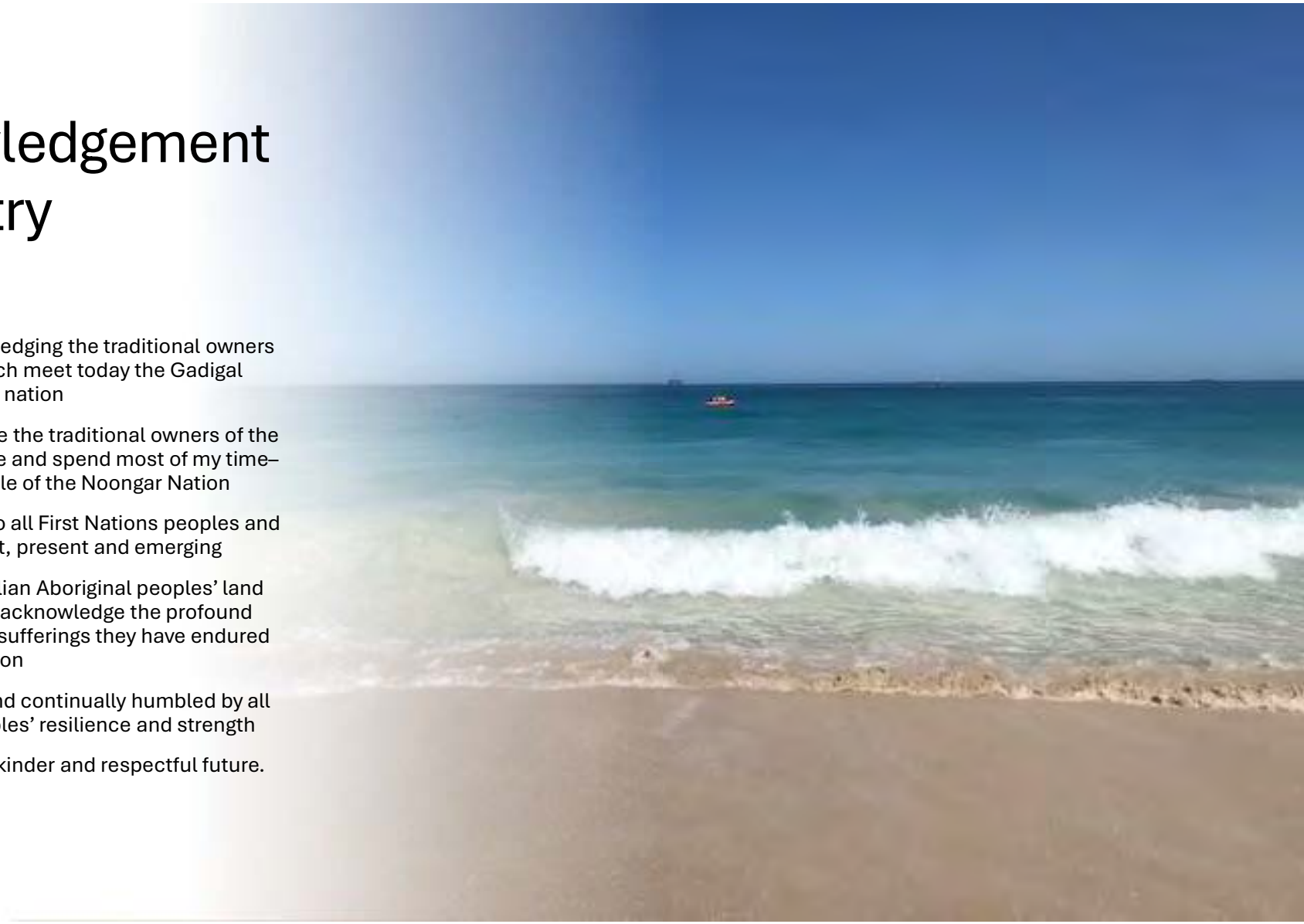
Shaping your Future: Enacting EALD policy through both-ways practice in First Nation Contexts

Professor Rhonda Oliver

Acknowledgement of country

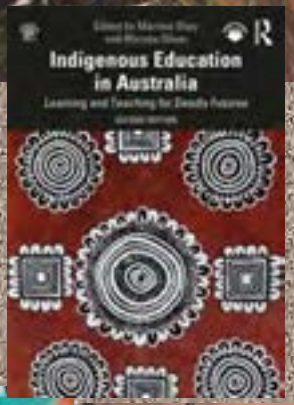
- I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which meet today the Gadigal people of the Eora nation
- I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which I live and spend most of my time– the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation
- I pay my respect to all First Nations peoples and to their elders past, present and emerging
- I recognise Australian Aboriginal peoples' land was unceded and acknowledge the profound and considerable sufferings they have endured since colonialisation
- I am profoundly and continually humbled by all First Nations peoples' resilience and strength
- I live in hope for a kinder and respectful future.



Positionality

- I am a non-Aboriginal woman who lives and works on the lands of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation
- I am mostly Irish-English heritage, and on my father's side I go back to at least the beginning of colonisation in Australia
- I have been an educator, and educational and language researcher for more than four decades, and for the last twenty years my research has been related to Indigenous education
- Today my focus is on First Nations Peoples of Australia, however, many points I make apply to all culturally and linguistically diverse people.

About me


Indigenous Education
in Australia
Learning and Teaching for Deadly Futures

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Exell & Morrow shine

Aboriginal people in Australia: A very brief background

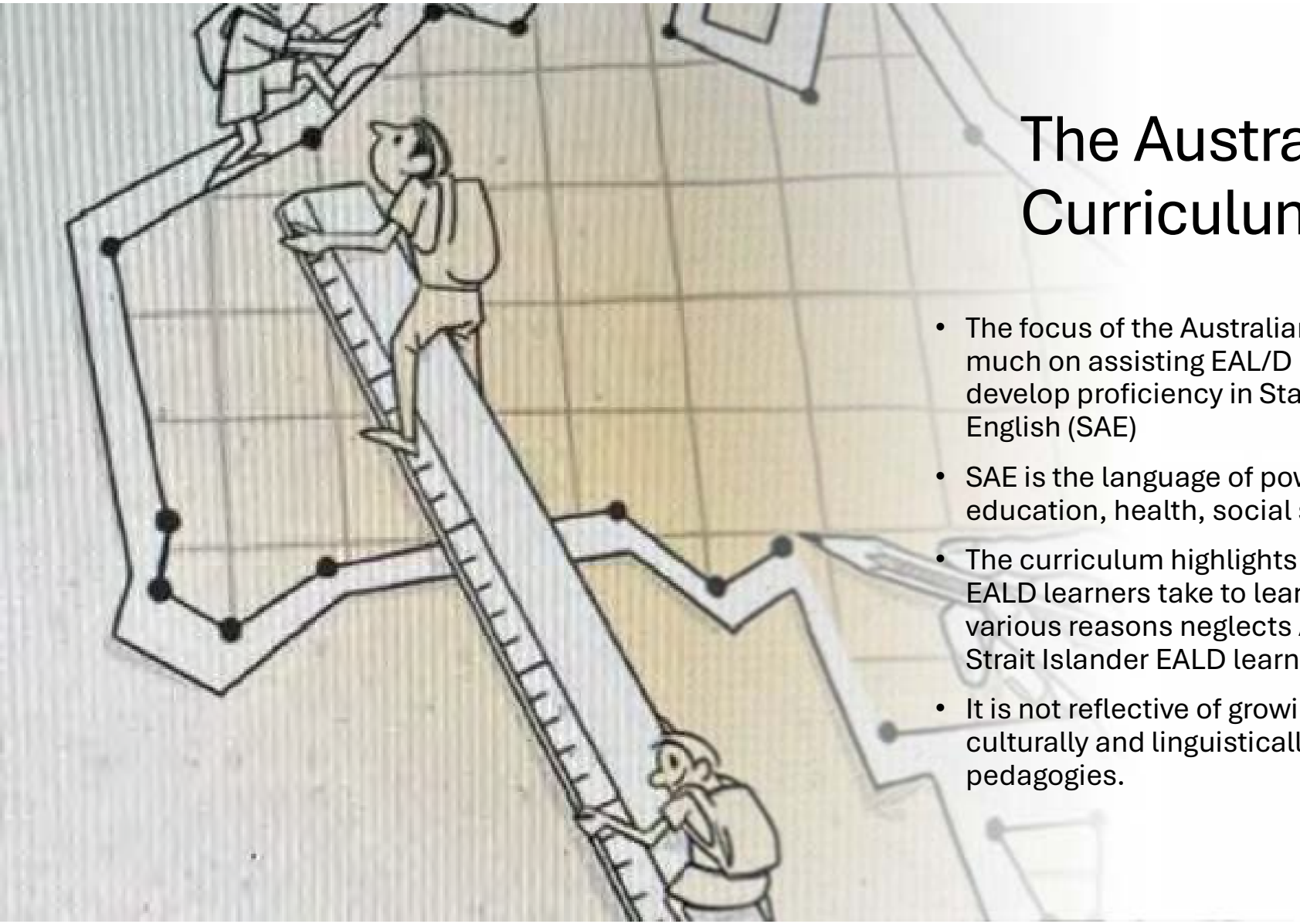
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia make up about 3% of the population
- There is considerable diversity – in their language and culture, their history, where they live, and their employment status and opportunities…
- but culturally they share a strong connection to land (boodja) – their country, the importance of family, how they like to learn (i.e., by seeing and doing) and how they share information and communicate (i.e., through yarning)
- Noongar Elder Uncle/Professor Simon Forrest describes how Aboriginal people have been in Australia for at least 60,000 years – 'the first of the first nations' (e.g., Bidyadanga footprints)
- In Western Australia > 60 language groups, but their language use varies considerably (traditional, Kriol, Aboriginal English, SAE)
- Like many first nations peoples they have been dispossessed and continue to experience disadvantage – often a direct consequence of colonisation
- For work, family and cultural reasons they will travel considerable distances and this has impacted their language.

The Languages of Australian Aboriginal peoples

- Aboriginal people**s** are not one homogenous group
- Their languages may include First (traditional) languages, contact languages including creoles, and Aboriginal English dialects and Standard Australian English
- Many are multilingual, some bidialectal, few are monolingual
- First languages: Some examples include Darug, Gija, Noongar
- Only 12 are currently spoken as a first language
- Whilst many are 'sleeping' languages, there is a strong impetus for revitatilisation
- Contact languages are mostly English lexified, for example Kriol and Yumplatok
- Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) is a dialect of English in the way that Australian, American, Scottish and Irish English are dialects.

Educational policies

- Current Australian educational policies are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their languages
- Within the relevant curriculum documents there are such terms as ‘recognition’, ‘language’, ‘culture’, ‘diversity’, and ‘respect’
- United Nations Declaration points to the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have access to education in and about their own languages
- Note, however, language rights are not a feature of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) policies
- What does appear is implied or deeply embedded (more on this below).



The Australian Curriculum

- The focus of the Australian Curriculum is very much on assisting EAL/D learners so that they develop proficiency in Standard Australian English (SAE)
- SAE is the language of power, it gives access to education, health, social services etc
- The curriculum highlights the length of time EALD learners take to learn English, though for various reasons neglects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EALD learners (Lu et al., 2025)
- It is not reflective of growing Australian field of culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies.

Translating EALD language policy into practice

- Why should we embrace Aboriginal students' language(s)?
- Cummins interdependence hypothesis – learners only as strong in their second language as they are in the first, therefore ignoring L1 background is highly problematic
- In a number of contexts, particularly in remote locations, the only time some Aboriginal students hear SAE is at school, from their teachers
- However, mainstream teachers often lack awareness/ understanding of students' language background, and about first languages, creoles (English-lexified) and AAE …and so many teachers are unaware students are EALD learners or even EFL/EFL learners
- As a consequence, deficit narratives are prevalent and impactful (e.g., 'rubbish talk', 'broken[down] English)

How do we shape the future?

Together we can do this by....

Addressing deficit narratives

- Appreciate diversity
- Acknowledge learner strengths
- Embrace learner interests
- Attend to learner needs

Don't let the curriculum be the tail that wags the dog

- Recognise the 'monolingual mindset' of Australians (Clyne, 2005):

monolinguals, despite being the minority, see their unilingual status as the default setting

- Most importantly, recognise and contribute to awareness of linguistic diversity.

Recognising the importance of Aboriginal Languages

- Languages are fundamental to the identity of First Nation peoples.
- Languages and identity are important for wellbeing
- Languages reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being

Therefore, we need to develop our awareness and acknowledge <u>all</u> students' languages recognising they are:

- foundational to inclusivity,
- support learner efficacy,
- help overcome 'the monolingual mindset',
- fundamental to scaffolding learning.

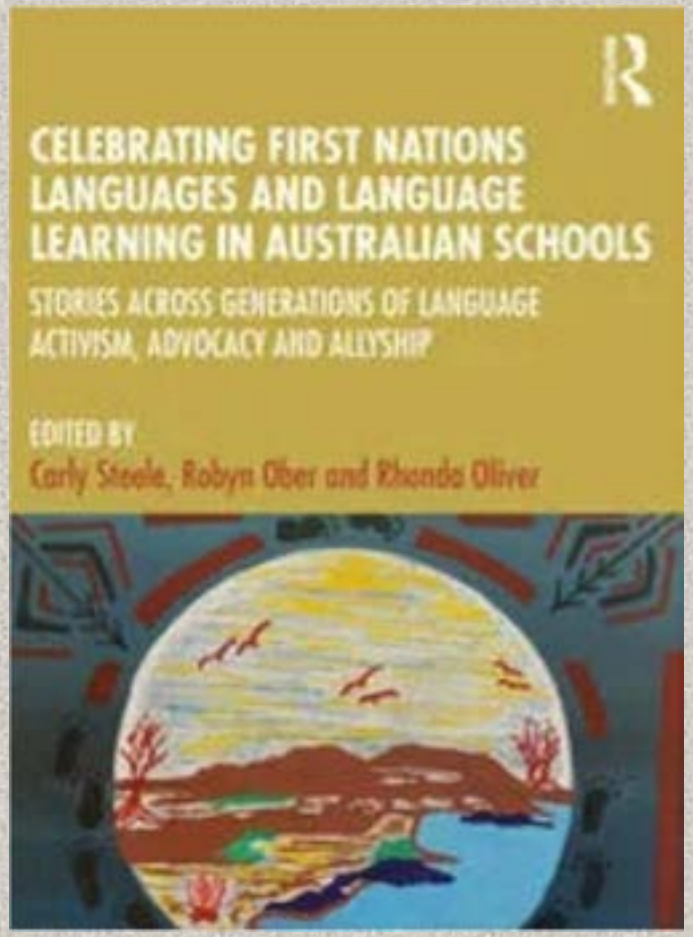
Reviving Gija

“Language is our identity. Our language identifies us as Gija people. Gija language is a language in revival. There are not so many people who speak Gija fluently. So, we want our kids to learn Gija, we want to teach it from generation by generation. From children to grandchildren. Going forever. That’s why our [translanguaging] curriculum is important”.

(Sophia Mung, June 19, 2025, Purnululu School)

Revitalising First (Traditional) Languages based on the curriculum

- Revitalisation of ‘sleeping languages’ is not a simple nor straightforward task, but the curriculum does provide ways forward:
- The Curriculum outlines the following pathways:
  - First Language (L1) Learner Pathway where the traditional language is still be spoken within the community, including by the students (these students should also be supported by ‘English as an Additional Language/Dialect’ (EAL/D) teaching approaches);
  - Language Revival Learner Pathway where the language is spoken only by a few community members or not at all;
  - Second Language Learner Pathway where the language to be taught is for all intents and purposes a ‘foreign language’ and is learnt in a similar way as English speakers would learn French or Japanese.



Scaffolding learning

- Scaffolding learning builds upon learner experiences, knowledges, understandings
- In turn, these are viewed through language: Learners linguistic repertoires are underpinned by cultural knowledge, skills and understandings (Ober, 2009)
- Aboriginal students (in fact many multilingual students) often do not have the opportunity to use their full linguistic repertoire as a mechanism for scaffolding
- In effect, this is discriminatory as the learning environment is not equitable: Those who enter school from diverse language (and cultural background) have far less access to the content and understandings encapsulated within the classroom.

Shaping the future: Consider both policy and practice

Embedded in the various and complex policy documents are affordances for inclusion of languages and culture

e.g., in the teacher resource 'EAL/D Learning Progression: Foundation to Year 10' it is indicated that when students are developing English they will "continue to use first language, culture and experiences, **when given the opportunity**" (p.38).

HACARA (2015) acknowledge the challenge for teachers:

"high levels of explicit teaching of specific EAL/D skills are required from both the specialist teacher and the classroom teacher" (p.9).

Policy

- As teachers and as members of ACTA we can serve as advocates for our learners: there is much to be done....be the water on the stone!

Practice

How do we support students?

- Be linguistically and culturally responsive through ‘both ways’ learning
- Embrace translanguaging pedagogies
- Include diverse and contextually relevant resources guided by the local community
- Take account of students’ needs, interests and strengths
- Move away from tokenistic measures
- Involve teacher reflexivity
- Use student centred learning that promotes agency and voice

‘Both ways’ learning

- Both ways learning is a linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogical framework
- It explicitly values and integrates Aboriginal knowledge systems alongside Western academic systems, providing a way to

"redress the imbalance and find a new balance that enables students to appropriate white knowledge whilst keeping strong in ‘Indigenous mind’“ (Ober, 2009)

- Promotes equal partnership between knowledge systems, ensuring student identity preservation while fostering bidirectional growth and community self-determination.

Boornoolooloo Wayiniwany

(Mung et al., 2025; Oliver et al., in preparation)

- Boornoolooloo Wayiniwany is an example of Both Ways Learning
- It is based on dreaming stories, or stories passed down through the generations of Aboriginal peoples from the Dreaming. These stories serve to connect people from today with their origins from the past
- They are the stories explaining creation and historical events representing the spiritual and philosophical understandings of the people who hold and then tell these stories
- Boornoolooloo School Dreaming stories are the foundation of the whole school **integrated** curriculum e.g., *Thirringgenji doo Joowijgarneny:* The Owlet Nightjar and the Bower Bird story and Woorra Wooral Moonga Moonga (womens' corroboree)

Translanguaging pedagogies

- Enable students to draw on their full linguistic repertories (e.g., discussing observations on our bush walk)
- Support early literacy development
- Serve to affirm identity and strengthens cultural knowledge
- Challenge “English only” models that disadvantage learners who speak traditional languages, Aboriginal English, and/or Kriols
- Are respectful of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing
- Are deeply grounded in community aspirations and collaboration with communities, children and families (e.g., Purnululu Curriculum (Boornoolooloo Wayiniwany)

Contextually relevant resources

- Include a diversity of contextually relevant resources
- Embed learner first languages and cultural identities into pedagogy
- Are guided by the local community and their experiences in the selection and development of these resources
- Require the development of strong relationships with local staff and community members
- Utilise curriculum resources (e.g., AITSL Cultural Responsiveness Framework)

Asmob bin wog paas la baasgedborl kowad.
Wee bin seeyem dinggo.
Ee bin awelin.

We walked past the basketball court.
We saw a marranyji (dingo).
It was howling.

Asmob bin wog paas la joogabeg tree.
Wee bin seeyem galaa.
Ee bin eedembad seed la grawen.

We walked past the sugarbag tree.
We saw a gerliny-gerlinyil (galah).
It was eating seeds on the ground.

Students' needs, interests and strengths

- Address student needs: A Needs Analysis is a good starting point for all learners, especially EALD learners
- Explore their interests and build upon these
- Determine their strengths and have these as foundational to teaching practice

Move away from tokenistic measures

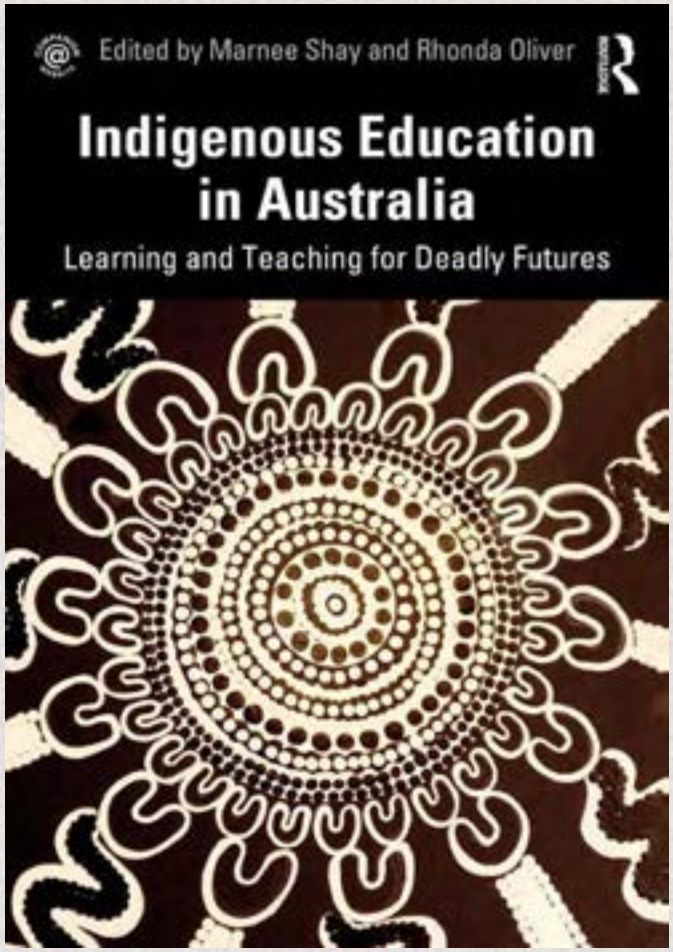
- Celebrate special cultural days – but don't allow that to be all that is done
- Shift from activities to ways of learning (e.g., both ways; translanguaging pedagogies)
- Integrate 'funds of knowledge' – of students, staff and community
- Embrace culturally sustaining pedagogies:

a strengths-based instructional approach that centers and sustains the cultural and linguistic identities, experiences, and ways of knowing of diverse students, families/caregivers, and communities (Paris, 2012)

Teacher reflexivity

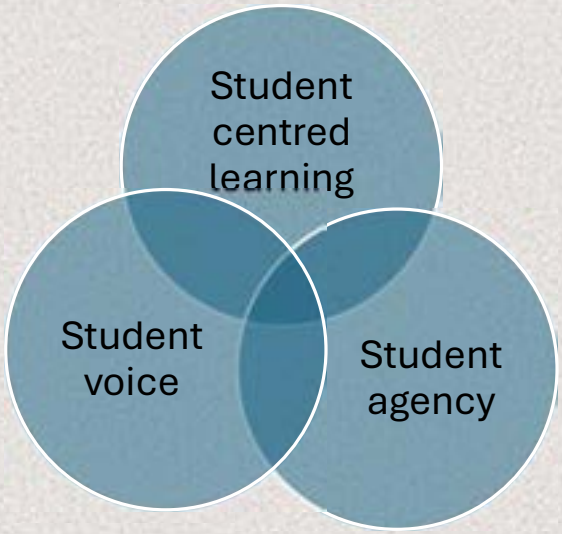
Teachers need to:

- Reflect on power dynamics
- Resist systemic inequalities
- Recognize that learning itself is historically and culturally bound
- Question whose knowledge and whose ways of being are inherently valued or centered in your classroom

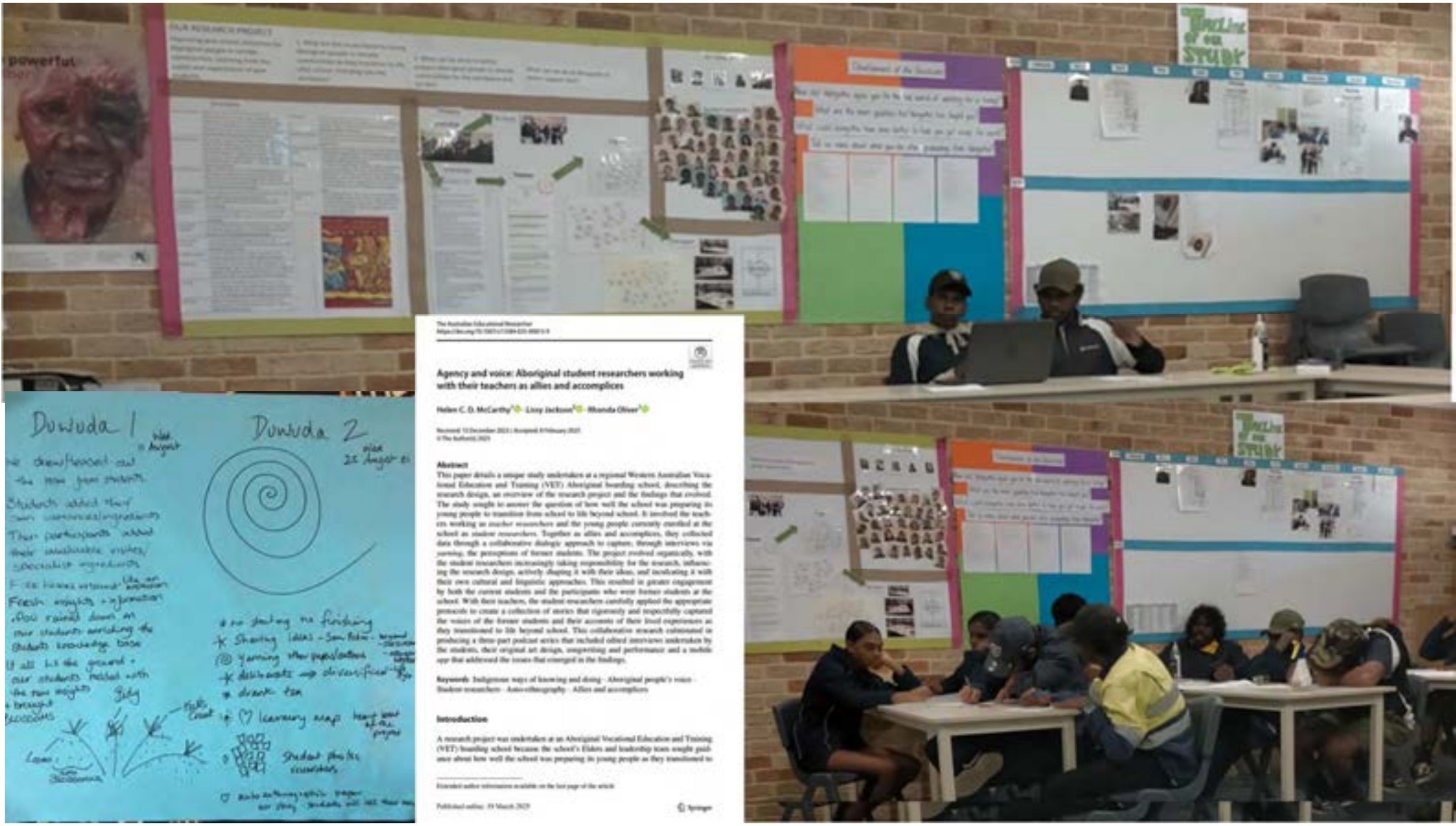


Student centred learning, voice and agency

- These are the core triad of contemporary educational design for empowering learners
  - Student centred learning shifts the locus from teacher to students: The approach, instructional timing and classroom environments match student needs, interests, and developmental trajectories
  - Student voice encapsulates respect for the rights of the students, their values, perspectives, and opinions and these are used to inform school and classroom decisions
  - Student agency is reflected in the autonomy of students and turning voice into reality.



Agency and Voice: Aboriginal student researchers working with their teachers as allies and accomplices (McCarthy et al., 2025)



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Agency and voice: Aboriginal student researchers working with their teachers as allies and accomplices

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Abstract
This paper details a unique study undertaken at a regional Western Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) Aboriginal boarding school, describing the research design, an overview of the research project and the findings that evolved. The study sought to answer the question of how well the school was preparing its young people to transition from school to life beyond school. It involved the teachers working as *teacher researchers* and the young people currently enrolled at the school as *student researchers*. Together as allies and accomplices, they collected data through a collaborative dialogic approach to capture, through interviews via *yarning*, the perceptions of former students. The project evolved organically, with the student researchers increasingly taking responsibility for the research, influencing the research design, actively shaping it with their ideas, and inculcating it with their own cultural and linguistic approaches. This resulted in greater engagement by both the current students and the participants who were former students at the school. With their teachers, the student researchers carefully applied the appropriate protocols to create a collection of stories that rigorously and respectfully captured the voices of the former students and their accounts of their lived experiences as they transitioned to life beyond school. This collaborative research culminated in producing a three-part podcast series that included edited interviews undertaken by the students, their original art design, songwriting and performance and a mobile app that addressed the issues that emerged in the findings.

Keywords Indigenous ways of knowing and doing · Aboriginal people's voice · Student researchers · Auto-ethnography · Allies and accomplices

Introduction

A research project was undertaken at an Aboriginal Vocational Education and Training (VET) boarding school because the school's Elders and leadership team sought guidance about how well the school was preparing its young people as they transitioned to

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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Wadjareckon
Welcome. Wadjareckon
(TRIAL)
YARNING UP
HEALTH & WELLBEING
WORK & STUDY
TRAVEL & FUN
GROWING UP
FAITH

DESERT TO THE SEA
Wongutha Stories Podcast
Wongutha Podcasts

Final thoughts

- It is time to work towards locally based solutions, not those that are top-down and that involve a ‘one-size fits all’ approach
- We “need to put on our listening ears”
- We should “no longer be silencing, but instead honouring and amplifying Indigenous voices”
- As non-Aboriginal people our support comes from being informed allies - even accomplices
- There is great promise, but still a long way to go….and if we do nothing, nothing changes.

Thank you
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