic, purposeful and relationally based engagement between institutions and Aboriginal communities' (Australian TAFE Teacher, 2018), as stated by the participants interviewed. How educational leaders engage with the community is consequently important and depends on

the local context (Shay & Lampert, 2022). School leaders need to ensure they are working with their local community in a respectful way, valuing local knowledge, and authentically listening to issues of concern. A recent AITSL (2022) report, *Building a Culturally Responsive Australian Education Workforce*, suggests schools require strong and focussed leadership that enables the support and development of culturally responsive staff (AITSL, 2022) to support success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

Relationships, the third key theme, is also a significant finding. Many key activities outlined in Indigenous education research and policy include embedding Indigenous knowledge in curricula, employing Indigenous people in schools, and engaging with Indigenous communities (Phillips & Lampert, 2012; Sarra, 2011; Shay & Heck, 2015). However, the relational aspect of all these imperatives is often missing. Indigenous worldviews emphasise relationality as central to knowing, being, and doing (Martin, 2008). Graham (2014) explains that Aboriginal relationality is 'an elaborate, complex and refined system of social, moral, spiritual and community obligations that provided an ordered universe for people' (p. 2). When Indigenous peoples speak of relationships, this often holds different meanings of protocols, expectations, and politics; therefore, having a deeper understanding of how relationships can advance the idea of excellence in Indigenous education from multiple perspectives (critically, Indigenous perspectives) is vital. The Australian Education Review (Gillan et al., 2017) calls for the elevation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in education through fuller engagement by institutions, systems, and policymakers with families and communities (p. v).

Policy implications

The gathered data have significant policy implications. The United Nations recognises the ongoing impact of colonialism and its impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of indigenous peoples globally (United Nations, 2023). Many settler-colonial nations have been unsuccessful in their attempts to address educational inequalities through policy. Until recently, many of these policy approaches globally have elevated a narrative of the indigenous deficit by focussing on gaps and problems. There is an emergence outside of Australia of shifting policy emphases to the aspirational and emphasising how indigenous people conceptualise a discourse of excellence in indigenous education. For example, in Canada, the 'Mamàhtawiswin: The Wonder We Are born With—Indigenous Education Policy Framework' for Manitoba emphasises the aspirations, voices, and imperatives of First Nations, Metis, and Innuit learners and in underpinned to First Nations principles connected to a culturally constructed concept of excellence that is connected to equity, belonging, and success (Government of Manitoba, 2022).

Contrastingly, Australian Governments have identified Indigenous education policy priorities as increasing attendance, improving literacy and numeracy outcomes, and increasing school retention rates under Close the Gap (Australian Government, 2020a). Close the Gap has been critiqued for some time for its emphasis on quantitative measures of these policy priorities and the lack of qualitative data that

privileges the voices of Indigenous peoples. There is a clear disjuncture between the policy priorities outlined in Close the Gap and Indigenous people's perspectives in this study. This supports the need for more Indigenous voices in all aspects of education policy, program planning, and implementation (Gillan et al., 2017).

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (Australian Government, 2015) almost echoes the data reported in this paper with the top three priorities set out as (1) leadership, quality teaching, and workforce development; (2) culture and identity; and (3) partnerships. Whilst the vision for this strategy is clear, it is unclear how effective it has been in its implementation since 2015. This further raises the questions of accountability and evaluation, such as where and how Indigenous peoples' perspectives and aspirations are included in policy, and how will governments measure a policy's effectiveness if Indigenous peoples are not included in evaluating such policies? The Productivity Commission released the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy in October 2020 (Australian Government, 2020b). This strategy was released to recognise poor evaluation of Indigenous policy efficacy over decades, providing principles that should inform the evaluation of Indigenous policy and programs such as centring Indigenous people and priorities and enhancing the quality of evaluations. The strategy outlines that the education domain should be included in ensuring policy and programs are properly evaluated, centring the voices of Indigenous peoples. However, there is still very little publicly available evaluation of Indigenous education policy programs.

Conclusion

The data from Indigenous peoples who contributed to this study assist in developing an understanding of Indigenous voices and perspectives on what excellence in Indigenous education is or can be. We recognise the limitation of this being a relatively small cohort of Indigenous peoples and have not intended to homogenise Indigenous voices. However, the data provide new knowledge in a field saturated with research that is often small scale and contextual. The three contexts where the research occurred represent geographic and cultural/linguistic diversity. However, the data were relatively consistent across the sites.

We continue our research program on excellence in Indigenous education to empirically understand what excellence in Indigenous education is, particularly from Indigenous peoples. We cannot offer a firm definition of excellence in Indigenous education at this stage of the research. However, it is clear from these data that the emergent three priorities for this group of Indigenous peoples, in aspiring to excellence in Indigenous education, are centred on the young person (nurturing culture and identity), leadership and inclusive cultures, and relationships. The data reported on in this study were from a pilot, and as the study received further funding, the data will be further analysed as the data grow. Furthermore, these data will be looked at with the data from non-Indigenous educators and leaders to examine shared priorities and divergences.

Elizabeth was the only participant in this study who talked overtly about racism; however, much of the data are race-based (indeed, this study is race-based), and

the ways that race appears in the data are somewhat normalised and come from the assumption that race and thus racism is present and mediates everyday interactions in settings, including education (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). Deficit discourses discussed in literature appeared in the data in our study; there seems to be a connection between these discourses and the ability to conceptualise excellence in Indigenous education in both cohorts. Participants in this study talked about their reactions to the word excellence and how it impacted their ability to connect to the conversation, usually based on the pressure that the word excellence evoked. The findings show that employing a language underpinned by strengths can change the conversation and, indeed, the expectations and aspirations within the context of education. We understand that simply changing the language from 'closing the gap' to 'excellence' will not be a panacea for the challenges ahead in Indigenous education. However, we propose that framing Indigenous education through excellence or a similar word (this may be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language word) may prove a useful tool in shifting the ideology of policy and thus the interpretation of enactment in the field of Indigenous education.

This research shows how Indigenous peoples conceptualised excellence in Indigenous education in this study aligns with many of the initiatives and programs advocated for over a long period of time, such as Sarra's (2014) Stronger Smarter approach. There is a limited but growing body of research that supports identity affirming as a key priority in aiming toward excellence in Indigenous education, as identified by participants in this study. In addition to re-framing policy and practice approaches, a key consideration in moving forward is how policy makers and practitioners can enact what is now a growing body of evidence based on the voices of Indigenous people in reimagining Indigenous education.

Author contributions Not applicable as this piece was written by a single author.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript. The author Marnee Shay was supported by UQ (grant no. UQECR1946289).

Availability of data and materials Not applicable to this research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no known conflicts of interests for this paper. There was no funding for this paper hence no financial competing interests. There are no perceived personal competing interest as paper was written based on the researcher's personal experience. This paper is contributing to the emerging field of interest in Indigenous education regarding subject English and text selection and the sentiment of this piece is in line with other work published in this area.

Ethical approval No ethical applications were required for this paper as all data were drawn from the author's personal experience. Not applicable to this research.

References

Australian Government. (2015). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education strategy.* Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/indigenous-education/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education-strategy

Australian Government. (2020a). *National agreement on closing the gap*. https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap

Australian Government. (2020b). *Indigenous evaluation strategy.* Productivity Commission. https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy/contents

Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) Mentoring. (2021). *Imagination declaration.* https://aimementoring.com/wp1/uncategorised/imagination-declaration/

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). (2022). *Building a culturally responsive Australian education workforce.* https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/intercultural-development/building-a-culturally-responsive-australian-teaching-workforce

Australian TAFE Teacher. (2018). Achieving excellence in Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander Education. *Australian TAFE Teacher, 52*(3), 21.

Bergmark, U., & Kostenius, C. (2018). Appreciative student voice model—Reflecting on an appreciative inquiry research method for facilitating student voice processes. *Reflective Practice, 19*(5), 623–637. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1538954

Bessarab, D., & Ng'andu, B. (2010). Yarning about yarning as a legitimate method in Indigenous research. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies, 3*(1), 37–50. https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcis.v3i1.57

Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Carlson, B. (2016). The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 19*(4), 784–807. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.969224

Brown, C., & Shay, M. (2021). From resilience to wellbeing: Identity-building as an alternative framework for schools' role in promoting children's mental health. *Review of Education, 9*(2), 599–634. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3264

Carlson, B., & Frazer, R. (2021). *Indigenous digital life: The practice and politics of being indigenous on social media*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Day, C., Gu, Q., & Sammons, P. (2016). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a difference. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 52*(2), 221–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15616863

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Fitzgerald, R., & Housley, W. (2016). Categorisation, accounts, and motives: 'Letters-to-the-editor' and devolution in Wales. In J. Wilson & K. Stapleton (Eds.), *Devolution and Identity* (pp. 121–136). Routledge.

Fredericks, B., & Bradfield, A. (2021). 'Waiting with bated breath': Navigating the monstrous world of online racism. *M/C Journal*. https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2825

Gillan, K., Mellor, S., & Krakouer. (2017). *Australian education review—The case for urgency: Advocating for Indigenous voices in education.* Australian Council for Education Research. https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=aer

Government of Manitoba. (2022).*Mamàhtawisiwin: The wonder we are born with—An indigenous education policy framework*. https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/iid/docs/mam%C3%A0htawisiwin_en.pdf

Graham, M. (2014). Aboriginal notions of relationality and positionalism: A reply to Weber. *Global Discourse, 4*(1), 17–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.895931

Gray, J., & Partington, G. (2012). Attendance and non-attendance at school. In Q. Beresford, G. Partington, & G. Gower (Eds.), *Reform and resistance in Aboriginal education* (pp. 261–303). UWA Publishing.

Hameed, S., Shay, M., & Miller, J. (2021). 'Deadly leadership' in the pursuit of Indigenous education excellence. In D. Netolicky (Ed.), *Future alternatives for educational leadership* (pp. 93–110). Routledge.

Harrison, N. (2007). Where do we look now? The future of research in Indigenous Australian education. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 36*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1326011100004361

Hogarth, M. (2017). Speaking back to the deficit discourses: A theoretical and methodological approach. *Australian Educational Researcher, 44*(1), 21–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-017-0228-9

Hogarth, M. (2018). Talkin' bout a revolution: The call for transformation and reform in Indigenous education. *Australian Educational Researcher, 45*(5), 663–674. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-018-0277-8

Jenlink, P. M., & Townes, F. H. (Eds.). (2009). *The struggle for identity in today's schools: Cultural recognition in a time of increasing diversity*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Leat, D., & Thomas, U. (2018). Exploring the role of 'brokers' in developing a localised curriculum. *The Curriculum Journal, 29*(2), 201–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2018.1445513

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077

Lowe, K., Tennent, C., Guenther, J., Harrison, N., Burgess, C., Moodie, N., & Vass, G. (2019). 'Aboriginal Voices': An overview of the methodology applied in the systematic review of recent research across ten key areas of Australian Indigenous education. *Australian Educational Researcher, 46*(2), 213–229. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00307-5

Lowe, K., Tennent, C., Moodie, N., Guenther, J., & Burgess, C. (2021). School-based Indigenous cultural programs and their impact on Australian Indigenous students: A systematic review. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 49*(1), 78–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2020.1843137

Ludema, J. D., Cooperrider, D. L., & Barrett, F. J. (2006). Appreciative inquiry: The power of the unconditional positive question. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 155–165). Sage.

Martin, K. (2008). *Please knock before you enter: Aboriginal regulation of outsiders and the implications for researchers*. Post Pressed.

McGrath, C. (2014). *Indigenous excellence is personal, it's individual, and it's about education.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/01/indigenous-excellence-is-personal-its-individual-and-its-about-education

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The white possessive: Property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press.

Mulenga, E. (2022). *School-community linkage in the implementation of localised curriculum*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Zambia. UNZA Repository. http://dspace.unza.zm/handle/123456789/7811

National Centre for Indigenous Excellence. (2022). *About.* https://ncie.org.au/about/

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2018). *What is PISA?* https://www.oecd.org/pisa/

Phillips, J., & Lampert, J. (2012). Introduction: Constituting the space for embedding Indigenous perspectives. In J. Phillips & J. Lampert (Eds.), *Introductory Indigenous studies in education: Reflection and the importance of knowing* (2nd ed., pp. 1–6). Pearson Australia.

Punch, K. (2009). *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*. Sage.

Purdie, N., Tripcony, P., Boulton-Lewis, G., Fanshawe, J., & Gunstone, A. (2000). *Positive self-identity for Indigenous students and its relationship to school outcomes*. Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Reed, J. (2007). *Appreciative inquiry: Research for change*. Sage.

Rigney, L. I. (2001). A first perspective of Indigenous Australian participation in science: Framing Indigenous research towards Indigenous Australian intellectual sovereignty. *Kaurna Higher Education Journal, 7*, 1–13.

Sarra, C. (2011). *Strong and smart—Towards a pedagogy for emancipation: Education for first peoples*. Routledge.

Sarra, C. (2014). *Strong and smart—Towards a pedagogy for emancipation: Education for first peoples*. Routledge.

Schleicher, A. (2014). *Equity, excellence and inclusiveness in education policy lessons from around the world*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264214033-en

Shay, M., Woods, A., & Sarra, G. (2019, August 13). *The imagination declaration: Young Indigenous Australians want to be heard–but will we listen?*. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/the-imagination-declaration-young-indigenous-australians-want-to-be-heard-but-will-we-listen-121569

Shay, M. (2021). Extending the yarning yarn: Collaborative yarning methodology for ethical Indigenist education research. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 50*(1), 62–70. https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2018.25

Shay, M., & Heck, D. (2015). Alternative education engaging Indigenous young people: Flexi schooling in Queensland. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 44*(1), 37–47. https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.8

Shay, M., & Lampert, J. (2022). Community according to whom? An analysis of how Indigenous 'community' is defined in Australia's through growth to achievement 2018 report on equity in education. *Critical Studies in Education, 63*(1), 47–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1786709

Shay, M., & Oliver, R. (2021). Introduction. In M. Shay & R. Oliver (Eds.), *Indigenous education in Australia learning and teaching for deadly futures* (pp. 1–6). Routledge.

Shay, M., & Sarra, G. (2021). Locating the voices of Indigenous young people on identity in Australia: An Indigenist analysis. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 15*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2021.1907330

Shay, M., Sarra, G., & Woods, A. (2021). Strong identities, strong futures: Indigenous identities and well-being in schools. In M. Shay & R. Oliver (Eds.), *Indigenous education in Australia learning and teaching for deadly futures* (pp. 63–75). Routledge.

Trimmer, K., Dixon, R., & Guenther, J. (2021). School leadership and Aboriginal student outcomes: Systematic review. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 49*(1), 20–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2019.1685646

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Tschannen-Moran, B. (2011). Taking a strengths-based focus improves school climate. *Journal of School Leadership, 21*(3), 422–448. https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461102100305

United Nations. (2023). *Education*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous People. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/mandated-areas1/education.html

Walker, R. J. (1996). Excellence with decency. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 29*(1), 97–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/1066568960290118

Walter, M., Martin, K. L., & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2017). Indigenous children growing up strong: A longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. *Palgrave Macmillan*. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53435-4

Watkins, J. M., Mohr, B. J., & Kelly, R. (2011). *Appreciative inquiry change at the speed of imagination* (2nd ed.). Pfeiffer.

Willoughby, G., & Tosey, P. (2007). Imagine 'meadfield': Appreciative inquiry as a process for leading school improvement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 35*(4), 499–520. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143207081059

Yin, R. K. (2013). Validity and generalisation in future case study evaluations. *Evaluation, 19*(3), 321–332. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389013497081

Marnee Shay is an Associate Professor and a Principal Research Fellow in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. She is an Aboriginal woman with maternal connections to Wagiman Country (Daly River region, Northern Territory), born in Brisbane, with strong connections to Indigenous communities in South East Queensland. She has an extensive externally funded research program that spans the fields of Indigenous education, policy studies, flexi schooling, and youth studies. She has published in many journals, books, and scholarly media outlets. She is the Lead editor of a critical text in the field of Indigenous education, 'Indigenous education in Australia Learning and Teaching for Deadly

Futures', published by Routledge in 2021 (with Prof Oliver). The book won a national award for 'The Tertiary/VET Teaching and Learning Resource' (wholly Australian) category at the Education Publishing Awards Australia. Her research has substantially impacted policy and practice in her field. She has contributed to numerous policy submissions, non-traditional research outputs (such as podcasts), and school reviews. She serves on multiple Government and school boards and committees, including the Queensland Department of Education Ministerial Advisory Committee for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education.

Jodie Miller is an Associate Professor in mathematics education, in the School of Education at the University of Queensland, where she is currently the Deputy Head of School. Her research focusses on improving the educational outcomes of students most at risk of marginalisation in school, particularly in the fields of Mathematics and Indigenous education. She is internationally recognised for her research in early algebraic thinking and evidenced-based strategies to support engagement in mathematics in primary school settings. She leads research projects with a focus on classroom and mathematical practices, teacher professional development, culturally responsive teaching, and examining student understanding. This research has been conducted in countries including Australia, New Zealand, and Germany. In addition to this, her recent research collaborations focus on examining excellence in Indigenous education. This work is co-led with Associate Professor Marnee Shay, where the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are brought to the forefront to re-imagine the notion of excellence in Indigenous education.

Suraiya Hameed is an Interdisciplinary Leader, Educator, and Researcher specialised in Educational Leadership at University of Queensland. She researches within the areas of Educational Leadership, Global Policy and Education, and Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, and Culture. Her research projects aim to make that major breakthrough in the development of leaders supporting the schools of the twenty-first century. She is currently leading multiple international research which aims at engagement with international counterparts to improve educational outcomes and to generate networking opportunities with international educators and school leaders. Her extensive experiences in varied leadership roles have translated into positive student engagement, positive student's trajectories as well as ground-breaking research in the leadership front. It has also allowed her to contribute invaluably to the leadership field and assist in bridging the gap between theory and practice, thus assisting students and her other colleagues to make meaningful connections between theoretical constructs and real-life applications in leadership. She is a recipient of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) Commendation award recognising her work within the leadership space.

Danielle Armour is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. She has cultural links to Kamilaroi Country in Northern NSW through her paternal Grandmother. Her research area is in Aboriginal education, and she has been involved in longitudinal mathematical research projects. Her research explores the complexities of working in between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems particularly in education settings. She is expertised in working with community to ensure culturally responsive pedagogies are included in the school setting. Through this work, she has had the opportunity to co-design research projects with Elders and community members. Prior to undertaking a role within the university sector, she worked as a teacher both within urban and very remote settings.