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Professional Pathways of Aboriginal Early Childhood Teachers: Intersections of Community, Indigeneity, and Complexity

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Abstract: Little information is available about the employment trajectories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples pursuing university professional qualifications. This article describes a context in which cultural space, issues of identity, pragmatics of employment, family and community and a bureaucratic regulatory environment intersect to create scenarios that are multi-faceted and layered in complexity. As has been demonstrated clearly in other arenas (Richardson & Watt, 2006), the move towards professional teacher education qualification is not linear or straightforward. To add to the knowledge base in this area, the focus in this study is on university graduates of a teacher education degree targeting people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. This landscape of professional pathways offers material for educators and policy-makers to consider in the drive to 'close the gap' in Indigenous educational opportunity in Australia and in related circumstances elsewhere. Note that terms such as 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous peoples' are used as general signifiers and may not be the group terms favoured by the people to whom they refer, but have been accepted as place-holders for complex identifications of lineage and personal identification. Aboriginal peoples should also be aware that this paper may refer to people who are no longer with us.

Contextualising the Portrait

This paper explores aspects of identity, portraiture and voice to help illuminate a situation which is often portrayed politically as straightforward, but which in reality is not: The gaining of qualifications by Indigenous people to work in both local and other communities as qualified teachers. The focus here is on graduates of a university early childhood teacher education degree which was developed in consultation with relevant communities for people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage who sought formal qualifications. Our study investigates the employment trajectories of people seeking and gaining qualification as teachers - a complex, multi-layered landscape across which pathways for personal and professional journeys are negotiated. This work is significant in that silent voices cannot contribute to program development or policy debates; this work enables more Indigenous voices to be heard and therefore to have the potential to inform decision-making.

Accompanying the voices of graduates quoted throughout the study, a picture will be painted by three authors coming from different perspectives. One of us is an Indigenous cadet studying Education in the university, the other two do not have Indigenous heritage; one of these is an Honours graduate who was a Research Assistant for much of the project, and the

other coordinates the focus early childhood teacher education program. Our opening reflection is told from this final perspective:

Yesterday I received an email from an Aboriginal woman in the final year of her Bachelor of Teaching degree program. She was double-checking dates for the upcoming practice teaching session to make sure they didn't overlap with commitments regarding the new business she had just purchased. Further enquiry revealed that she had purchased a 'fruit and veg shop up the coast', though she intended to return to teaching in child care in the future. This conversation triggered thoughts of others who had graduated from the program over the last decade, including the mother of my correspondent. The faces that came to mind were scattered up and down the East coast of Australia, some at home with children, some retired, others studying, some in the larger education sector, others in roles as diverse as government work in the Department of Health and Aging or the Federal Police, language and cultural consultancy, and others directing children's services. Stepping back from this montage, what image could be painted of the professional pathways of these graduates?

To contextualise this study, we examine the need for qualified teachers, the Australian policy context, and issues faced by some Indigenous people seeking higher education. The study will be explained as a platform from which to illustrate both group and individual experiences. Traditional forms of reporting will be used alongside individual perceptions in an attempt to create a more complex portrait of professional pathways than either genre offers on its own. As Chapman (2005) has noted:

The creation of portraiture is a response to the marginalization and sterilization of the experiences of teachers, administrators, and students in schools. The portraiture method rejects flat, stereotypical explanations for school success or failure and depicts the multiple layers of contexts represented by events and people. (p. 28)

Working within a socio-constructivist framework, that rounded complexity is incorporated here through the voices of graduates entwined with analysis of key themes and employment pathways.

The Need for Qualified Teachers

In a national Australian report, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2001) reported that:

It is well recognized that teacher quality is a critical factor in the performance of Indigenous students in early childhood services and schools and that there is a direct link between teacher quality and Indigenous student learning outcomes. (p17)

Further, the pressing need to involve more Indigenous children in early childhood educational experiences underlies the concern with increasing opportunities for Indigenous people to gain university teaching qualifications (Fleet & Kitson, 2009a). Quality of services is an essential element in early childhood group settings. In high quality programs, key staff have a university degree, staff-child ratios are favourable, group sizes are small, and staff conditions minimise staff turnover (see for example Vandell & Wolfe, 2000; Watson, 2001).

Research continues to support the need for qualified Indigenous early childhood teachers to enhance the future prospects of young children, with positive flow on effects for

their families and communities. In previous research investigating Aboriginal families' participation in early childhood services, it was found that the lack of Aboriginal staff was an important constraint leading to low or non-usage of services; parents, staff and community members mentioned the benefits of having Aboriginal staff to facilitate communication with families and provide positive role models for children (De Gioia, Hayden and Hadley, 2003; and Hutchins, Frances and Siggers, 2009). Kronemann's report (2008) echoes these sentiments:

Early childhood education and care programs must recognise and value Indigenous knowledges, skills, language, culture, and ways of learning... there are far too few Indigenous teachers and staff currently working in the sector and this is a significant barrier to increasing the participation and educational wellbeing of Indigenous children. (pp. 5-6)

As Martin (2005) also noted, cultural connection plays a key role in successful educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples. In 2008, however, only one percent of educators in Australia were Indigenous (MCEECDYA, 2010). In *'The challenge of change'* in Indigenous education, Rigney wrote: "It is important that governments promote Indigenous workforce development and that all Indigenous students are taught by high-quality teachers in schools" (2010, p. 10). The importance of recruiting Indigenous early childhood teachers for improving Indigenous children's educational opportunities is reflected in other sectors as well; for example, there has been international recognition for the need to increase training and recruitment of Indigenous health care professionals to achieve optimal health outcomes for Aboriginal patients and to improve Indigenous health (Usher, Miller, Turale, & Goold, 2005). What is not represented clearly and reflected upon in these reports and recommendations is the lived experience of those peoples responding to this urgent call: What is the situation for those who undertake teacher education in an effort to further their professional pathways and the wellbeing of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families?

Policy Context

Since 1990, the Australian Government has been a leader in calling for tertiary education equity, with policy reflecting *A Fair Chance For All* (DEEWR, 2010). Prior to the development of this Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Services) program in 1995, however, Indigenous participation in mainstream tertiary education had not kept pace with the increase in tertiary education participation by non-Indigenous Australians (Hunter & Schwab, 2003). The 1998 Senate inquiry into the status of Australian teachers indicated that, although there was an increase in the number of Indigenous teachers gaining tertiary qualifications resulting from government programs and recruitment, there were still difficulties retaining Indigenous teachers, a trend also seen with non-Indigenous teachers (Australia Parliament Senate Employment Education Training References Committee, 1998). The development of the Macquarie University program was an important step for increasing Indigenous Australians' access to tertiary education in a mainstream institution.

Also at this time there was a shift in educational policy from a process or curriculum-based approach to an outcomes focus on teacher standards and quality teaching (MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education, 2001). In the context of the Rudd government, rhetoric was directed at 'Closing the Gap' of educational achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This shift in policy focus led to more emphasis on program development enabling Aboriginal people entrance to tertiary studies.

Over several decades, the Australian Government's Indigenous education policy has mandated strong participation of Indigenous people in education at all levels. In accordance

with this policy, governments developed incentives for rural and remote students to attend mainstream institutions to gain tertiary qualifications. Increased numbers of university-based equity scholarships and Indigenous-specific scholarships were also introduced, including scholarships supported by non-government organisations such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

One of the key elements supporting the Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood Services (BTeach ECS) program was the availability of 'backfill' for employers when students were required to participate in block study sessions on campus (between 7 to 10 days each block, twice each half-year). This policy was developed under the Howard Government's Indigenous Support Program (ISP). The introduction of this provision enabled the university to support Indigenous early childhood education workers; without this funding, it is unlikely students would be able to take leave from their employment to attend the block on campus sessions. Although changes to funding of the Abstudy scheme (If you are an Indigenous secondary or tertiary student or a full-time Australian Apprentice, Abstudy is an allowance that may help you stay at school or in further study) coincided with a drop in Indigenous participation in tertiary education (Powell, Lawley, & Raciti, 2006), the increased funding for ISP enabled universities to provide meals, accommodation and travel assistance for students, thereby reducing the financial burden, particularly for those travelling interstate and from rural communities.

Indigenous education equity and access still plays a key role in education policy. Recently, an Education Action Plan was released by the Gillard Government developed through MCEECDYA. The Plan aimed to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, principals and education workers by 2014 in rural and remote communities to help reduce the high turnover rate of education staff and to improve the delivery of curriculum to Indigenous students in schools in remote communities (MCEECDYA Ministerial Council for Education, 2010). At a state level, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training Aboriginal 2009-2012 Education and Training Strategy identified similar goals (Department of Education and Training, 2009).

These government initiatives highlight the importance to Indigenous children and their communities of the work being done by programs such as this Bachelor of Teaching degree. But are the goals being achieved?

Issues for Aboriginal People Seeking Higher Education

Aboriginal people recognize that access to tertiary institutions means more than gaining an education; it means gaining access to power, authority and an opportunity to exercise control over the affairs of everyday life. This control is usually taken for granted by non-Aboriginal people. (Kirkness, 1995, p37)

In considering the experiences of Aboriginal people in higher education, it must be recognised that there will be at least the same breadth of backgrounds, experiences and expectations for 'Indigenous' peoples as there will be for 'non-Indigenous' peoples. As Rigney (2010) notes:

Indigenous Australians are diverse and not homogenous. We do not all speak the same Indigenous language nor do we live in the same region...but government bureaucracy- and to a lesser extent curriculum writers- keep getting this wrong. (p.10)

This warning resonates through much research involving Indigenous families (Trudgett & Grace, 2011). Nevertheless, a convoluted history of colonisation and minority status

negatively affects the pathways of Aboriginal people seeking higher education. O'Rourke (2008) reported on "lower rates of success, retention and completion by Indigenous students" (np) and on institutional barriers to success. These included the perception of educational difficulty, stigma of tertiary study in local communities, lack of support from the university, lack of tertiary study skills, the status of cultural pioneers and geographical distances. These results are probably dependent on particular programs as only a few of these were highlighted in another Australian study by Fleet, Kitson, Cassady and Hughes (2007).

There is limited literature relating to the professional pathways of Indigenous people moving through higher education and an employment trajectory, though international work provides a possible point of reference. Writing from a Canadian perspective, Kirkness (1995, p.32) claimed that the biggest issue facing Indigenous communities was the lack of professional Indigenous people. Kirkness explained that the University of British Columbia recognised the urgent need for North American Indian professionals and adjusted accordingly. Their program is delivered in block format (similar to Macquarie University's delivery) and has given its graduates job opportunities that provide motivation for study. However, their offerings are not without challenges. One of the biggest issues faced is the academic institution that provides the program. Kirkness (1995, p.34) noted that the host institution is often elitist and Eurocentric, and then asked how the monolithic Ivory Tower could be reoriented so as to make its vast resources more accessible to Aboriginal peoples and their communities. This perspective reflects the views of Solorzano & Yosso (2001, p. 2) who noted that

There are also concerns with regard to closet racism, those microaggressions... those unconscious or subtle forms of racism that people of colour recognise and absorb on a daily basis...exposure to microaggressions during long periods of time, without support systems to combat their wearing effects, lead students of colour to adopt complex coping mechanisms or leave the university.

Such racism may be seldom seen, but is often felt.

Speaking from an Australian context, Foley (2010, p. 145) commented on the pressures of study on an Indigenous person today, stating "if Aboriginal students are forced to study for longer periods to obtain pre-requisite skills then their financial position is weakened and demands by family can intensify". This was the basis of Macquarie University's educational program: to provide facilities and access to education that would free the students of the strain that comes with personal obligations alongside university study. By allowing for intensive study in block mode, students are less financially burdened and are more likely to maintain engagement with study and the institution (Fleet, Kitson, Cassady & Hughes, 2007). The need to cope with microaggressions may not be so easily resolved, but their existence reinforces the urgent need for culturally safe support systems.

Portrait of a Study: Many Professional Pathways

In response to this context and after extensive consultation with local Indigenous communities, Macquarie University's Institute of Early Childhood and the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies developed the Bachelor of Teaching Early Childhood Services (BTeach ECS) in 1995. The program is aimed at people already employed in the early childhood sector who are without formal tertiary qualifications.

The degree is offered in an innovative mixed mode (7 to 10 day blocks with supported external study) that combines the principles and pedagogy of a 'mainstream' early childhood degree with Aboriginal understanding and knowledge. It has been a "three year degree" delivered over four years as a combination of part-time and full time study, with an alternate

year of entry schedule. Equivalent fourth year status is available through a subsequent Graduate Diploma. Students are drawn primarily from the Eastern seaboard of Australia, often attracted by word of mouth from others working in early childhood services. One graduate noted:

The degree is the first major step to a more powerful career. I sometimes think how very lucky I am to be given such a fantastic opportunity. It may seem like a long road to travel, but it is clearly worth it.

A few urban students of Aboriginal heritage choose to study in the 'mainstream' BEd (ECE), but their voices are not included in this study.

The Professional Pathways research sequence began in 2003 through a discussion with students graduating that year. The opportunity to celebrate their achievements and track their progress into further employment was seen as an affirmation by the group of their accomplishments. The progress of these and subsequent graduates from the degree has been monitored over eight years in order to investigate the nature of employment trajectories as they intersected with the gaining of an early childhood teacher education degree. This study is Phase Three of the sequence. Phase One included a government report based on research by the teaching staff (Indigenous and non-Indigenous; see Cassady, Fleet, Hughes & Kitson-Charleston, 2005) and a professional journal article written in conjunction with graduates (Fleet, Kitson, Cassady & Hughes, 2007). Phase Two was re-working the data into a freely distributed community publication sharing the graduates' experiences and encouraging others to pursue higher education (Fleet & Kitson, 2009b). Data collection for these publications followed standard ethics procedures, being gathered by and shared with graduates.

Data collection has continued in this stage of the project. BTeach(ECS) graduates from 2003-2011 completed written questionnaires or phone interviews regarding their employment during their involvement with the BTeach program, their current employment and plans for the future. Several volunteers were followed up with field visits to gain greater understanding about their careers post-graduation; some of these data will be reported elsewhere.

The research team discussed four main questions with the graduates, including:

- What were you doing (employment) when you were first interested in doing the Bachelor of Teaching degree?
- Did you stay in this position when you were studying? What other roles/jobs did you take on? What influenced your decision/s?
- What did you do (employment) when you finished your degree? Did obtaining the degree/qualifications help you gain this position?
- What are your employment plans for the future?

Several graduates have worked alongside the research team, making suggestions and assisting throughout this period. The work has been acknowledged as collaborative, with the potential to shape practice and policy in ways that may assist others.

Responses were collated and analysed, both for themes and to enable a range of voices to be portrayed (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) that might illustrate the diversity and complexity of the professional journeys. This method of portraiture reveals "a disciplined, empirical process of description, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis- and an aesthetic process of narrative development" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p185).

As advised by Richards (2009, p.143), we have been "working very deeply and sensitively with [the] data, paying due attention to every theme, worrying at the inconsistencies and puzzles". Throughout the data analysis, due regard was paid to criteria appropriate to constant comparative strategies for developing interpretative themes (Yates, 2004), including

saturation, focus, and sufficiency. It has highlighted participant perspectives as providing invaluable insight into lived experience.

What are we Learning? Sharing the Journeys

Due to the unique mode of delivery and targeting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people already employed in the early childhood sector (Fleet & Kitson, 2009), the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Services) has graduated students from five states and territories across Australia (NSW, QLD, VIC, SA and the ACT). From the development of this program until the end of 2011, 68 students had graduated with this degree. Of these, survey responses were received from 48 graduates. Others were either over-committed elsewhere or not contactable. As 'pathways' evoke 'journeys', the findings are presented both in terms of individual narrative voices and with overview tables for clarification of demographic details.

Deciding to Get on the Train: Reasons for Going to University

'I have two daughters doing the degree as well'

Both personal and professional relationships encouraged Indigenous students to complete the BTeach degree, as word-of-mouth recommendations and recognition of the importance of qualifications spread throughout several Indigenous communities. Often family members encouraged younger generations to enter the program, or employers/ees at childcare centres encouraged colleagues to gain tertiary qualifications.

My cousin also went in to do the degree and loved it. I gave her the confidence to do it. It is a great combination of learning and culture such as stories told, assessments, getting information about students' hearts and life – a story bridge built together.

As demonstrated in Table 1, thirty-six respondents (75%) began their degree while working in the Early Childhood sector. As the program targeted people working with young children, this was expected. The remaining twelve participants came from four categories: Other Education (N=5), Human Services (N=5), Family Responsibilities (N=1) and Hospitality (N=1).

Three of these 36 respondents mentioned that they had no qualifications for the work they were doing at the time, though this situation was probably more common than that number suggests:

I was working as an untrained early childhood teacher. I was in this position for 7 years, but at different places.

I was an untrained assistant – supervision, team work, centre routine. No paper work involved in that job. It was at a long day care.

Research conducted by Cahill and Collard (2003), reported in *Deadly Ways to Learn*, found that many of their participants began with little or no knowledge of the early childhood sector. However the majority of participants responding to this survey had substantive knowledge of the sector, such as one respondent who described her specific role in a child care centre: "I was a Cultural Support Worker at a MACS Centre N.S.W. The centre looked for a teacher to provide stability to the community – preferably Koori" (Koori' is a group term identifying language and territorial peoples). The table below shows the diversity in occupations held.

Early Childhood Sector	Number of students at enrolment (48)	Most recent Post graduation employment (48)
Director/ Acting Director	6	10
Room Leader/ Assistant	30	0
Qualified Teacher (EC)	0	9
Other Education (School, Aboriginal Education Assistant and Family Day Care)	5	12
Human Services	5	9
Family Responsibilities	1	6
Other	1	2

Table 1: Distribution of Employment

Almost two-thirds (N=30) of graduates began their degree working in the broadly defined educational sector but not in the role of ‘Teacher’ or ‘Director’. These occupations included primary school teacher’s aide, a number of teacher assistants and child care workers and an administrator.

Several graduates alluded to previous work experience which encouraged them to go to university, as well as to previous TAFE (Technical and Further Education provided by the college sector) or university experiences. Their diverse stories help to illuminate the varied backgrounds of people choosing this degree path:

I was first working at Department of Human Services, Victoria as a Koorie Early Childhood Field Officer (KECFO) when I first got interested in the degree. My role involved increasing working with early childhood centres and playgroups to increase the number of indigenous children attending a funded preschool year.

I got involved with my daughter’s kindergarten helping out, parent fundraising. Then I got offered the assistant’s position and bus driver’s. During my first 10 years at the Indigenous Centre I had completed the Preschool Teachers Aide Certificate, and was doing the teacher’s job without the pay or recognition. I was hungry for the degree to be recognized. When it became available (the course) I jumped at the opportunity.

I had started Bach of Teaching at ACU in Brisbane & completed 2.5 years.

These statements make it clear that considerations of professional pathways must include longitudinal autobiographical time lines and not begin with entrance to a particular university program. By then the train has already left.

On the journey: During Study Time

Typically, given the time necessary to complete the degree, people had a range of employment, such as that reported by one graduate:

Fulltime as an Assistant at an Aboriginal Kindergarten, left and had 1 year off then 1 year fulltime work in NSW Health as an Aboriginal Family Support Worker (Aboriginal Health Education Officer), working with families with

children 3 and under as well as sometimes working in the Domestic Violence Room, helping women in this situation.

For students who were already employed in the early childhood sector, professional experience, support and encouragement from their workplaces was important for starting and completing their tertiary early childhood qualifications. Similarly, Sharrock and Lockyer (2008) noted a range of structural supports that assisted student retention.

The Issue of Being Supported: Symbiotic Intersections of People and Circumstances

Student support networks (including the University, family and community) are one of the most significant factors enabling students to study and complete the BTeach(ECS) degree. Scaffolds are provided also by the university in the form of teaching staff, a designated Indigenous Student Support Officer, as well as the federally funded Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS), which helps fund local mentors who help students with their studies.

Many graduates raised the issue of support and encouragement.

Yes I did stay with my current employer throughout my studies. The main thing that influenced my decision to stay with my current employer was the support and encouragement that they gave me whilst I was studying. For example I could take time off for study time; time off when my children were sick. This organisation also had a goal in wanting all of their Indigenous staff fully qualified, which made my decision easy to stay on until I achieved my qualifications. While studying I remained at the centre as an assistant. The reason I stayed at the centre I loved my job working with parents-children-staff, encouragement from staff whilst studying was great.

The valuing of family and community resonates throughout these voices. In addition, Cahill and Collard (2003, p 213) explain that the pressure of the workplace and the frustrations of study can “turn out to be highly constructive because it helps you understand what it is like to be taken out of your comfort zone.” One respondent in this study noted:

It was hard to balance work and studying but I had the support of family and my employer. If it wasn't for them telling me to persevere then I might not have finished my degree. Support is everything.

Having a supportive work place enabled students to take the time to study, and also allowed them to expand their professional duties as early childhood employees whilst studying. One graduate reflected on her ability to complete studies and gain experiences at her current place of employment:

I stayed at the centre because it was a safe decision for me. Working part time fitted in well with my studies. I also had access to Aboriginal children and their families that allowed multiple opportunities to observe with workplace-based uni assessments.

In addition to this, other comments indicate the expansion of duties undertaken by BTeach students as they progressed through their university studies:

I stayed with my centre as they allowed me to study and they encouraged me to complete the course. As I got further into my studies my role at the centre expanded: teacher assistant / bus driver / relief teacher / book keeper / cleaner / fundraiser.

These tended to be symbiotic relationships- with services and communities offering support to students, while graduates returned the gift through knowledge and professional skills.

Arriving at the station: After Graduation

After graduating from the program (see Table 1), over a third [N=19] of respondents remained in the early childhood sector, including ten respondents in Director or Acting Director positions in children's services. Of these people, almost all had progressed up the children's services hierarchy as a result of their studies in the program. Graduates reported experiences such as:

When I finished my degree I was still employed at the preschool, then moved into the head teaching role, then teaching / Director role. I moved onto a job in Sydney where I was an Authorised Supervisor at ... Long Day Care Centre. I found the job in the Koori Mail. It didn't take long to find work. I am now working as a teacher.

Twenty-one people, having studied and gained an early childhood education degree, chose to work outside the sphere of the early childcare sector. This includes twelve graduates who moved to other roles in education such as Primary School Teaching, Cultural Consultant, Early Childcare Consultant, Case Worker for an Indigenous Organisation, Authorised Child Safety Officer, Aboriginal Health Education Officer, Presenter in Education and various Academic roles. Others are in the sector but keeping their options open. As one graduate commented: "[I] am looking at TAFE for Cert 4, however distance is a problem; the graduate program with DEEWR could be an option, always looking!"

A further nine graduates work in Human Services fulfilling various roles that include: TAFE Program Manager, Family Worker for the Welfare Department, full-time Foster Carer, Public Servant, working for DOCS and working within the hospitality industry. One respondent who works as a public servant described the journey she took:

I was co-director for six months. Then went on to do child protection for three years. Have been in and out of government roles. I then went and worked for Indigenous Early Childhood workforce strategies, but this ran out of funding and was disbanded. Worked in Employment for 18 months – kept looking for early childhood opportunities such as organizing training programs, working across RTO for Certificate 3, working with the Indigenous community. At the moment I am working with the Australian Federal Police.

Eight graduates are currently not in paid employment as six people have family responsibilities or health issues, and the other two are seeking employment. As one graduate stated, unforeseen circumstances can halt this process:

Difficult for teachers' positions in the country as the geographical area is far and wide, no transport, when job is advertised -relative/friend/in-service person gets positions. Discrimination is an issue.

The Usefulness of the Degree

It is clear from these results that by obtaining a degree, the graduates of the Bachelor of Teaching degree have either maintained or improved their employment positions. Seventeen of the BTeach graduates (35.4%) have risen to positions of higher status within the sector than

they were in when they began the degree. It is difficult to categorise the trajectory of the nine people working in non-teaching positions, as the various human services roles are more 'parallel' in status than hierarchical, although the majority of respondents are clearly in more senior roles than when they began studying.

More than 91% of the participating graduates (N=44) stated they were currently using their BTeach degree, either in relation to the same position they were employed in prior to starting the degree, or as a stepping stone to alternative employment, including promotion within the child care sector, further advancements in Education, Government, Health Care and Law sectors as well as the progression to higher degrees. For example, one person said:

The information made available to us was up to date and relevant to my profession and therefore, worked for me in my training and management roles to come.

And another commented:

After graduation I needed to move so I had to find another job. I found another director's job and now knew what I was doing as I was qualified.

One graduate reflected on the usefulness of the degree as a stepping stone, stating:

I remained in the centre, but I was employed part time for one year at a local primary school. My task was to support the children (K-2) in literacy and numeracy. I also had the opportunity to teach and mark assignments for [a unit in the degree being taken by a subsequent cohort].

Almost half of the participants (N=27) stated that their degree helped them in their line of work but not because they wished to utilise it for advancement in their career but for its own sake. Many respondents believed that the degree helped them in a personal and cultural manner. Note the following three voices:

Now when I look back I think about how good it was building bridge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, teaching us aspects of life and making it work together.

I feel my confidence and understanding of other organisational systems developed as a direct result of the conversations made possible through the tutorial style classes.

I seem to be still learning (and consolidating much of my knowledge from the undergraduate) however, I feel that the degree and the specific units as part of the course allowed me to grow as an Aboriginal woman as well as an ECT.

Most graduates stated that they were happy in their current position while others suggested that they stayed in it because it provided them with the flexibility they needed:

When I completed my degree I stayed with my current employer as the Administrator of the Service. I occasionally fill in for relief teaching when needed. The reason why I stayed on with my current employer as the Administrator was due to my own children still going through Secondary school, which I had the flexibility to be close by for them if needed.

Study, work and family are constantly intertwined.

Onto the Next Journey: Retention and Future Plans

Ten (20.8%) of the 48 participants in this study did not comment on any future plans, while twenty (41.6%) of the 38 participants (79.1%) who did respond to this question intended to continue in their current employment for the immediate future.

Same role – no plans to move on. I own the place and have been the longest teacher here so I don't want to leave. It is also an Aboriginal kindergarten so that makes me want to stay as well.

Yes – it's still exciting and challenging. I have a great staff of 7 (most of the time). And I have to stay until my last grand-child goes through the centre which will be next year.

I have since returned to work after having my baby at Easter this year, and really love it!! Whilst I would love to work in early childhood, I am still able to be involved in Indigenous education, just with bigger kids!!

This optimistic outcome affirms the efforts of all those in this program involved in studying, teaching and supporting.

Of the respondents who indicated they would like to change their employment in the near future (N=6; 12.5%), five wished to be employed or remain employed in the early childhood sector, while the sixth respondent wished to move into primary education. Of the five who wished to stay in the early childhood sector, three people wished to change employers for different working conditions (“When I finish my Masters Degree I am out of there. Moving on to a place and in a role where I am appreciated for my skills and knowledge”), one wished to teach in a remote community, and the remaining respondent hoped to start her own day care centre (“Next step – starting up daycare at home once I'm done here”).

Future plans of these 38 graduates also includes five completing further study (13.5%). Two of these five wish to complete further teaching qualifications to meet interstate teacher standards, one graduate is currently enrolled in a TAFE business administration course to support the role of an early childhood centre director, and one intends to complete a higher degree. One graduate contemplating ‘further study’ did not elaborate.

Reflections on the Journeys

These findings provide a portrait of a good news story. As reported by Fleet, Kitson, Cassady and Hughes (2007), perseverance and resilience continue to characterise this group who are dedicating themselves to education and community services, finding either stability or flexibility as desired. Contributing to the research itself was seen as satisfying by many of the co-participants, being pleased that ‘the Uni’ was still interested in their experiences. It suggests that this research was developmental or catalytic in its impact. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes such research as empowering: “empathetic and critical...” (1986, p. 26).

Interestingly, the components that graduates identified as being important characteristics of their degree program are similar to those identified almost twenty years ago in another context. McPherson (1994) conducted research into what graduates of the Murrumbidgee College believed made the Institute's program a success. Students replied with four key points:

The training programs have not been taken ‘off-the-shelf’ but have been ‘tailored made’ to meet the specific training needs and are therefore meaningful. (p.32)

Practice is important – students may not have seen the relevance of theory due to the fact that they had not experienced the application of such knowledge. (p.33)

Mixed mode delivery – Attendance at one week block release training sessions was felt to be more effective than attending after hour's classes. (p.33)

Teaching strategies and resources needed to be flexible during the implementation of the program so that effective learning could take place. (p.33)

Within the expected constraints and opportunities of the Australian university sector, the flexibility and mode of delivery of this degree were clearly significant. In conjunction with an Indigenous support unit, 'Block mode' helped in creating a culturally safe educational community, providing support to students enabling them to grow and prosper in an adult education environment. The only consistently expressed concern about the program was that of interstate students having difficulties in getting their qualification recognized. This difficulty is being addressed through program restructuring in response to nationwide shifts in registration requirements.

What is of concern are the silences in our report of the journeys. Unvoiced turbulence often lies behind the numbers and basic responses: the unspoken world of centre politics, family responsibilities and community conflict. Too many graduates have found themselves unable to find or keep appropriate employment due to historical family arguments, deep-seated resistance to Aboriginal leadership, or resentment from lesser qualified staff. To avoid misrepresentation, those stories of silenced voices and concealed stories need to be told separately by the owners of those missing narratives.

But these were not the only omissions in these stories and summaries. For example, several of these graduates had serious health concerns (stroke or heart attack) while studying and the majority had major family issues including at least one death in the immediate family. On a more positive, emancipatory note, 21% have completed at least one more degree or qualification since completing the BTeach (ECS) and others are actively considering further study.

Clearly, we cannot know the particular circumstances of those graduates who are not included in this portrait. Some graduates may have chosen not to participate or continue with professional engagement, possibly due to the presence of other, less visible forces. Santoro, Reid, Simpson & McConaghy (2004) used 'Pedagogies of Whiteness' as a possible explanation for graduates leaving the Early Childhood sector. One of the graduates in their study confirms that 'white pedagogy' (closet racism or microaggressions) can have an impact upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. She commented:

I think the way Koori people learn is, you know, about touching and feeling and exploration and seeing the wonder in a puddle, you know. The discovery of dropping a rock in and making waves and all that sort of stuff. Whereas Western teaching and learning is very compartmentalised. It's very boxed and has to fit into 'this.' Because if it doesn't, it's not part of 'that.' It sits out here, and that's where we (Indigenous people) sit. We sit out here because we don't fit into that box. We're surrounding the box. We're part of the box. We're inside the box. We're all over the box. We're like the air, we're all around you but it's not...western teachers don't see that. (p. 4)

Finally: Pathways are Multiple; Portraits Highlight Possibilities

The findings highlight human complexity and the benefits of a course of study that emphasises relatedness, respect and the intersections of community and Indigeneity. People contributing to this study were self-selected graduates of a particular program. They were not randomly selected and may have been predisposed to assist in the research. Within a study dependent on a narrative landscape approach to portraiture, however, this is a useful response rate or circle of storytellers. While the findings may only be interpreted within the context of this portrait and not as applying to a wider population, they were based on the participants' perceptions of their own demonstrably salient experiences: They agreed that "*support is everything.*"

Overall, these respondents expressed appreciation for their program and satisfaction with their current roles. While this may be a reflection of those who chose to participate, it is nevertheless a tribute to them as graduates and to their journeys. Further research with other graduates in a range of programs may affirm or extend these findings.

These graduates are largely moving to achieve what they have set out to do. While 12.5% per cent are occupied with family responsibilities and a few are not engaging in the sector at this time, approximately 84% are professionally engaged, with almost 65% working as educators, including 21% working as Directors or Acting Directors in children's services across various states. This is an encouraging result for both individuals and program developers. In the process, the graduates are growing as individuals and professionals, thriving from a program which is designed to recognize both individuality and professional requirements. Their life chances are stronger. Their entering commitment is being rewarded. Their voices are being heard.

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