

Counter stories: The voices of Indigenous peoples undertaking educative roles in flexi schools

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This paper reports on findings from the first author's doctoral research examining the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Australian flexi schools. "Collaborative yarning methodology" storyboarding was used to hear (and theme) the collective experiences of Indigenous teaching and non-teaching staff in these alternative school settings, where both they and Indigenous students make up a larger proportion of Indigenous people in the school than in mainstream schools. Informed by Indigenist and critical race theory, 19 Indigenous staff members contributed to knowledge around three themes: Us mob, Race and racism, and Practice. The latter incorporated discussions both of curriculum and funding issues. Many Indigenous staff were working in flexi schools through choice and a sense of commitment to working with Indigenous youth. However, other issues, such as experiences of racism, were still present despite the "social justice" nature of flexi schools.

Keywords: Indigenous education, flexi schooling, Indigenous educators, Indigenous voices, racism

Introduction

Alternative schooling has become a global phenomenon. The field of alternative education internationally includes diverse schooling types, whereby there is commonly an emphasis on smaller learning environments and personalised learning (Mills & McCluskey, 2018). The array of alternative programs and schools for young people was mapped in Australia by Kitty te Riele (2007) to assist in understanding how alternative education provision in Australia was emerging. Kitty te Riele (2007) developed a typology of the differentiated alternative education models as either being long-term or short-term options, some designed for changing the provision of education to meet the needs of young people and others for changing the young person to meet the needs of the system. The research that informs this paper focuses on Indigenous engagement in flexi schools; thus, it is important to distinguish its concern with what te Riele identifies as the longer-term alternative settings that aim to change educational provision to meet the needs of young people.

The term *flexi school* is used in this paper as the preferred language to describe alternative schools in Australia that support young people who have been disenfranchised from education to re-engage in schooling (Shay, 2015). We use this term because it is the preferred and recognisable term used by practitioners in Australia; however, it is important to acknowledge that in international contexts the term flexi school has different meanings. For example, in England, flexi schooling refers to students who have flexible arrangements with their schooling provider, whereby a student may arrange to attend school on certain days and have alternative learning occur on days when they are not attending school (Poultney & Anderson, 2019).

This paper reports on findings from a doctoral study by the first author, where the focus was to centre and privilege the voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples undertaking professional educative roles in alternative or flexi school contexts in Australia. As an Aboriginal (Wagiman) researcher and experienced teacher in flexi school settings, the first author is uniquely positioned to both conceptualise the research problem and undertake the study as part of the doctoral thesis. The second author is an Aboriginal (Birrigubba) and Torres Strait Islander (Eastern and Murray Islands) academic with experience in teaching, leadership and research in areas that utilise Indigenous knowledges and frameworks that challenge underlying assumptions and stereotypes that contribute to the lack of success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The third author is a non-Indigenous academic who began working in the education sector teaching adult literacy in prisons and other alternative settings in Canada, and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Far North Queensland after moving to Australia.

Flexi schools are engaging with high numbers of Indigenous people in Australia (Shay, 2018; Shay & Heck, 2015), yet this context of schooling is relatively absent from broader Indigenous education literature and policy. The findings from this study documenting the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employed in alternative or flexi school contexts in Australia have micro and macro implications for Indigenous education, both in policy and in practice, and the growing flexi schooling or alternative sector in Australia.

Gaps widening and more flexi schools opening: How Indigenous education and flexi schooling quietly converged

The policy setting in Indigenous education over the past decade or more has emphasised imperatives to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students across the areas of early childhood, literacy and numeracy skills, attendance and Year 12 completion rates (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). The close the gap agenda is not without critique; some scholars have documented their concerns about the ways in which such policy discourse and approaches position Indigenous students and their families as failures, without sufficient examination of the role of schools and educational institutions, education leaders and policy makers (Bishop & Vass, 2021; Hogarth, 2017; McKinley, 2017). Scholars such as Sarra and Shay (2019) propose that focusing on gaps and deficits only positions Indigenous students as the problem. While debate has ensued in the literature about both policy and practice, the data has consistently indicated limited improved educational outcomes for Indigenous young people (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020; Gunstone, 2012). The *Closing the Gap Report 2020* tells the story of Australia's ongoing failure to make any significant gains in improving educational outcomes, despite over a decade of concerted policy efforts, with only two of the education targets reported to be on track; namely, to reach 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood and to halve the gap for Indigenous people aged 20 to 24 to have Year 12 or equivalent attainment by 2020 (note the latter

goal was to halve the gap, not close it) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Moreover, research that centres the voices of Indigenous people in defining educational success and excellence is still emerging (Australian Government, 2019; Guenther et al., 2013; Lowe et al., 2019).

While most people who are familiar with Indigenous education policy, research and practice are all too familiar with the close the gap narrative, a somewhat unknown aspect of Indigenous education is the role of flexi schools in working with young people who have been disenfranchised or excluded from accessing mainstream schooling options. Flexi school research in Australia is still emerging, but it is well established that the cohort of young people who attend flexi schools have often experienced trauma, are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have interacted with the youth justice or child protection systems, have experienced marginalisation because of their gender identities or sexuality, have experienced bullying, have diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues, have alcohol or drug misuse issues, or have experienced other forms of discrimination (Morgan et al., 2014; Shay et al., 2016). In addition to these factors, in past research, a picture of very high enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people emerged on a smaller data set (Shay, 2018; Shay & Heck, 2015). A young person's Indigeneity can, in many instances, incorporate the factors mentioned above as well. Furthermore, it is recognised across the flexi school sector that somewhere between 35 and 45 per cent of young people enrolled in flexi schools (longer-term, aimed at changing educational provision to meet the needs of young people) are Indigenous (Shay & Lampert, 2018). Some flexi schools located in regional and remote locations have at times had an enrolment of 100 per cent Indigenous students. Engagement of Indigenous young people in flexi schools has featured in broader studies in the field (Mills & McGregor, 2010; te Riele, 2012); however, there has been very little explicit research or inquiry into the significance of this, particularly in relation to the broader Indigenous education landscape.

As flexi schools are sites young people access when they have been disenfranchised from mainstream schooling, flexi schools can offer answers to complex questions that have not been resolved in mainstream settings (Shay & Lampert, 2018; te Riele et al., 2020). For example, when the data demonstrates, amongst other things, that mainstream settings are not providing engaging learning experiences for many Indigenous young people, as evidenced by school completion rates and other CTG data (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), there is a lot to learn from a context that is able to engage the very same cohort of young people. Shay and Heck (2015) propose that there is emerging evidence that the centrality of relationships/relational practices, the focus on community, and young people emphasising their voices and choices may be connected to why flexi schools have been successful in engaging Indigenous learners where mainstream schools have not been as successful. However, there is much more depth required in understanding the quality of engagement and whether engagement in flexi schools has resulted in educational outcomes for Indigenous youth as outlined in key Indigenous education policies, such as literacy and numeracy outcomes and Year 12 completion rates (Shay & Lampert, 2018). Furthermore, there is little publicly available data reported on how flexi schools perform on other key objectives outlined in Indigenous education literature, such as increasing numbers and employment of Indigenous teachers (Australian Government, 2014; Landertinger et al., 2021), effective and sustained embedding of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Sarra, 2011), and providing opportunities for Indigenous leadership and self-determination (Davis, 2018; Gillan et al., 2017).

The Australian Government announced a "co-design" approach to policy and program development in 2019 (Australian Government, 2019), indicating a new centring of Indigenous voices and aspirations in the goal to shift the lack of improvement across a range of social, educational, health and justice indicators. This centrality and ascension of Indigenous voices should be visible across all educational

contexts, including flexi schools. This is particularly important in this context because of the high numbers of Indigenous young people engaging in these schooling settings, particularly young people who are often facing multiple systemic and individual challenges.

The distinct contribution of Indigenous people in professional roles in schools

Indigenous people have played critical roles in many facets of Indigenous education, including supporting Indigenous learners, family and community engagement, teaching, providing specialist advice on the embedding of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, and providing specialist cultural advice to school leaders and teachers (Shay, 2017). Some research to date on the topic of flexi schooling has focused on the roles of Indigenous teachers and the role of Indigenous education workers (this type of role is titled differently depending on the educational jurisdiction). There is a growing body of scholarship on what these contributions mean in relation to the schooling experiences not only of Indigenous students, but all students. Many of the findings conclude that Indigenous people are undertaking critical roles in often precarious environments (Shay, 2017).

The roles of Indigenous education workers (hereafter referred to as IEW) have been examined across jurisdictions, with many of the studies reporting on the diversity of the roles and the great breadth of services (Buckskin et al., 1994). The historical study by Buckskin et al. (1994) expressed strong concerns about IEW's lack of employment stability and career pathway support. The same concerns were also raised more recently in the MCEETYA report (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000) that highlighted the importance of providing permanent roles with professional development opportunities in contributing to the overall aim of improving educational outcomes for Indigenous young people. Nearly two decades after the Buckskin et al. report, Gower et al. (2011) reported similar findings from a study of IEW roles in Western Australia. The authors reported that, not only was there a lack of career pathways, there was often a lack of recognition of the skills and roles of IEWs at a school level; further, there was often no systematic record of what professional roles IEWs were undertaking. A large empirical study of Indigenous education in Australia by Luke et al. (2013) similarly echoed concerning findings about the lack of support for IEWs in schools, outlining that their roles were often "reactive" and working conditions were "insecure" (p. 3). The findings were similar in studies that focused on the experiences of Indigenous teachers. The overall findings reported that Indigenous teachers were expected to be all-things-Indigenous to a school (Santoro & Reid, 2006; Santoro et al., 2011). This is a form of systemic racism due to the racialisation of Indigenous teachers and the ways in which schools expect different performativity from teachers who are Indigenous. The issues, including racism in general (Hogarth, 2019), appear to be similar across the research for any Indigenous professional performing an educative role, whether as an IEW or as a qualified classroom teacher.

The body of literature on the roles of Indigenous teachers and leaders in education is growing. Recognised as a way forward in addressing some of the concerns in the literature on IEWs and in acknowledging the importance to Indigenous students of having positive role models (Malin, 1994), increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers has been the focus of two major government-supported initiatives. The first systemic push to increase the numbers of Indigenous teachers emerged in the late 1980s with a call for 1000 teachers by 1990 (Lane, 1991). The target was not reached but the idea was regenerated again in 2011 through a large funded project called MATSITI—the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative. This multidimensional project investigated evidence-based strategies to support increased Indigenous teacher numbers, as well as retention of qualified Indigenous

teachers in schools. Around the time of this project, it was reported that the Indigenous teacher workforce made up only 1.2 per cent, when the Indigenous student population in the same period was 4.9 per cent (Australian Government, 2014). Some of the reasons for these low numbers have been reported in other studies, such as research by Santoro et al. (2011) exploring why Indigenous teachers leave the profession. The authors found that Indigenous teachers in this study felt they had extra and unreasonable expectations placed upon them in addition to their responsibilities as teachers, mostly in relation to their identities as Indigenous peoples. Indigenous teachers in this study felt that schools expected Indigenous teachers to be a channel between the school and the Indigenous community, which should be the role of all in the school, not just Indigenous professionals (Santoro et al., 2011).

While there is some literature available on the experiences of Indigenous people undertaking educative roles in mainstream school settings, there is little existing research on the professional educative roles and contributions that Indigenous peoples are undertaking in flexi school settings. Although it has been reported that there are disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous students in these schooling contexts, estimated between 30 and 40 per cent (Shay & Heck, 2015; Shay & Lampert, 2018), the important dimension of how flexi schools have responded to these high numbers through employing Indigenous peoples has been absent from the literature. In a small survey-based study that examined leadership in Indigenous education in flexi schools, Shay and Heck (2015) reported Indigenous professionals made up 29.56 per cent of their total workforce. This data, together with a pattern of findings from studies of the experiences of Indigenous educators in mainstream settings above, provided the impetus for the doctoral study reported on in this paper.

Theoretical underpinnings and research design

There are two research questions reported on in this paper: How do Indigenous staff describe their experiences and roles working in flexi schools?; How do Indigenous staff believe constructions of race and issues of racism impact upon their roles with respect to pedagogy, curriculum and policy?

This study was framed by Indigenist theory developed by Rigney (2001), whereby the entire research design was governed by three underpinning principles: resistance as the emancipatory imperative, political integrity, and privileging the voices of Indigenous peoples. Rigney's Indigenist theory works alongside critical race theory to enable specific questions and inquiry about issues of race and racism in investigating the research questions. Solorzano and Yosso's (2001) theoretical approach to race research outlines principles that align with Rigney's Indigenist principles, including challenging dominant ideologies, centrality of experiential knowledges, commitment to social justice interdisciplinary perspectives to enhance critical inquiries, and ensuring the centrality of race also recognises intersectionalities. Ladson-Billings's (1998) critical race theory in education provided four focus areas of exploration in listening to the voices and experiences of Indigenous people undertaking educative roles in flexi schools. The four focus areas that informed the development of research questions were curriculum, instruction (pedagogy), assessment and funding (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Yarning and storyboarding were utilised as the principal approach to data collection in this study (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Stuart, 2012). These critical-race-informed methods were trialled and subsequently extended through this study into what came to be called "collaborative yarning methodology" (Shay, 2019), which enabled participants to centre yarning as a principal way of exploring their experiences while providing the Indigenous researcher with governance over how the data was

recorded in a safe and culturally appropriate way. This original collaborative yarning methodology also allowed for participants to co-analyse their own experiences, thus improving data integrity and accuracy.

Storyboards are a textual record of the yarns, which took place across a one-day workshop. The storyboards were recorded on large sheets of paper that were accessible at all times during the day and re-visited at various times throughout the research workshops. Having the data visually represented to participants meant that there was transparency in how data was recorded and what was being recorded and represented. This changed the dynamic between the researcher and participants to a more informal and relational approach in developing the knowledge produced (Shay, 2019).

Co-analysis of the storyboards took place in the research workshop, with participants undertaking initial observations of themes and patterns from different perspectives across each storyboard. These analyses were combined with author one's analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was undertaken. The data was then coded and themed accordingly under the workshop themes of Us mob, Race and racism, and Practice. These themes, linked to the research questions, emerged from the data and were analysed using the principles from the underpinning theoretical approach to the study.

Participants

Purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2007) was used to determine participants for this study. Participants were employed in professional roles in the kinds of long-term flexi schools whose purpose was not to reintegrate young people back into a mainstream classroom, but to meet their long-term needs (te Riele, 2007). All participants identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Eight flexi schools from three States in Australia (Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria) are represented in the participant group, with a total of 19 Indigenous staff participating. The *My School* website classified the geographical locations of the sites at the time of the analysis in 2016 as being metro (*n*5), provincial (*n*2) and remote (*n*1) (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2016).

Diverse professional roles, job titles, gender and age demographics were represented in this study. The majority of participants are what would be termed "support workers" in mainstream settings, with job titles such as student support worker, youth worker, teacher aide, administration officer, family support officer and Indigenous education worker (IEW). There was only one school principal and one teacher who participated in the study. The number of participants means that these findings are not intended to be generalisable. However, the diversity of representation, depth of the data and the positionality of the researcher enabled critical data to emerge to develop an initial understanding of the roles and voices of Indigenous staff in flexi schools.

Findings

Findings will be reported on under the three workshop themes of Us mob, Race and racism, and Practice. There was a fourth workshop and the ideas and aspirations voiced by participants are reported on in the conclusion of this paper. Representing the findings under these theme headings provided a guided framework with which to centre the voices of Indigenous people undertaking professional roles in flexi schools and to shape an informed understanding of how these experiences are similar or different in consideration of existing research outlined in mainstream Indigenous education literature. This framework was utilised in the workshops which were grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of the

study, in both centring the voices of Indigenous peoples and providing specific spaces for the exploration of issues about race and racism in their experiences.

Us mob

The 19 purposefully selected participants contributed their experiences to respond to the research question “How do Indigenous staff describe their experiences and roles working in flexi schooling contexts?”. Participants discussed why they chose to work in flexi schools, described their roles and their approaches to working with young people, and gave their opinions about supporting Indigenous students. Some of their comments are outlined and critically discussed below.

Why Indigenous people are choosing to work in flexi schools: “There were lots of Aboriginal kids and it felt right”

Indigenous staff reported a variety of reasons for choosing to work in “flexis”. What emerged clearly in the data was that most participants (*n* 17) had previously heard of flexi schools and (*n* 5) participants had previously been employed in education support roles in mainstream school settings.

One participant shared the shock they experienced when they commenced in a flexi school after working in mainstream schooling: “I had always worked in mainstream. I was shocked the first day [of flexi school]. Kids were throwing chairs and swearing. Now working with principles, feels like a safe environment.”

The principles referred to in this context are safe and legal, honesty, participation and respect; practitioners in these school use these principles to work with students in managing their behaviours.

Other participants spoke about the opportunity to work in an education system that was focused on supporting young people over prioritising the needs of the system:

I was working as an Indigenous support worker at a mainstream high school ... I was always in trouble at mainstream because I prioritised young people over the needs of the system. First thing I saw [at flexi school] was young people. I liked the look of the school ... I thought it's more hands on with young people and I could be [in support] with young people.

Many participants had heard of flexi schools through their family and community connections; however, some also found out about them through conventional job advertising mechanisms. There was overarching agreement amongst participants that being in a flexi school setting “felt right” compared to mainstream schools.

How Indigenous staff defined their educative roles in flexi schools: “Just be there for them, treat them like family”

A key theme to emerge from the focus in understanding the complex roles Indigenous staff are undertaking in flexi schools was the emphasis on relationships, irrespective of the person's job title or role. Data showed emphatically that relationships were a priority for participants in undertaking their professional roles and this transcended across job titles. This phenomenon rendered job titles as somewhat insignificant in relation to how participants articulated their roles and duties in flexi schools. Building relationships, prioritising relationships and caring were the core roles of Indigenous staff as described by participants in this study.

When describing how relationships were prioritised in their job roles, participants would often relate this back to their cultures and identities as Indigenous peoples. For example, one participant said, “Building relationships is important—for myself, I have a big family, so I’ve got those connections. Having those connections means trust. Kids can pick you out whether you are true blue or if you are there for the money.”

Another participant spoke about how they prioritise relationality:

I wait to have brekkie at school. We talk about family and their skin groups and connect that way ... before you work with a child you must build that trust and respect. You sit and talk to them about yourself and they tell you about them[selves]—it is a two-way street ... our kids are respectful because we have spent time building relationships.

Within the relationships theme, two sub-themes also emerged in how relationships are prioritised for Indigenous educators in flexi school settings. Food, sub-theme one, spoke to the importance of food in building relationships with young people. Family, sub-theme two, emerged because family featured heavily in what participants said regardless of their professional title or role in the school. Some participants spoke about how family was related to their roles within the flexi school: “Young people come from different skin groups; they sit in their groups but I share my time with all of them. Some of my family are there.”

Others spoke to a family disposition in their relational approaches in their professional roles: “I am a bit like a mum—they are like my kids.”; “Our young people come to you for culture, family trees. Finding out where kids are from so they know. I show kids their family and their cultural connection.”; “Some of our mob get shame but we took them out for a coffee and after six months I started working with our young people ... Indigenous kids call me Aunty. I have got that relationship.”; “I am family, brother, uncle to young people.”

The second theme to emerge from the Us mob research workshop was cultural being. This describes the references many participants used to explain the significance of their Indigeneity in their job role. This data was surprising, since only one of the participants had the word “Indigenous” in their job title (Indigenous Liaison Officer). However, it was not just their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identities they would describe as being central to their work; it was many aspects of culture and their cultural knowledges that they talked about as being critical to their jobs. One participant said, “You don’t have to seek Aboriginal kids out; they will seek you. I believe Indigenous workers in flexis are underrated.”

In relation to cultural being, another participant said:

My way of working with our young people is different—kinship, the continuous incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives in everything and in all that I teach because I am Aboriginal. I can pass down stories to our young people and the young people trust me because I am Aboriginal.

Race and racism

Indigenous staff in flexi schools and their experiences of direct and indirect racism at their schools

Participants' experiences of racism resulted in three key themes: feelings and vibes, values, and behaviours. Feelings and vibes represents participants' experiences of indirect or direct racism at their school. Only two participants in the cohort responded that they had not experienced racism in their schools in their professional roles. However, both participants later talked about racism being "hard to pick sometimes" and that they were not really sure if they had experienced it, with one saying, "I haven't experienced racism at this school, I don't think".

Covert subtleties described much of the talk about experiencing racism. One participant said, "Sometimes they [non-Indigenous people] are looking at you saying one thing but their body is saying something else. Aboriginal people sense these vibes."

Another participant described their experiences of racism as "here—not direct". The vibes described extended to how participants felt they could or could not interact with their colleagues at times: "You know when you can say things and when you can't."

The second theme, values, emerged to explain the many examples provided by participants that spoke to values and value-laden interactions that participants believed were mediated by race and racism. A breadth of examples was provided, including "When it comes to events they (non-Indigenous staff) don't put their hand up to help" and "I have experienced racism. I have tried to get advisory groups but it gets blocked. I have tried to organise proper cultural support for young women—blocked". Many of these interactions speak to the power differentials that critical race theory seeks to analyse.

In addition to the values that referred to individual racism, the values of the systems that govern flexi schools were storyboarded. All participants endorsed the statement, "All staff should have to do cultural awareness/competence training ... why doesn't cultural training have the same importance as child protection?"

Another participant made the connection from beyond the schooling context to the broader societal attitudes and values, saying "racism will always be an issue in our society and that reflects in school also". This powerful quote speaks to the inevitability of race (and racism) everywhere (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The third and final theme, behaviours, describes the behaviours that participants felt were racialised in their schools. While obviously related to values, a number of racialised behaviours that participants either observed or experienced were described, from deliberate avoidance of cultural events—"one particular non-Indigenous staff member always has something on when cultural events are happening, every time"—to specific experiences participants had in navigating their professional roles:

I experience racism every day. My boss is white and [the] head of wellbeing is white—they team up ... they never team up in a positive sense ... another Aboriginal staff member has been harassed. She stands up to management—two on one, isolation, divide and conquer, exclusion and division—being excluded around issues to do with all of our young people.

While the data on experiences of racism in these flexi schools did not emerge as prevalently as is reported in mainstream schooling contexts (Bodkin-Andrew & Carlson, 2016), there is still clear evidence that Indigenous staff in flexi schools are navigating racism in the course of performing their professional roles in flexi schools.

Although not as prevalent in the data, the issue of racism between Indigenous peoples was described. One participant wanted it recorded that “sometimes racist comments come from other First Nations people”, while another participant asked that it be recorded in the data that they had experienced racism in “an incident involving another Indigenous worker”. While this issue did not feature heavily in this study, it is important to recognise; as Clark et al. (2016) note, it is imperative to understand the issue of lateral violence and its impact on Indigenous peoples, particularly in large Western institutions that are ill-equipped to manage these issues. Because flexi schools have high levels of engagement of Indigenous peoples, this data supports a need for specific strategies to support Indigenous staff when issues arise amongst other Indigenous staff.

At a surface level, job titles and the inclusion of the terms “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal” in them may seem benign. The studies outlined earlier of IEWs in mainstream schools illustrated experiences of high levels of racism (Buckskin et al., 1994; Gower et al., 2011). In this study, racism associated with publicly announcing Indigeneity as a role, as in a job title, emerged to be less prevalent (although still present); however, the contrasting factor in this study is both the context and also that only one Indigenous staff member in this study had the term “Indigenous” in their job title. While this is emerging data and it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the connections between “identifying” through a job title and racism, this finding provides evidence that a review of IEW roles and the use of racialising job titles may identify a pervasive problem.

Practice in flexi schools: “To get ideas happening it needs to come from the top”

The Practice focus research workshop aimed to address the research question “How do Indigenous staff believe constructions of race and issues of racism impact upon their roles with respect to curriculum and funding?”. The scoping of this question was in the original research design, based on critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As the workshop progressed, it became clear that, although participants in this study were not necessarily responsible themselves for curricula in classrooms, due to the nature of flexi schools, this cohort of staff were often present and part of planning and discussion with their teacher colleagues. The following section outlines their observations in relation to curricula in flexi schools, particularly in relation to Indigenous studies and embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into the curriculum.

Curriculum

Participants identified that Indigenous knowledges in flexi school classrooms were overwhelmingly left to Indigenous staff to incorporate. Indigenous staff explained that no matter their roles in the school, Indigenous staff were over-relied upon because of a belief that that non-Indigenous teachers do not have the skills and knowledge to embed Indigenous knowledges and perspectives across the curriculum. For example, one participant stated that “teachers may feel like they don’t know enough but they have the opportunities—we have elders come in daily, it is a community approach”, while another participant outlined that, at their school, “non-Indigenous teachers [are] constantly relying on Aboriginal staff for cultural resources (embedding Indigenous perspectives)”. These accounts were supported across a number of flexi school sites, where another example of this over-reliance was that “teachers want to leave it up to the experts”. This data was consistent with other studies relating the discomfort, avoidance and uncertainty non-Indigenous teachers feel with Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing and being (Castell et al., 2018), as well as their reliance on Indigenous non-teaching staff in mainstream school settings (Price et al., 2019). We now have a growing body of evidence across various schooling contexts, including flexi schools, where there are high numbers of Indigenous students engaging, that professional

Indigenous education roles are still being attributed by schools as being the responsibility of often-devalued Indigenous staff, irrespective of their job titles.

Many in this cohort were not employed as a teacher, nor was curriculum their official responsibility. This finding reflects the disjuncture between what Indigenous staff in flexi schools are employed and remunerated to do in terms of their roles and responsibilities and what they actually perform above and beyond their paid roles. This issue echoes the evidence from mainstream literature on IEW roles and Indigenous roles outlined earlier in this paper; that is, because these professionals are Indigenous, there is an inherent assumption that they will be all-things-Indigenous, even in areas of their professional role that are not recognised and that they are not being paid for. Irrespective of whether the person is happy with the situation, there are issues with Indigenous staff being exploited (by being underpaid), lacking clear career pathway opportunities and being burnt out. What is evident is that schools (including the flexi schools in this study) appear to need the expertise of Indigenous staff; yet, as is evident in mainstream schooling settings, Indigenous staff in this study also appear to be in the lowest paid and ranking category in the school.

Funding

Funding emerged clearly as an issue affecting Indigenous staff at flexi schools. More than half of the participants were not aware of how funding that is supposed to support Indigenous students was used, and the remainder were not able to provide examples of how they are involved in any decisions related to the utilisation of funding earmarked for Indigenous students. The majority of the participants said it would be good to know about and be included in these decisions. As one Indigenous staff member said, "I did know Indigenous monies come in. I don't know where the funds go and I don't ask. To access funds for Indigenous young people would be good."; another person agreed that "it would be nice to know how much there is to plan and budget. I don't know how much funds there are for Indigenous students".

Ladson-Billings (1998) asserts that funding distribution is one issue in education where the issue of racism manifests, resulting in disadvantage for particular racial minorities. In terms of Indigenous education in Australia, funding distribution typically lacks transparency, with less than 10 per cent of all Indigenous-funded programs receiving externally undertaken, rigorous evaluation (Hudson, 2016). Despite the Australian Government signalling substantial expenditure to meet Indigenous education policy objectives (Shay et al., 2019), there is very little transparency in the public arena as to how these funds are allocated or, indeed, how Indigenous peoples have been part of the decision making as to how the funds were allocated and whether the issue the funds were for has been effectively addressed. Including funding as a research topic in this study served to explore how Indigenous staff are so rarely involved in decision making in relation to Indigenous education funding distribution. In a flexi school where there are disproportionately more Indigenous young people enrolled, it was especially critical to include this topic for exploration.

Conclusion

Indigenous staff seem to be choosing to work in educative roles in flexi schools for positive reasons. This can be seen as an affirmative finding for the flexi schooling sector. The strongest theme to emerge from the data on roles of Indigenous staff in this study is that Indigenous staff are bringing a wealth of cultural knowledge, relationships and expertise, even though this contribution is not an overt expectation of their paid employment role. Furthermore, Indigenous staff were clear that they were over-relied upon to do

all-things-Indigenous, including cultural programs and embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. The imperative for flexi schools, and indeed all schooling sectors, is for remuneration to adequately reflect the unique knowledge and experience of Indigenous staff, and this may mean looking at industrial models that may not exist in schools. This finding also means flexi schools should be providing opportunities for growth and leadership of this skilled cohort, particularly when the schools are benefitting from their cultural knowledge and connections.

There are two significant implications from the data about racism and Indigenous staff in flexi schools. Although experiences of racism did not surface as strongly in the data as in the literature in mainstream settings, racism is still clearly an issue in this educational context, as it is in many schooling contexts (Yared et al., 2020). Because flexi school educators often see themselves as doing social justice work in education (Mills et al., 2016), there is a risk that flexi schools may not see racism as an issue to address. This study provides data from the voices of a cohort of Indigenous staff demonstrating that it is a problem and, while racism remains a broader societal and systemic issue, it is likely to continue to surface as Indigenous people interact, even within this “alternative” schooling context.

In relation to funding, the data revealed that Indigenous staff were not included in decisions about funding provided for Indigenous education programs and support. Indigenous staff were over-relied upon for their cultural expertise, but, paradoxically, were not utilised for their expertise to contribute to decision making about how to best use funding that schools receive to support Indigenous students.

We conclude by centring the voices of Indigenous staff and their aspirations for systemic improvement. Many of these ideas are correlated with the key findings and should be considered by flexi schools as they are engaging such high numbers of Indigenous students. These recommendations include: (i) systemic and policy changes to flexi school systems, such as “developing an Indigenous employment strategy”; (ii) providing leadership through the “national appointment of someone to implement” Indigenous policies in flexi schools; (iii) pathways for Indigenous staff at flexi schools, including “upskilling staff through professional development opportunities” and/or “funded study support for Indigenous staff including time to study. We should choose what we study”; (iv) long-term strategies such as a 10-year planning cycle”, as well as “opportunities between flexis [for Indigenous staff] to move and develop”. Finally, there was a strong sense that this work had just begun, and a call for a “national Indigenous staff conference for flexis – we need regular space to connect”.

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Please cite this article as:

Shay, M., Sarra, G., & Lampert, J. (2022). Counter stories: The voices of Indigenous peoples undertaking educative roles in flexi schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 51(1). DOI 10.55146/ajie.2022.20



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