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The impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in school communities: A case study of the RATEP pathway

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In the Australian education system, the call for more First Nations teachers has been central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy for at least 50 years and has been re-iterated in the recent National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. In response, there have been several programs over time that have served to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. One such pathway is Queensland's Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP). Despite having been in operation for over 30 years, there have been little published findings about the impact of this pathway. This case study evaluates the impact that graduates of RATEP have had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the school communities in which they taught. This study used the "most significant change" research method to find that teachers' critical points of impact were their abilities to act as conduits for building relationships and developing cultural understanding in school communities. Further, the tension between the need to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and the personal cost to these teachers in carrying this weight of responsibility was evident. We conclude with propositions for the future and ongoing research in this field.

Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, teacher workforce

Introduction

In the Australian education system, the call for more First Nations[1] teachers has been central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy for at least 50 years (DEET, 1989). In 2011, the Australian Government dedicated approximately eight million dollars to the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) (Johnson et al., 2016). The purpose of this initiative was to attract, support and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and teacher education academics. However, the momentum of this project has ebbed, and "its groundbreaking work [left] to languish" (Buckskin, 2018, para. 10). The most recent call to action in Australia is the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan that seeks to attract and retain more First Nations teachers (Department of Education, 2022). This call echoes international trends, based on the premise that First Nations teachers are more likely to have the specific cultural knowledge required, are able to understand their students'

[1] In this paper we use terms such as "First Nations peoples" to refer to traditional owners in international contexts, and "Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" to refer to the traditional owners of Australia. We also use the plural "peoples" intentionally to recognise that within Australia there are many diverse groups. We do so respectfully acknowledging that not all terms are equally accepted by all people.

struggles with colonialism and racism, and, when in leadership and mentoring roles, are able to promote student engagement, outcomes and an overall "sense of comfort" (Landertinger et al., 2021). Furthermore, these teachers contribute to reconciliation efforts and are "better able to counteract and expand beyond Eurocentric curriculum and teaching models" (Tessaro et al., 2021, p. 614).

Queensland's Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) is an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education pathway that has operated from 1990 and continues today. Since its inception, over 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers have graduated through this pathway (internal communication, March 18, 2024); a significant achievement and contribution to the teaching profession, and the school communities that they serve. Despite this, there have been few published findings about the impact of this pathway, or the impact of the teachers who graduated from it. This case study seeks to fill this void by evaluating the impact that graduates through RATEP have had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the school communities in which they taught. The research used the "most significant change" method (Davies & Dart, 2005) to find that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers' critical points of impact were their abilities to act as primary conduits for relationships and cultural understanding in school communities. This study offers propositions for future and ongoing research in this field, including the need to address the tension between the desire for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in schools, and the personal cost to these teachers in carrying the weight of this responsibility.

Understanding impact: Indigenous students and school communities

Impact is a complex notion that may be highly individualised, difficult to identify or left unrealised until the future. A recent review of studies that seek to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes notes a disconnect where links between practice and improved outcomes are by implication rather than evidence, with a tendency to identify effective pedagogies to engage and support students rather than to improve their educational outcomes (Burgess et al., 2019). Therefore, the importance of academic success is often cited but not realised alongside other types of success. Common themes across the research aimed at understanding impact or what is needed to support "success" in schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students centre the role of relationships, cultural inclusion, community engagement, and the nuanced knowledge of complex histories interwoven with local place and country, contexts, and aspirations that each of these entail (Guenther et al., 2015; Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Lowe, 2017). Collaboratively, these themes highlight that ideas about impact are culturally situated. Guenther et al. (2019) argue that the measures of success outlined in education policy documents often have little congruence with those articulated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see also Moodie, 2020; Sarra, 2017; Street et al., 2022). Therefore, there are multiple perspectives about what constitutes "impact" for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schooling contexts. Impact is not straightforward; nor is it easily defined. Indeed, it is a "complex equation" of interrelated factors (Munns et al., 2013, p. 10). In this section we describe how impact might be understood in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and school communities before turning to the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the next section.

Lowe et al. (2019) argue that Aboriginal students operate at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b, 2011), calling for teachers to address the false divide between school and community. Nakata (2007a, 2007b, 2011) puts forward that, for Indigenous peoples in contemporary Australian society, Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems are not separate but are instead intertwined within the "multi-layered and multi-dimensional space" of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a, p. 199). Applying this

theoretical construct to the divide between school and community that Lowe et al. (2019) describe, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should not be seen as separate to the communities in which they live, and nor should schools. Impact is therefore felt through strongly developed relationships between students, schools and communities (Lowe et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019; Munns et al., 2013). Authentic engagement is a key element underpinning relationships; schools and teachers have a critical role in building trust and respect (Lowe et al., 2019). Moreover, students themselves speak "strongly and often" (Lowe & Weuffen, 2023, p. 46) about reciprocity and relationality of positioning themselves within and of community, which further points to the need for meaningful community engagement. In remote Indigenous communities, Guenther et al. (2015) found carer and community engagement was the primary indicator of successful schooling, which was facilitated by two-way approaches bridged through relationships with local staff who held the contextual knowledge to do so. Lastly, cultural inclusion is a key factor, which includes prioritising curriculum and pedagogy from an Indigenous perspective (Guenther et al., 2015; Lowe et al., 2019; Munns et al., 2013).

Morrison et al. advocate for a "hopeful approach" (2019, p. v) across Indigenous education models to challenge the deficit positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education discourse. This approach seeks to shift the gaze from students to teachers, who "need to appreciate that many Aboriginal students arrive at school with unique and valuable cultural capital, and it's the teachers who need to obtain the necessary understanding and skills to engage with these students, their parents and the local community" (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 476). It is also acknowledged that to enact such models, support and commitment are needed from school leadership and through professional learning (AITSL, 2022; Lowe et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019). This in turn can inform "systemic and structural change at the whole school, cluster, regional and state levels of education" (Lowe et al., 2021, p. 475)—a focus that Morrison et al. note has been given "little attention" (2019, p. 58) to date. Hameed et al. echo this and similarly state a hopeful move forward that would see education leaders incorporating elements of impact as outlined by Indigenous peoples, with a clear call to "work with us, work beside us, value us and let's reimagine new ways of working" (2022, p. 108).

Understanding impact: The role of Indigenous teachers

The MATSITI evaluation panel (Johnson et al., 2016) found that having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the teaching profession is essential to the educational success of children and young people and their families and communities. A recent Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) report noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are critically important to student success through their ability to foster student engagement, improve students' educational experiences and outcomes, and build the cultural responsiveness of the profession (2022, p. 19). Yet only 1.5% of teacher professionals identify as being from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (ABS, 2022). Many are reluctant to identify as they are concerned about carrying the cultural load of "being the only persuasive or credible voice speaking up for their culture" (AITSL, 2022, p. 19). There is an ironic juxtaposition here where the Indigeneity that makes such staff "attractive to institutions" (Hogarth, 2019, p. 49), often results in cultural load or taxation on Indigenous staff. As "the embodied Aboriginal" (Hogarth, 2019, p. 54) there is a "further burden … [Indigenous staff] are expected to accept" to do "all the other business that Indigenous staff are being required to do" (Hogarth, 2019, p. 49) as well as their teacher workload.

Furthermore, issues and themes relating to the presence of both conscious and unconscious racism in schools was one of 10 main themes identified in the recent AITSL report on culturally responsive

teaching, with a "greater emphasis on social justice and racism in submissions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders … than from other groups" (2022, p. 23). The report notes that "racism at work is endemic" (AITSL, 2022, p. 8), resonating with previous findings where inherent racism "silenced or marginalised" Indigenous teachers within "predominantly white school and staff" (Hogarth, 2019, p. 54), and where teachers experienced being treated as lesser, despite being equally qualified (Hall, 2018). Overall, Aboriginal teachers report layers of systemic and institutional racism, particularly as an effect of white norms and privileges (Hall, 2018, p. 96). This is racial microaggression in the form of everyday explicit or implicit acts of racism, and aligns with phenomena documented internationally, such as Smith's concept of "racial battle fatigue", defined as the psychological, emotional and physiological responses to racial microaggressions over time (cited in Smith et al., 2011). In response, there are national calls for culturally safe education settings amidst this "identity strain" of minority groups having to "manag[e] their identity in the workplace to avoid the negative consequences of discrimination, harassment, bias and marginalisation" (AITSL, 2022, p. 8).

The final MATSITI report included recommendations for promoting teaching as a career, increasing the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers as leaders, developing culturally safe recruitment and employment practices, and increasing retention rates in initial teacher education (ITE) degrees (Johnson et al., 2016). The study by Landertinger et al. (2021) of 50 Indigenous ITE programs in Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia found key directives that have been found to be successful for supporting Indigenous teachers in ITE degrees. These include bringing education to students, for example, options for online study; removing financial barriers; building Indigenous-centred learning communities; and collaboration and long-term partnerships between universities, organisations, education authorities and community partners. Furthermore, the transition of graduates into schools requires collaboration, funding and further research for the continued evaluation and improvement of strategies to increase the numbers of Indigenous teachers in schools (Tessaro et al., 2021).

Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP)

The policy goal to attract and retain more First Nations teachers is not new and various policy initiatives have been working to this end. Indeed, as noted by Gower et al. (2022), there have been several programs across Australia that have served to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, including enclave, hybrid and off- campus programs. These include the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) in Queensland, the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education (RATE) program in the Northern Territory and the more contemporary example of the On Country Teacher Education (OCTE) program in Western Australia. While each is distinct in its own way, these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher pathway programs share many commonalities, such as partnership models with respective state or territory departments of education supported by governance measures, and a commitment to serve students from regional and remote areas. Students are enrolled in the same Bachelor of Education course that is offered to internal and external students, working with the same content and assessment, and to the same standards as any other student enrolled in the course, with the caveat that they are supported to complete this study in their home communities, with in-community support. To the knowledge of the authors, RATEP is the longest continuously running of these pathways.

RATEP is the case study for this research project. RATEP is a community-based teacher education pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who can choose to study at RATEP sites throughout mainland Queensland and the Torres Strait, as well as via an off-site model. It is supported by a partnership between TAFE Queensland, James Cook University and the Queensland Department of

Education. It has been awarded the Premier's Award for Partnership and Reconciliation; the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Advisory Committee Award for Excellence in Partnerships, Pathways and Policies; and an Australian Award for University Teaching (JCU, 2024).

Beginning in 1990 with two remote communities in the Torres Strait and two in the Cape, it currently includes 10 sites located across Queensland, spanning from Thursday Island through to Toowoomba, and supports students from 26 communities through an on-site and off-site model (internal communication, March 18, 2024). While the types of communities that the pathway serves quickly evolved beyond remote to also include rural and urban, the widely known acronym of RATEP has been retained (York & Henderson, 2003). The pathway has also developed to include an early childhood pathway; however, that is not the focus of this study. Experienced teachers at each site support and mentor students at multiple points in the pathway. Students can enter the pathway as early as year 10, studying a Certificate III in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education as part of their senior certificate. Successful completion of this certificate contributes eight of the 20 points needed to be awarded a senior certificate in Queensland. Next in the pathway is the Diploma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. Once this qualification is successfully completed, students can articulate into the Bachelor of Education (Primary) with the equivalent of 12 months credit applied to their degree. Early research of this pathway notes that it is underpinned by a model of inter-systemic collaboration (York & Henderson, 2003). Consultation with partners throughout each pathway revision, has, for example, supported the diploma qualification to meet academic pre-requisites as required by the Queensland regulatory body for ITE to minimise obstacles to the transition from TAFE to university study. This level of cooperation is "rare" and "unique" (Willett, 1991, p. 11).

To date, the pathway has supported approximately 200 registered teacher graduates and 1,550 paraprofessional graduates (internal communication, March 18, 2024). The pathway made significant early gains whereby graduates represented over one quarter of the registered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Queensland (York & Henderson, 2001, 2003). Noting that the first cohorts graduated in the early 1990s, while some have since passed or retired, many are now experienced classroom teachers and employed in leadership positions, including school principals. York and Henderson note that "the importance of RATEP graduates cannot be underestimated. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers have changed the face of teaching, particularly in the northern parts of Queensland, and RATEP has contributed to this change" (2003, pp. 82–83). While this impact has been anecdotally noted, to date, it has not been the focus of research. This, and the discussions that emerged from representatives of RATEP's partnering institutions at governance meetings, formed the impetus for this study.

This case study sought to explore experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers who graduated from the Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree through the RATEP pathway and to document their impact on the students and school communities in which they taught. The research question posed was, **What impact have the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers who have graduated through the RATEP pathway had on their students and in their school communities?**

Method

The method is an adaption of the most significant change technique (Davies & Dart, 2005), chosen to support collaborative inquiry and transparency in data analysis. In brief, this is a "grassroots" method, in which participants "on the ground" are interviewed about what has been their most significant change. In this case, it was adapted to what has been their most significant impact, in keeping with the research question. This adaptation included two stages. The first focused on individual interviews with teachers and stakeholders. Interview transcripts were analysed to identify examples of significant impact, and then these examples were amalgamated by themes to create a singular composite narrative of each theme. The second stage was the presentation of the composite narratives to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants only in a focus group to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander views, to promote co-learning and listening and learning from local knowledge, and to potentially recognise broader notions of "success" for students than may be usually favoured in colonial and performative school discourses. This method privileges consensus building, which was complemented by incorporating a yarning methodology into a conversational approach to both interviews and the focus group to "develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38).

There were two participant groups: the teachers who graduated through the RATEP pathway (n = 3 [2 females and 1 male] referred to as the "teachers" in this paper, but as "graduates" in the composite narratives), and the school/RATEP partnership stakeholders (n = 4 [3 females and 1 male] referred to as the "stakeholders"). The teachers had varying teaching experience with one participant having taught for over 30 years. The stakeholders represented two principals and two RATEP teacher coordinators who work at school sites to support students in the RATEP pathway.

The research team was co-led by a non-Indigenous researcher from the university that delivered the ITE degree to RATEP and the RATEP state program coordinator, who is Aboriginal. The team included a research assistant who recruited the project participants and conducted the initial individual interviews to avoid any possible coercion from the RATEP partners, who would likely have a pre-existing relationship with potential participants, as well as two sets of advisory committees. The first was a critical friend advisory group consisting of an Indigenous advisor and a non-Indigenous advisor; both had experience with First Nations ITE pathways. The second advisory group was a reference group that consisted of representatives from the partnership governance structures with members from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds. These advisory committees were consulted throughout the research project at each stage, from research design through to the analysis and presentation of findings. Following this model, data were collected in 2022. Ethics approval (H8259) to conduct the research was attained from both James Cook University and the Department of Education, in addition to individual consent to participate.

Stage 1: Data collection and analysis

In the first stage of data collection, individual narrative interviews were conducted online with all teachers and stakeholders by the research assistant via Microsoft Teams, through which the interviews were also recorded and transcribed. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and used the research question as a prompt for discussion. The data were then inductively analysed to identify the most significant impacts. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), the transcripts were read first for familiarisation, then a second time for coding, and then a third time to generate themes

from codes. The extent to which these markers were identified across interviews is presented in Table 2. These themes were identified as:

- relationship building
- drawing on both worlds
- school cultural capability
- social and economic benefit
- formal leadership in schools
- student aspiration
- including one barrier to impact – racism.

While we had hoped to identify a link between teacher practice and improved educational outcomes in the data, our findings aligned with literature (Burgess et al., 2019) in that the impact on students focused on student engagement and support, such as relationship building, school cultural capability and student aspiration. To present the most significant impacts, salient extracts that captured key themes relating to impact in the data were de-identified and merged to become a singular cohesive composite narrative for that stated impact.

This method created a representative narrative of each impact while protecting the identities of participants; this was a crucial aspect to stage two when these composite narratives were shared with the participants to gain further input regarding the most significant impact. Before stage two, the composite narratives were shared with the critical friend advisory group to validate the analytical and interpretive process. The composite narratives represent the first data set presented in the findings section of this paper (see Table 1). It is important to note that for two identified impacts—building relationships (narrative composites A and B in Table 1) and cultural capability (narrative composites G and H in Table 1)—there were two versions created: one from the stakeholders' perspectives and one from the teachers' perspectives. However, this information was not shared with the teachers who in stage two were asked to validate narratives and reach a consensus on which composite narratives represented their most significant impact.

Stage 2: Data collection and analysis

In the second stage, an online yarning circle with the teachers was facilitated by the research team co-leads on Microsoft Teams, which, as before, was recorded and transcribed. A yarning circle was used as a culturally appropriate research methodology that privileges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of communicating, including storytelling, in a relaxed and equitable setting where participants can talk freely about their experiences and responses (Barlo et al., 2021; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia et al., 2013; Shay, 2021; Sinclair, 2021; Walker et al., 2013). In this data collection and analysis phase, only the teachers participated, with the rationale being that it is those teachers who are best placed to define their impact according to their own values and priorities. In this way, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants are not only the subject of data collection, but they are active and agentic in the Indigenist (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003) analysis of data, ultimately determining what their impact is. Participants were presented with the composite narratives (see Table 1) through the share screen for visual reference.

During the yarning circle, each of the narratives was checked for accuracy and fairness of representation before the teachers were asked to talk about which represented the most significant impact for them. Using the transcript from this circle, their responses and justifications were thematically analysed as described above and are presented in the second part of the findings in this paper. Our interpretation was member-checked with participants, with no changes requested, and shared with the two advisory groups.

Findings

In this section, two sets of data are presented. First are the composite narratives that identified eight markers of impact and one barrier to impact, and second are findings from the teachers' yarning circle discussions about the most significant impact.

Composite narratives of impact and markers of impact

In total, nine composite narratives of impact were developed from the interview data for the yarning circle, shown in Table 1. These composite narratives provide a rich thematic description of the markers of impact identified from the interview data set.

Table 1: Composite narratives of impact

A: Relationship building (local knowledge) *Derived from stakeholder interviews Graduates are kind of a conduit, or pipeline of communication. That's really helpful that people will use them to get information and understand decisions and processes and they are able to share and explain some of the limitations of the education system. The community connect with them, trust them with their children and are comfortable that there's someone in the classroom that they identify with, and they help the rest of us to understand and connect better with the kids and the community. They have local knowledge and can be strong advocates.	**B: Building a bridge** *Derived from teacher interviews Building a bridge between community and school means that parents feel comfortable coming up to the school and being part of the conversation and solution. Closing the gap in communication, and finding a solution together is important. It's coming from the past and being able to have networks and relationships to help other teachers and parents find a connection and understand the language. It is really important.	**C: Social and economic benefit** Building people's capability through the RATEP pathway has a flow on impact into households, such as the social development and social status of people. Increasing training and study, and therefore qualifications, have an impact for peoples' lives and income. It is also a financial incentive as it enables you to "move up" as a teacher.
D: Drawing on both worlds The difference in the impact is that graduates can contribute from both angles. Unlike the rest of the local staff, they also have a deeper understanding of the curriculum and education requirements so they can put that lens on a cultural and local perspective. RATEP graduates through RATEP have both. They are from the community, but with a lens of looking at how we educate within the system that gives deeper knowledge, just by having that training to be a teacher.	**E: Student aspiration** A positive impact on the students is that they see graduates as a teacher and think that is something they might aspire to as they get older. Graduates can make a connection and influence them to attend more regularly and learn to the best of their ability, to break the cycle. They can be leaders and be confident they can become or do whatever they would like to be when they grow up and finish school.	**F: Formal leadership in schools** There has been an impact within school leadership. Graduates have taken up both permanent and acting roles such as heads of department or curriculum, deputy principal or head of campus. But there is more capacity, with the ultimate goal to see a principal role in the future.
G: Leading cultural capability *Derived from stakeholder interviews Graduates are instrumental in terms of leading cultural capability development. For example, leading work across the school in various programs and initiatives, such as visioning for the school aligning with cultural frameworks and values, selecting frameworks for curriculum design, advocating, and building EALD and first language knowledge, and making up a school dance troupe.	**H: School cultural capability** *Derived from teacher interviews Graduates impact on the cultural capability of the school staff and students in various ways. For example, providing advice about, introducing, and/or creating programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or perspectives, and working collaboratively with different languages such as Creole … There is also coordinating NAIDOC celebrations. It is really important to develop a respect for kids in their language and culture. This builds connectedness.	**Barrier to impact – racism** Some people think that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are not as good as non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, and there is some negativity around the RATEP pathway where graduates are not respected.

Note: From the report *Case Study: Evaluating the Impact of the RATEP Community-based Teacher Education Pathway on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Success*. Copyright by Salter & Mitchell, 2023.

The degree to which the composite narratives are representative of the markers of impact identified in participants' interviews is shown in Table 2. Across the interview data set, two themes had the greatest prevalence across all participants: leadership in fostering cultural capability (G and H), closely followed by stories of teachers' relationship building (A and B); hence, two versions of these composite narratives were created representing both stakeholder and teacher perspectives. While there appeared to be consensus on these markers of impact across both groups, it is interesting to note that the remaining themes had a majority in either group, but not both. Three themes were observed mostly in stakeholder interviews: the social and economic benefit of participating in the pathway itself, teachers' abilities to draw on both cultural and educational knowledge, and participation in formal leadership positions. The latter two were also identified by at least one teacher. In contrast, the theme of impact on student aspirations was identified in all teacher interviews but only one stakeholder interview. Finally, a barrier to impact identified as racism was present only in teacher interviews. As an inductive approach was taken to identifying themes, some themes did not explicitly align to the research question. For example, social and economic benefit was spoken about regarding the social and economic impact of completing the pathway on teachers and their families, rather than the impact of teachers on students and schools directly, and racism was spoken about as a barrier to impact, rather than a way in which teachers impacted on students.

Table 2: Markers of impact identified in participant interviews

Theme	S1	S2	S3	S4	T1	T2	T3
A: Relationship building (local knowledge) *Derived from stakeholder interviews **B: Building a bridge** *Derived from teacher interviews							
C: Social and Economic benefit							
D: Drawing on both worlds					X		
E: Student aspiration				X			
F: Formal leadership in schools					X		
G: Leading cultural capability *Derived from stakeholder interviews **H: School cultural capability** *Derived from teacher interviews							
Barrier to impact – racism							

Note: S = stakeholder; T = teacher. Grey shading identifies the presence of the theme, with no shade indicating the theme has not been identified. A bolded X indicates where the theme was identified by the only participant of that group (either stakeholder or teacher).

Yarning circle

This data set sought to go beyond the latent level to explore the semantic content of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants' choices by asking for a consensus and seeking to explore underlying ideas and experiences that supported their decisions. In the first instance, all teachers validated the composite account selection, including the barrier to impact. When asked if they could come to a consensus as to which of the markers of impact was the most significant in their respective contexts, discussion led to a consensus on account B: relationship building (see Tables 1 and 2), which is reflective of the broader literature (see Lowe et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019; Munns et al., 2013).

For teachers in this study, relationship building was not just about the everyday work of being a teacher, it was part of "something bigger", a "philosophy" or "vision":

> Building a bridge between the community, I suppose with the B, it's just, you know, again through that journey … Yeah you can work with as much people as you can and **it's always good to build those connections** because those connections, if successful, **they're going to be able to help with the vision, I think, not just as education in the school setting, but education in a community setting as well**. (Teacher 2)

> That's because that's, **my philosophy** is, you know, **community engagement** and **building strong relationships** and **connection to culture**. (Teacher 1)

Further, the teachers had a commitment to something bigger than an individual endeavour:

> I was thinking about this as I was looking at the [composite narratives] before, you know how when we're in community, have really close knit, we are, everybody knows everyone's business and you just live like that. Everyone is just so loving. Hey, how you going? **You're waving. Everyone's welcoming. Everyone's checking in. There's no every man for themselves. It's such a team.** Yeah, it's a team. **It's a team-based environment**. (Teacher 1)

Supporting this collective bigger picture was the acknowledgement that, while all the markers of impact were important, B: relationship building was the most important as it is critical to this bigger picture, although this consensus was not straightforward. For example, Teacher 2 initially responded, "Look I can probably touch on a few of these things here", but when asked which was most prominent, said, "B". But later, they found it was again difficult to discriminate: "Yeah, I'm looking at B, D, H … G and H you can nearly go together with programs that are implemented."

Similarly, Teacher 1 oscillated between composites before identifying B: relationship building as the most significant:

> E, F, G and H there's a little bit of everything there that I can see that I've, from my personal experiences that I can touch base on, **but look the main connection** is with all these scenarios and experiences, I suppose, **is that it's the connections that we make with our students, community and colleagues, and most importantly with our community** … And, like, if you're making connections, **then you can implement these other strategies within the school context**. Such as

> language and EAL/D, and curriculum and extracurricular activities, or looking to influence other people within a community or rural community context, I think **it's the foundation**. (Teacher 1)

Teacher 3 confirmed the interrelationships between the markers:

> Yeah, definitely, because **it does connect all of them really** cause if you have that bridge, you're also, you know, **you also have cultural connection to the community** and you know links to elders and all that sort of stuff. So, I would agree that B would be **the standout for me** personally. (Teacher 3)

The implications of the centrality of relationship building as the most significant marker of impact on and in schools and community is that this connection is needed as a catalyst for all the other markers of impact. This potentially points to the reality of the "complex equations" (Munns et al., 2013) that seed success, and the inherent interrelationship between the markers of impact that suggests efforts to identify and isolate them are potentially redundant.

For Teachers 1 and 3, trust was integral to this foundation:

> All those little factors that are connection, and communication, **building those, that bridge with community**, I feel that I have this, this strong relationship with my kids and, you know, I can talk in my language and especially, you know, and I can say things I can translate, **there's that trust**. (Teacher 1)

> Yeah, I would agree with B cause it's kind of, it's similar to A [composite narrative] where people, you know **you're building that trust** kind of thing and having the communication run through the community and the school. (Teacher 3)

Building "that bridge" and "trust" resonates with the need for authentic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (Lowe et al., 2019) and points to the critical role these teachers have in building the trust and respect such actions require with "cultural connection" (Teachers 1 and 3). Teachers saw themselves as uniquely positioned to lead this work, including epistemic mentoring (Lowe et al., 2019) through their "drive" to engage, and bring along non-Indigenous colleagues.

This is despite the systemic racism they faced and were forced to navigate, reflecting their shared experience of being positioned as inferior (Hall, 2018; Hogarth, 2019). Teacher 1 refers to this as a "battle", directly invoking Smith's (cited in Smith et al., 2011) concept of racial battle fatigue:

> **I feel that I've always had to battle to and I should not have to**. Nobody should have to battle to prove ourselves, and we work so hard because we are the pinnacle of any school faculty. We, you know, we drive the communication and relationships between families and community and school, when it comes to NAIDOC … or cultural events. (Teacher 1)

Furthermore, the relationship building that underpinned "building a bridge between community and school" was consistently described with very active language, such as "build", "drive", "strive" and "pushing forward", indicating that this work requires concerted and consistent efforts to build relationships. This signals that there remains a gap between schools and communities that *requires* bridging and is suggestive of the persistence required to consistently build and reinforce this bridge and the continued need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to do this work.

Regarding what conditions have likely given rise to this marker of impact being so important, two references were made suggesting the effect of policy on both personal and professional experiences. Teacher 1 describes relationships and connection as the cornerstone of education policy and documentation informing their professional work as a teacher and in schools, citing the concrete importance of relationships as affirmed by "policy documents and every framework that you're look[ing] at that word that sticks out is connection and this is no different". For Teacher 2, the effect of policy speaks more to the settler-colonial legacy and cycles of disadvantage that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples navigate daily and in schools. These shared experiences provide First Nations teachers with insight into the impact of colonialism and racism on students' lives inside and outside of school (Landertinger et al., 2021). This is captured in final reflections in the yarning circle, which, at the same time as acknowledging cycles of disadvantage, also speak to the potentially transformative impact of education, and the roles that they, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, can play in achieving this outcome:

> I always go back to the analogy of swimming the river. And I'll always go back to that and I think it's important for our people what whether you're elders in the community or whether you're kids. If we don't break that terrible cycle that we're in and take it on the education side of things, we can never progress as, I suppose, you know, always keeping that culture alive as well. Then you sort of got that balance that, I always refer back to that swimming the river. I guess you know to be able to be successful and it's just, it's bread and butter these days, you know. And I tell my kids, I say if you go down this way you follow this path you're going to, you know, end up with the results that we are seeing in our young people today. You know, doing all the things that we don't want them to do whereas they can take that path and be successful in what it is they do and, you know, come to the realisation or come to that time in their life where they have **broken the cycle and never have to be in that cycle again**. (Teacher 2)

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, while all markers of impact were confirmed as important, consensus was that relationship-building is necessary to facilitate them, and the interwoven and complementary nature of the markers made it difficult to initially come to this point of consensus. The smaller stories that made up the composite accounts were seen as interrelated and, rather than being able to simplify into one hierarchical marker, the discussion was more about the multi-faceted nature of impact. As previously noted, this points to the "complex equations" (Munns et al., 2013) that seed success in schools and point to the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers as fostering much more than a "role modelling and a sense of belonging [for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students] in a predominantly non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space" (AITSL, 2022, p. 19), as critical as that also is. Even relationship building was complex to define, with both everyday mechanisms for relationship building (for example, "You're waving. Everyone's welcoming. Everyone's checking in." and "It's easy for me to have, you know, small conversations with parents."), and the theoretical and conceptual positioning of relationship building as a vision and philosophy. To try and disentangle the markers of impact here is not the point, rather it is to acknowledge this entanglement as a positive enabler of impact both in schools and on students.

Our point about the interrelated, interwoven and multi-faceted nature of impact in these contexts speaks to complexity inherent within Nakata's (2007a, 2007b, 2011) proposition of the cultural interface. In this conceptualisation, knowledge is not fixed; it is not clearly delineated, nor can knowledges be reduced to

a single point of difference (Nakata, 2007b, p. 8), or, in this case, a single point of impact. As participants expressed, notions of impact were complex, entrenched in daily interactions, often unseen and certainly not explicitly measured by schools. Despite the irreducible nature of complex concepts like impact, it was clear from the teachers' responses, or rather lack of responses, what did not constitute impact. Impact was not measured by student results or in reference to improved NAPLAN results. Therefore, as argued by others (Guenther et al., 2015; Sarra, 2017; Street et al., 2022), the notions of impact or success need to be broader and more encompassing than present-day Western neoliberal conceptions of what these terms mean. Additionally, as evident in teacher responses, relationality is central to their conceptualisation of impact, which again is reflected in the broader literature on educational success for First Nations peoples (Bishop et al., 2019; Moodie, 2020). However, a shift in perspectives is needed to see a broader, more complex conceptualisation of impact, and one that centres relationality, being adopted in educational policy and practice.

While the most recent policy call indicates a hopeful approach that seeks to work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to "co-design" educational futures (Department of Education, 2022), this research also reveals that the ground-breaking work of the MATSITI project is left unfinished. Specifically, there is a need to develop culturally safe recruitment and employment practices for teachers in schools. As described elsewhere (Hollingsworth, 2016; Reid et al., 2004; Santoro & Reid, 2006), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in our study identified racism as an ongoing barrier to their impact. They described the identity strain, the cultural load and the battle required to do this work on a daily basis. Therefore, policy cannot continue to prioritise attracting First Nations teachers, without equally focusing efforts on retaining First Nations teachers by challenging the varying forms of racism encountered in educational settings. There is a clear tension between seemingly progressive policy calls to increase the numbers of First Nations teachers in schools, and the personal cost to these teachers in carrying this weight of responsibility. Calls for more teachers must be met with parallel levels of institutional responsibility and accountability that are commensurate with such actions.

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