

Yarning the Way: The role of Indigenous education paraprofessionals in guiding the post-school transitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth

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Cover art work

The cover art work is by the artist, Marissa Josselyn. She is a Guyinbaraay woman, an accomplished artist, and a Secondary Visual arts and Photography teacher, who likes to share her passion for contemporary and traditional art forms with her students. This artwork was completed in inks and water spray to keep the colour flowing and mixing. It depicts the ebb and flow of a river as it reaches the sandy shore. The Team chose this art work for the cover of the report as it reflected the wisdom of Aboriginal educators who describe guiding students into post-school education as 'the walk to the river' where sustained cultural guidance is key to ensuring success.

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1. Introduction

“I think it’s the walk of the river. The barrier is if they’re going to go into Uni...they need someone to walk with them. There’s got to be someone to show them this is the expectation, this is where you’ll go and you come with me and sort of like go there with them rather than just say here’s the map, you’ve got to go, go there, you’ve got to go there.”

Schools play a pivotal role in providing career education and knowledge about pathways into tertiary education; this is especially true for Indigenous students (Kinnane et al., 2014). The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* (Australia Government, 2015) has identified ‘Transition points including pathways to post-school options’ as a priority area for action. The most recent *Closing the Gap* report (Australian Government, 2018) highlighted that the target to halve the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment was on track. However, others have noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are vastly underrepresented in Year 11 and 12 academic courses that are the path to an ATAR that allows for direct entry to university (Behrendt et. al., 2012). The area of transition to post school education requires action. For example, in 2016 a significant proportion (42%) of young Indigenous people were not in employment, education or training (NEET) (Australian Government, 2018, p. 80). In general, the Indigenous population participate in Vocational Education and Training (VET) at a higher rate than the non-Indigenous population, with 18.7% of the 15 to 64-year-old Indigenous population enrolled in VET in 2015, compared with 9.3% of non-Indigenous 15 to 64-year-olds (Windley, 2017, p.21). There is however a lower Indigenous participation rate for higher education. In 2015, Indigenous students accounted for 1.6% of enrolments: for proportional representational parity, or equal share of enrolment to population, the percentage would need to be around 2.3% (Koshy, 2016).

The complex picture of positive growth and current challenges indicates a need to better understand how to best support Indigenous students in their career journeys within and beyond school. An essential element of career education is developing the knowledge and practical skills required to find out about the wide variety of available careers and the post-school education options that provide a pathway to these jobs. Undoubtedly, the educator’s role in this process is vital. While there is a body of research on the experiences of the professional and cultural roles assumed by Indigenous teachers (Burgess, 2016; Santoro, 2011), much less is known about the role of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators working in Australian schools. This includes the often overlooked but vital cultural and learning support provided by a group of educators we have called Indigenous education para- professionals (hereafter IEPs). The titles and functions of IEPs are varied but include paid educational positions within schools that are designed to support student learning. Some IEPs work in Indigenous identified positions, while other do not. IEP position include but are not limited to:

- Aboriginal/and Islander/Indigenous Education Officers
- Aboriginal/and Islander/ Indigenous Education Assistants
- Koorie Engagement Support Officer
- Aboriginal Community Education Officer
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Worker

- Norta Norta Tutor
- Aboriginal Early Years Worker
- Aboriginal Student Support Officer
- Aboriginal Male/Female Student Co-ordinator/Mentor
- Aboriginal Community Education Officers
- Cultural Advisors/Educators
- Community Liaison Officers
- Classroom Tutor
- Homework Tutor
- Learning Support Officer
- Student Literacy Support Officer
- Teacher's Assistant/Aid
- Special Education Support Assistant

IEPs do not generally have a teaching qualification or accreditation (hence the use of the term para- professional) and usually have a VET credential and/or are studying in VET or higher education. IEPs assist teachers, school administrators and students by: delivering learning support in class and specialised learning programs; liaising with Indigenous families on educational and pastoral matters; and acting as a 'lynch-pin' to authentically connect schools with local Indigenous communities to promote educational opportunity and respect for cultural ways of knowing, being and doing.

The aim of the research reported here, was to explore the wisdom of IEPs in their 'connecting' and 'translational' role, particularly as this related to guiding Indigenous students towards post-school education options. The study represented an attempt to fill a knowledge gap about an important yet often overlooked group of educators who have made a valuable contribution to Indigenous education in this country. The study was guided by the following questions:

Lead research question

What is the role of IEPs in working with Indigenous young people, their families and communities towards access to and participation in post-school education, particularly higher education?

Sub-research questions

- How do IEPs provide a role model for participation in higher education?
- How do IEPs act as conduits between young people, their families and their communities, and schools to practically facilitate access to and encourage participation in higher education?
- In what ways do IEPs communities come together, formally and informally, to encourage participation in higher education?
- What do IEPs identify as the enablers and barriers to post school education, including higher education, and what do they think should underpin policy and practice to address barriers?

2. Methodology

2.1 Study approach and ethics

The research was embedded within an Indigenous knowledges framework (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2003; Rigney, 1997). Nakata (2004) describes this framework as being 'different things in different places to different people. It is perceived as complex by most cultural outsiders because such knowledge does not easily fit into the scientific logics or western concept' (p.22). Smith (1999) writing of Kaupapa Maori research, explains the collectivist (holistic) approach to inquiry which encourages the researcher to work with the community on an equal basis to reach a shared understanding. The researcher negotiates at all levels of the research design with the community in the implementation, data collection and analysis to obtain cultural and political integrity in the research findings (Rigney, 1999). Henderson (1996) asserts that research design cannot and does not exist outside of a consideration of culture; therefore, our methodology must acknowledge the cultural aspect. This includes ethical practices which consider Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. During the project, communities were consulted usually through existing mechanisms such as local Aboriginal education consultative groups.

The project received institutional ethics approval from the University of Newcastle, Deakin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

2.2 Method and analysis

Yarning and yarning circles were the primary method used in the study. Yarning is an established cultural form that allows Indigenous communities to share knowledge in a respectful and inclusive way. In research contexts, yarning and yarning circles establish relationships of respect as part of gathering perspectives on a topic. Yarning circles direct a circular discussion on a topic related to the research questions, highlighting what participants know and how their knowledge adds to our understandings (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). During the yarning process, the researcher must enact careful listening and develop and build a relationship that is 'accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p.38), a type of accountability that is well established in the *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (AIATSIS 2012). As a method, yarning can create culturally safe research spaces which may enhance the validity of data (Drawson, Toombs & Mushquash, 2017).

Face-to-face individual yarning and yarning circles were conducted in New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Victoria. To participate in the project, participants had to be currently working in an IEP role and have had a minimum of two years' experience in an IEP role. Indigenous researchers in the universities located in each State/Territory facilitated the yarning which was guided by a schedule of discussion prompts including: the type of IEP role undertaken and the work associated with the role; perspectives on learning, career education and post-school transitions; enablers and barriers to post-school education; and ideas for policy and practice in this area. Yarning and yarning circles were between 20-90 minutes in duration depending on the number of participants and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In New South Wales, 2 individual yarning sessions and 7 yarning circles (with between 2-7 participants not including the facilitator) were conducted. In the Northern Territory, 1 individual yarning session and 3 yarning circles (with between 2-

4 participants not including the facilitator) were conducted. One yarning circle with 4 participants was conducted in Victoria.

The analytic process was dialogic and consisted of the research team initially meeting face-to-face for an intensive two day workshop to read the transcripts and discuss interpretation of the data. During the interpretative process, Indigenous members of the research team drew on cultural knowledges to gain intersubjective agreement on a series of thematic categories and sub-themes and identified which data reflected these (Kvale, 2007). Some thematic categories were subsequently synthesised by researchers from the University of Newcastle and sent to the group for discussion and consensus. This process was also used to develop the recommendations that conclude this report.

2.3 Participants

In all, 35 IEP participated in the study (23 Female, 12 Male). Twenty eight were employed in high schools and seven in primary schools. They were employed in a variety of positions including: Aboriginal Education Officer; Learning Support Officer; Norta Norta Tutor; Koorie Engagement Support Officer; Aboriginal Support Tutor; Aboriginal Mentor; Special Education Support Assistant; and Classroom Tutor. All participants worked in government schools. Table 1 provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

State	Gender		School employment	
	F	M	Primary	Secondary
New South Wales	12	10	1	21
Northern Territory	8	1	6	3
Victoria	3	1		4

3. Findings

“We need to stay true to ourselves and strengthen our identity and keep that strong along the way.”

In this section of the report, findings are reported according to two major themes: (1) Enabling educational futures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth; and (2) Understanding the contribution of Indigenous education paraprofessionals (IEPs) to learning and the transition to post-school careers and education. The first theme includes sub-themes of: culture and community; family; school; role models; and post-school transition and pathways. The second theme describes the importance of the IEP role for enabling futures for Indigenous youth. Both themes are complex and include inter-connecting ideas of culture, community, identity, well-being and belonging.

3.1 Enabling post-school educational futures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island youth

“I’ve tried the best with my kids to say that, ‘To become and to be proud Aboriginal people, change the stereotypes....Like, you are the change.’”

The theme of enabling post-school educational futures details the facilitators and barriers identified by IEPs. Culture, through the community and family, was identified as key to engaging and supporting Indigenous youth within the school system and beyond. Indigenous identity was seen as an integral part of culture, community and family. The lack of understanding of culture within schools is identified as a barrier to students and families engaging with schools as is negative family and community schooling experiences or intergenerational trauma. Family and the relationships between family and school, and family and community, are also identified as critical to encouraging students to engage with schooling and therefore education and employment options post-school. The IEP role was viewed as a crucial link in these relationships, particularly for those students whose family was in crisis, disengaged or unavailable, to the student.

3.1.1 Culture and community

Culture and community were viewed as very important; in particular it was important that IEPs were seen as part of both community and culture:

The biggest positive thing that we’ve got here is products (locals from) of our own community. I went to this school. [Name1] went to this school. [Name2] went to this school. [Name3] went to this school.

IEPs thought that building pride in culture and community enabled students to change or resist popular stereotypes:

I really think - I’ve tried the best with my kids to say that, ‘To become and to be proud Aboriginal people, change the stereotypes that media are saying that, you know, we’re all alcoholics, we’re all sniffing petrol, we’re all gamblers. Like, you are the change.’

But if they know their self-worth and they know that they are a proud Aboriginal person, and they can do what anyone else can do despite where they’ve, like,

where they've gone, where they've come from, where they're currently living that they can change that. I think that is a humungous barrier. If we can overcome that I think that can really - really set some sort of direction for kids. Absolutely.

The role of community in supporting transition and progression to university was recognised in a number of ways. For example, some local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) provided financial support:

I know our local AECG they go above and beyond to contact the schools with regular scholarships or help with tuition and things like that and we spread the word to try and get the kids to be involved.

[I]t's so amazing the difference of the relationship between schools and AECG and how that helps you know with students, their involvement with students and how they can also be part of that process of moving students beyond year 12 and what they do next...

IEPs explained the importance of engaging with community in order to develop a student's sense of belonging and identity, and this in turn would strengthen a young person to engage with schooling and explore post-school career goals:

I think that if you don't know who you are and you don't have that sense of belonging, then you're lost. It's like you've jumped in the car, you haven't got a destination to go to, you're driving around in circles. So it's – it just fills you up spiritually as well as culturally and there's no better feeling than having that connection to identity and who you are and you know, connection to home and all that sort of stuff.

Some participants raised the process of confirmation of Aboriginality, as well as related bureaucratic issues when enrolling and obtaining support at university, as problematic for some students:

I feel like we have an issue with probably three types of kids. We have kids that identify and understand, and we've got kids that identify and don't understand, and we've got kids that don't identify. But they're all Aboriginal. Or they all tick a box that says they're Aboriginal. But some tick that box and don't identify.

He had to prove he was Aboriginal. That's [name]. Remember eh? Because I said to him, I said, 'How do I have to prove? I'm black. I'm full blood,' I said, 'Don't worry mate, the thing is that they only know you as name. You're just a name and that's it. Just do what you've got to do. At the end of the day they'll determine if you're Aboriginal or not. You've got to keep fighting all the time. The fight still goes on today.'

Participants raised the issue of school-community engagement as it was often difficult for community and family members who had negative experiences at school, to go to the school. This could reinforce a 'disconnect' between community, family and the school:

There's a disconnect with families at times, like it really stood out last week when [a] class had a cultural day and families are required to go in and one man came along with his mate and his mate went in, but that man couldn't go into the room because of the memories evoked from his own [schooling]....So of course

when families have had that trauma themselves, they can't encourage their kids and so they sort of, you know, they don't see how important education is to break the cycle and I don't know what you can do with that.

3.1.2 Family

The support and encouragement of family was recognised as of prime importance to the engagement of students in schooling, which then impacted on the ability and enthusiasm of students to continue their education after leaving school:

I think family for any young kid is the biggest support base that you could have. It's just unfortunate that a lot of our kids don't have that.

So a lot of it, I think is that positive encouragement and the support at home. If they don't have support at home, then a lot of them feel like, 'why should I go to school?', there's no meaning to go to school, like, there's no reason so I think, yeah, that support and encouragement is a big thing for kids.

I've sort of found that definitely community and family has big major role. Like there are some people with the smarts there, they're sort of encouraged to be the first of their family to go to Uni and to break that barrier and close that gap down. So definitely family support is definitely a very huge one there and the local community around as well so...

I think families are important. It's the support of your family and encouragement from your family....I think there has to be a change at high school is we want our kids to succeed, we must support them more when they get to high school.

3.1.3 School

IEPs discussed the importance of the school principal as either an empowering or disempowering influence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff. Reasons for increased cultural presence within a school was often put down to the attitude of the principal to Indigenous education:

And you can do that stuff if the principal kind of feels - feels it's relevant.

[T]he only way that this room works so well is because we've got a principal who is happy to give us all positions in here and be really supportive in basically all the decisions that we make in order to benefit the kids here.

[A]t the previous school that I was at, the principal – when we went there and we presented something to him, he was all over it, he was on board and the staff was on board. It was a tight knit staff as well. We'd meet every Friday and have morning tea and everyone was there together and it just felt like it was a community within the school. Whereas here I think everyone is so time poor now. I think a lot of people put it down to is that everyone is so time poor. You tend to I guess stick within their own faculties.

Participants thought that schools that supported cultural as well as learning support programs, and worked with the community to develop these, were the most successful at engaging students in learning. Some also remarked on the need for culturally sensitive gendered programs:

Yeah, all schools need to be culturally inclusive. That's important. Kids have to feel like they belong.

There's programs that run for Aboriginal kids. In the school that I see, for mainstream, alright but then you need some cultural stuff in it. When I say cultural stuff I mean male and male and female and female. You can't have too many...females on males, the big boys especially. I see that happening a fair bit – not only at school but elsewhere. They really got to look at that stuff and if we want to bring our kids up to be strong, empower them to be strong in their culture, we've got to do it the right way from the start.

In some cases, participants thought that school and teacher expectation of Indigenous students needed to be lifted, with some teachers still expressing 'low' expectations of students. One participant related the following story about a student defying the low expectations of the school deputy principal:

Then the vice-principal at the time over there said to her... '[name], what do you want to do when you finish school?' She said, 'I'd like to study medicine.' The principal turned around and said, 'Oh, you wouldn't be able to do that. That's too hard for you.' So that negative, [name] took it and turned it into a positive. That's what drive her. She wanted to prove that she could do it, because she was told more or less that she couldn't do it. We know why. [name] came back after one year, after three years, I think, of Uni, the principal, that person saw her in the markets and said, 'Oh what are you doing these days [name]?' [She] just said 'I'm studying medicine. This is my third year.'

Some IEPs expressed concern about some teacher's inability to adapting their instructional styles so that the serious issue of illiteracy could be addressed:

Especially even in Year 11 and 12, once you're not in that class which is expected to get the Band 6 or Band 5, you're in another class and they treat you 'Oh, it's okay. You'll just get through,' and you know whatever. The expectations are really, really low of the whole class if you're not in English standard or you're not in an extension class or something like that.

There's so many of my Aboriginal kids are still illiterate because the teaching styles haven't really differentiated for them.

Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) were considered very important, especially when they were developed in partnership with community and family:

I think for me it would be the personalised learning plans; highlight them significantly because I think they're crucial in schools. I think they're looked upon as another piece of paper and I think they're really important if they're done right and they're reviewed and they've worked with community and they've worked with families to complete those personalised learning plans.

3.1.4 Role models

The availability of role models, from family, community, school or elsewhere, was recognised as pivotal for Indigenous students:

[S]o with the role modelling it doesn't always have to be the parents because in my line of work if I say a child that had possibilities and had a goal and the parents weren't in that space I would work with the child to let them know ... and to let them know that where their parents is at is where they're at and if they're not able to support it's because they don't have the means, they don't have the ability but that doesn't determine who you are. But it is important and there would be something to help that person feel like that, there would be a feeling, it would be like an embedded knowing. But some kind of role modelling, some person that they could go to and get real support...

[T]hey need one significant person in their life that believes in them and if they haven't got that significant person, basically they're lost, a lot of them.

[S]ometimes our best role model is the person outside the family. When you're dealing with resilience one of the questions asked is who do you have that's outside of the family not related that you could go to at any time to talk with and that always seems to me to be really important because their parents aren't always – their parents are often traumatised...

3.1.5 Post-school transitions and educational pathways

Participants identified key aspects of post-school transition and educational pathways as: high expectations from community, family and school; the timely provision of information; and access to people who could provide timely and ongoing support for the student on their career journey. Support could be financial or emotional, from family, friends and community. Participants stressed the need to continually give students a reason 'why' they should go onto post school education:

[T]he rest of the kids...they don't particularly value properly because they understand life to be different. That's all. They're not dumb and they're not smart. They're just kids that identify and understand what it means to sit at home with your Nan and do as she says. They don't need anything else. They're not aspiring to anything else... Yet we tell them to go to Uni and go to Uni and go to Uni ...and they can't see why. But we never give them a reason to see why.

Some IEPs stressed the legitimacy of alternative pathways into VET or higher education and the need to be aware of the costs and benefits. The following quote illustrates this in relation to university:

And if you feel like you want to do this for a little while or do that, just kind of feel your way through. You don't have to go straight to Uni and you don't have to be – if you want to be a lawyer, you know, maybe try something along this way and see if you like it. In Uni, get yourself in that – you have to pay HECS for that and if you're changing it, you have to pay HECS for this.

Participants thought that alternative pathways into university, in particular, needed to be made more apparent to students and their families. Knowledge about alternative pathways made the transition from school easier and empowered students to make good decisions about their future:

[What is needed is] maybe education around the different pathways into Uni just in case they fret that they're not going to get their ATAR. Like for example another student of mine, she didn't quite get the ATAR and she was devastated that she wouldn't go into her dream sort of degree was psychology and I was able to, I knew her before she was one of my first students. I sort of suggested because of having my role...student transition into like tertiary education. So yeah, I just informed her of different pathways.... She's now finished her third year in psych and going onto her fourth year next year...

The provision of 'taster days' or university experience days were considered useful for students who needed to time and information to explore career options:

So they get to have, like, an open day here on campus; see what a day to day life is, see the lecture theatres and [degree program] really works on the kids on understanding who they are as a person and what's your dreams and aspirations. If you don't think of things that you like and write them down - so at the end of the day it's like a big worksheet that they've done, which they've kind of allowed themselves to reflect on who they are as a person,... what kind of job they might be interested in when...they're older.

We're going to [name] University, they've invited us for the week to come down and check out what Uni is all about down there. So everyone's going to get a taster of the courses. Whether it be nursing, animal science, policing, teaching, engineering. Like a whole scope of things so students know what to expect if they go to a university like [name], the cultural support that's available and what Uni life is basically like.

Offering Indigenous students a range of opportunities, from the primary years through to senior secondary school, to explore and try out career options with their families engaged in this process, was considered imperative to facilitating positive post-school transitions.

3.2. The role of Indigenous education paraprofessionals in enabling positive futures

"And the beauty of us within school is that we're so thankful for community because they put us in the position that we're in now. We are thankful for them old people that have fought hard to have these positions in schools and they had the connection with community so we need to have that if this is going to be successful. So we feel like we're working for them, you know."

3.2.1 Perspectives on the value of the IEP role

Participants were a diverse group, ranging from young people studying at university to older people who had worked in IEP roles for over twenty five years. Many had a range of experiences in the job market and life, with a few completing degrees or others holding VET qualifications. Others had deep life experience, and most talked about a connection to culture, Country and community. Some described how they entered into an IEP role after becoming involved in local education in a voluntary capacity:

One of my principals came up to me because I'm also involved with AECG, so I have that connection with the primary schools and the principals. She said to me,

'[Name], do you want this Aboriginal teaching job?' I was, like, 'I can't do that. I've just finished school. I don't know what I'll be to support the kids.' Then I ended up going for it.

There was a range of opinion from participants on whether their role was valued or really understood in the school. Some thought they were well respected for their cultural and learning knowledge and that teachers sought them out because of this, while others described some 'stigma' attached to the role and a lack of understanding by non-Indigenous staff members on their connection to Indigenous communities:

It comes back down to creating that stigma of an educational professional support person. Like [colleague] said earlier, like, our elders and our family members that are our – are our knowledge holders, you know, they are – that is our- we see that as our support person. But within, you know, a schooling system it's so different.

It's our relationships with the kids provide that information. So, we've put in the time to get to know them, get to know how they like to be treated, how they don't like to be treated, things like that and then we can pass that on to teachers. I know a lot of teachers ask me, this kid shuts down, how do I connect with them and I'll give examples of things that they can try in the classroom and stuff like that.

The actual roles varied greatly, sometimes dependent on the approach of the school principal. Some roles were well defined and related mainly to student learning support while others covered cultural teaching and learning, pastoral care, community liaison, professional development for teachers, and family support. A few roles included post-school follow-up with students who continue with post-secondary schooling. The following quote exemplifies the activities undertaken by IEPs who had a broad role within the school community:

[W]hat my role entails is across the board. It's pretty much like a – like having a youth centre inside of a school. So, I do a range of things. I do attendance. I do – I help as a team I suppose with [colleague], [colleague] and the whole team. We work together as NAIDOC day celebrations, individual learning support for individual children, students, [personalised learning plans] PLP's, cultural programming through the whole school. So, we work with the teachers as well. I run a boy's group. Also, I do a lot with the parents as well. We all deal with parents... mediation between students, Aboriginal students. So, when there is conflict within the community we meet together at the school without that conflict coming to the school as well.

IEPs had important cultural responsibilities beyond their official job descriptions as these participants explained:

[G]iving our kids confidence about who they are, of their identity. I see that as the basis for everything. Who are you and where do you come from?

We're family to them. We're seen as elders. Like I said to this group of kids, I growled, I said 'I don't like growling at you, but what happens when you are at home? Do your parents growl at you?' They said, 'Yeah.'

[T]he relationships is highly important to our kids because without at least one person in the school building a good rapport with the kids, they don't respond because they know if you don't care and then they don't care..

We do everything as we are, as a circle. We talked a bit about yarning circles. We promote that to the staff. That's part of our job. We promote eight ways of learning to the staff, also part of our job. I'm on the connecting to country committee and also now for next year [colleague] will be on that because I'm also outside this role the vice president of our local AECG...

It's about – yeah, being Aboriginal 24/7 and being out there and being immersed on the stuff with the community and that way you form those networks and those connections.

These roles provide connection between all the components that contribute to the education of an Indigenous student; family, community, culture, school, peers, teachers – as well as the institutions and other community groups that were important to ensuring opportunities for students. Participants perceived their contribution and usefulness in a much wider, more holistic manner, than a single job title or description might encompass. For example, the links between learning, the teacher and the student is elucidated in the following ways:

I work with teachers, I work with – I've just begun working with learning support staff and giving them tools in a situation with a child that they're working with and they're hysterical, showing them how to bring the child into the body and asking the child questions that will give the child a positive answer and a turnaround from what they first believed.

So, I suppose the role is to go - for the junior school to go into class and assist the students with learning life. That's how I like to think about it. If they have problems, rather than wait for them to come to us which rarely happens, that way we can fix any problems they have as it happens, assist with their learning and so we're building that relationship with them because you're going to have days where kids don't really want to learn.

Professional development of teaching and professional staff at schools is, for some, part of the role:

And now staff are going to do cultural awareness courses held by [name] in [program name] ... if we have a large enough amount of staff going to do that and that cultural understanding in the school. We're doing so many more professional development days to have that understanding within the school. I think that will eventually overcome some of the barriers.

In addition to the community linking role and providing learning support, many IEPs took on a pastoral care for students in difficult, crisis or traumatic situations:

[W]e tend to spend a lot of time putting spot fires out with the kids that have got, you know, some wellbeing issues which is not our primary role, you know, but a lot of the time, they put us in those situations because they know we've got

the relationship with the kids and we can settle them down and we can control them sometimes for the teachers as well, you know.

I work with families in grief, in separation and usually if there's an issue in the school with a child I'll work with the child - but always work with the family - because if one person in a family has got a problem everybody has a problem so I work with the whole family. Sometimes I just work with the mum and when I work with the mum and change her perception of the issue or she changes her perception of the issue then that means that she can take charge of what she needs to for the child so when the child can take the leader serious and believes in the leader then the child is confident and will also feel comfortable and I think they learn their esteem from that as well, they learn to believe in themselves and trust, trust is a really big thing.

A lot of students as well you know they may have parents or you know, they live with Nan and Pop or whoever who haven't done, who maybe didn't reach that part of their [education] so they're not really sure how to support the student and that can be really tough too. The student is going home and they've got an English essay to write. They don't have the assistance there and then they freak out about it and then you come to school still freaked out and that's when we're able to help tackle the problem but the time in between yeah, it creates that whole you know, I'm not good enough, I can't do this, I don't get it, I'm just going to give up.

In relation to post-school transitions a few schools offered post-school support, either formally or informally. In formal support programs, the ex-students were contacted to check on their progress and need for information and/or further support. Where this was informal, IEPs kept in touch with ex-students and their family through community connections. IEPs identified that a lack of formal follow-up was problematic because the school community could not share successes:

Because we don't have follow up, we don't really know except through hearsay what happens to them. We don't have a tracking process so we – I know that last year, someone did his electrical apprenticeship, someone was going to do a carpentry apprenticeship and not many students really go to university from this school. Our Indigenous students. This year, we may have one going to do music...And our brightest student, she wants to go on to do a Cert II in Animal Studies. So no, we don't have many stories at all.

3.2.3 Indigenous Education Paraprofessionals as role models

Participants described their position as role models as something that came with the job, although many had also been community role models before this:

I think if we weren't good role models we wouldn't be in these roles, but, just, I think, knowing both, all of us, anyway, we all have a healthy lifestyle, as well, inside and outside of school and we're respectable people.

I do. I think of myself as a bit of a role model for the boys. Just someone to look up to. I feel like I'm doing really good in the community. I work at the high school. Got myself a few nice things, a car, a boat, a motorbike. Try and keep

myself as involved as I can in the community. Go to meetings, etc. Play footy. And all the young boys – even the girls and stuff, like, someone to look up to. The boys are sort of ‘Oh you play footy!’

Participants thought that IEPs should come from all walks of life, from those with deep life experience to people with a VET qualification or a university degree. This diversity was a model for success in all shapes and forms, including post-school education achievement:

I think it's really important to have a mixture of Aboriginal people who do work in schools. You know, I've worked with people who are a little bit older and they didn't have the chance I guess or they didn't really see at the time the need to go on to year 11 and 12. So I guess when you have a mixture of people who the students who have gone on to year 11 and 12 who haven't, and have done all these other things in life, it sort of show students, that at the end of the day or years later you are able to come around and do what you want. But I guess with my where I'm at, you know, I've gone on from school, got a degree and like here I am making sure that students can see their potential and that they're supported at school to make sure they can go on to whatever it is, further tertiary education, TAFE, trade, whatever it is...

Many IEPs thought as role models they were well positioned, both in community and as a bridge to educational institutions, for guiding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people towards making a positive transition into work and post-school education. As the following participant eloquently summed up, young people needed more than an impersonal 'map' of post-school education options; they needed a trusted Indigenous person to help them on the way:

I think it's the walk of the river. The barrier is if they're going to go into Uni...but I think they need someone to walk with them...there's got to be someone to show them this is the expectation, this is where you'll go and you come with me and sort of like go there with them rather than just say here's the map, you've got to go, go there, you've got to go there.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

At the conclusion of the final day of interpreting and analysing participant's stories and learning from their wisdom, the research team developed this set of recommendations for action:

1. There is a need to nationally scope the types of credentials (e.g. Certificate, Diploma, Associate/Sub-bachelor Degrees) that are targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking to become education paraprofessionals in order to ascertain both the quality of the credential and to provide information about options for qualifications for those seeking a career path into this area.
2. There is a need to more systematically include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education paraprofessionals, in each state and territory, in Indigenous education advisory group/and or consultative processes.
3. Research is required on models for and the efficacy of school-based programs which follow-up and follow through with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as they make their transition out of school and into employment and/or tertiary education. Case studies describing such transition programs and evaluations of the impact of these should be produced and made publicly available. Indigenous school staff should play a key role in collect, utilising and responding to data on transition outcomes.
4. More research is required on the important transition points for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; that is, in transitions between early childhood programs and centres into primary school, from primary to secondary school, and from secondary to tertiary education.
5. Options for improving financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in VET and higher education are required, particularly when students need to move out of home to pursue study.
6. Students require support when they are at school to obtain Confirmation of Aboriginality; this can greatly assist them with accessing the Abstudy Living Allowance, in securing cultural and learning support and scholarships in VET and at university, and in being considered for specialised placements, traineeships and internships. School principals require training and guidelines on this process.
7. Schools require additional support to provide diverse and aspirational work experience placements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
8. Indigenous education paraprofessionals should be involved in producing case studies on best practice for developing culturally safe and inclusive Indigenous spaces within schools and as part of school culture.
9. It is urgent that the literacy and numeracy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students be addressed at a national level. This includes listening and responding to the ideas of Indigenous education paraprofessionals in these important areas of learning.
10. State and national statistics on Indigenous access to and participation in ATAR subjects and outcomes for Indigenous students must be made publically available on an annual basis.

11. In order to further develop culturally effective programs and approaches, more research is required on the 'lost kids' - those who don't complete high school or go on to further education either directly from school or via an alternative pathway.

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