

1-1-2023

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[10.55146/ajie.v52i2.656](https://doi.org/10.55146/ajie.v52i2.656)

Hill, B., Nilson, C., Uink, B., & Fetherston, C. (2023). Transformation at the cultural interface: Exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 52(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.55146/ajie.v52i2.656>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

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Transformation at the cultural interface: exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students

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Research on transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), particularly within the context of higher education, has demonstrated the significant impact university learning can have on a wide range of cohorts across diverse learning contexts. However, the extensive body of literature pertaining to transformative learning remains largely silent on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and the extent to which their engagement with academia can be transformative. Nevertheless, Nakata's (2007b) cultural interface theory has shaped policy, practice and thought in Indigenous higher education, elucidating the nuances, complexities and challenges that confront Indigenous students in their journey through university. In bringing together these two critical theories, this study investigated the journeys of three undergraduate Indigenous university students finding that university can indeed be a site of positive personal transformation. Such changes were fostered through critical peer support relationships, relationships with family and loved ones as well as a growing confidence and pride in their cultural identities. These findings have important implications for the way institutions support and teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and provides a nuanced insight into their university journeys at the cultural interface.

Keywords: cultural interface, Indigenous education, student experience, transformative learning

Introduction

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled at universities than ever before. While the first few Indigenous students entered higher education in the mid-1950s (Fredericks & White, 2018), there are now more than 22,000 undertaking studies at Australian universities (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022). This growth, while significant, still sees Indigenous enrolments significantly below population parity (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, while access and participation rates are improving, retention, success and completion rates across the sector remain a key concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the higher education sector. Nationally, Indigenous undergraduate students are retained at a rate 10.3 percentage points lower than the overall domestic cohort, with the average success rate being lower still, at 13.6 percentage points (Universities Australia, 2022). Furthermore, while increasing gradually over time, less than half (49.4%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have completed their degrees after nine years of study (Universities Australia, 2022). National data also shows that the average six-year completion rate for Indigenous students is 41% compared with 63% non-Indigenous and 56% relative to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Uink et al., 2021).

Given the need for significant improvement in Indigenous student outcomes, an important body of research has sought to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students to inform national and institutional responses to addressing disparities in educational outcomes. This research can be broadly categorised into four areas of inquiry: the student experience (e.g., Barney, 2013; Rochecouste et al., 2014; White, 2009); enablers and obstacles to student success (e.g., Barney, 2016; Cameron & Robinson, 2014; Curtis et al., 2015; Herbert, 2005; Kinnane et al., 2014; Trudgett, 2014; West et al., 2014); student retention (Asmar et al., 2014; Day & Nolde, 2009; Hearn et al., 2021; Hearn & Funnell, 2021; Mills et al., 2014; Pechenkina, 2015; Shah & Widin, 2010; Uink et al., 2019; Uink et al., 2021); and increasing access, preparedness and participation (e.g., Hall, 2015; Hall et al., 2015; Powell & Lawley, 2008). This body of research demonstrates the complexities for Indigenous learners at university; however, it does not explicitly interrogate the nexus between dominant theories in higher education and Indigenous-specific theorisations of students' university experiences. There is value in exploring how diverse theoretical framings intersect to help scholars fully understand the complexities that Indigenous students navigate on their learning journey and how these complexities play out within the context of their broader life stories.

The cultural interface within the context of higher education

The cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a; 2007b) recognises that Indigenous university students are situated within overlapping, competing and, at times, contradictory discourses that result in universities being complex spaces for Indigenous students to navigate (Nakata et al., 2008). While simultaneously being critical locales for agency and change (Nakata, 2007b), they are also spaces of exclusion and erasure (Mukandi & Bond, 2019). Therefore, Nakata (2007b) contends that students “embark on a *transforming* [emphasis added] process of endless instances of learning and forgetting, of melding and a keeping separate, of discarding and taking up, of continuity and discontinuity” (p. 10) when navigating their way through university. On this journey, Indigenous students are variously, yet simultaneously, understood as the learner and “the known”, but are less often positioned as the knower (Nakata, 2007a).

Indeed, a substantial body of literature deploys Nakata's theory in its analysis of the higher education sector to understand the positioning of Indigenous students within the sector, including teaching and learning, student support policy and practice. Only a small number of studies (Barney, 2013; Bennett et al., 2021; Cameron & Robinson, 2014; Hill et al., 2020; Nakata et al., 2008; Oliver et al., 2013; Rennie, 2018) examine and engage explicitly with Indigenous students' lived experiences at the cultural interface. These studies demonstrate that the tensions Indigenous learners face at the cultural interface are multi-factorial, at times paradoxical and always complex. For instance, within their institutions of study, students encounter racism, but are often well supported by university Indigenous centres to manage and persist with their studies (Fredericks et al., 2023; Nakata et al., 2019; Uink et al., 2021). Students may feel culturally isolated within the academy, but derive significant strength from their Indigenous peer networks (Hill et al., 2020) and, despite facing considerable financial challenges, they are also supported by family and the Indigenous community both within and external to the university to remain engaged with their learning (Uink et al., 2019). These studies highlight the utility of applying Nakata's cultural interface as a theoretical lens for understanding individual student journeys and how these journeys intersect with Indigenous students' past and future selves, their families, and their communities.

Transformative learning at the cultural interface

While the cultural interface is a complex and contested space, it is also an important site of agency that can foster change. The transformation processes identified by Nakata (2007b) at the cultural interface has potential resonance with Mezirow's (1991) work on transformative learning (Bennett et al., 2022). Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1978; 1991; 1995; 1996) explicates the processes of change that students may experience in engaging with learning that prompts significant shifts in existing perspectives, ideas or worldviews. Such change is often catalysed by a disorienting dilemma that, through critical reflection and new roles and relationships, can lead to the development of new frames of reference that establish new assumptions and beliefs about the world around them and others within it (Mezirow, 2003). This process is commonly articulated as being constituted of 10, not necessarily linear, phases (see Table 1).

Table 1: The 10 phases of Mezirow's transformative learning

Phase	Descriptor
1	A disorienting dilemma
2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3	A critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions
4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6	Planning of a course of action
7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8	Provisional trying on of new roles
9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10	Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

(Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105)

Throughout the historical development of Mezirow's theory, the focus of research has been on cognitive shifts and transformations, encompassing the reshaping of frames of reference, habits of mind and worldviews (Mezirow, 1991). However, recent scholarly discussions have extended transformative learning theory beyond the cognitive realm, incorporating social and affective elements into the discourse on transformative learning, thus broadening its scope (Illeris, 2014; Mälkki, 2010) and enabling a more comprehensive understanding of transformative learning (Dirkx, 2006; Illeris, 2014). With this re-examination and re-interpretation of Mezirow's work comes some ambiguity as the dominant cognitive focus is broadened to encompass other more social and emotional aspects of learners' transformation. To address this ambiguity, scholars in transformative learning, such as Illeris (2014) and James (2002), propose interpreting transformative learning through the lens of "identity". More than just being about

changes in the way learners think and feel, emerging scholarship is interested in the way some forms of learning transform students' sense of self and relationships to others.

Importantly, within the context of Indigenous higher education, Hall and others (2015) argue that transformative learning experiences for students have the potential to foster academic success, strength and persistence at the cultural interface. An important contribution to the potential nexus between transformative learning theory and cultural interface is provided by Bennett et al. (2022) and their findings that intentionally designed curriculum and pedagogy, utilising transformative learning, positively impacts Indigenous students' self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-confidence and sense of belonging.

In contrast to Mezirow's work, Nakata's cultural interface provides a more progressed scholarly interrogation about the ways in which identities, particularly for Indigenous learners, are shaped by academia. However, despite a significant body of research focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences at university, there remains a gap in the literature examining Indigenous students' narratives of transformative change while they are engaging at the cultural interface. This is particularly evident in relation to the potential ways in which university may foster shifts in how students think about themselves and the world around them and, more importantly, what such transformation may mean for them, their families and communities. Furthermore, despite an extensive existing body of work exploring transformative learning theory in a range of contexts, there remains a scarcity of research examining whether, or the extent to which, higher education is transformative for Indigenous university students. Likewise, whether these transformations mimic – or extend beyond – those steps articulated by Mezirow's 10 steps. In bringing together transformative theory and cultural interface frameworks, it is envisaged that a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities of Indigenous students' experiences at university can be more completely appreciated and understood.

Research objective and questions

Through examining individual student narratives, this study aimed to understand the nuances of Indigenous students' experiences at university, the potential for transformation to occur throughout their engagement with higher education, the meanings that students attach to their experiences and changes that may occur at the cultural interface. Through these narratives, the nuances, and complexities of Indigenous students' engagement with higher education could be revealed to help shape policy and practice within the context of Indigenous higher education. To elucidate this further, an empirical study was designed considering the following research questions:

1. Are universities, at the cultural interface, a site of transformative learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander undergraduate students? If not, how do Indigenous students' journeys and experiences differ to other student cohorts?
2. If so, how is such transformation fostered and what meanings do students attach to personal transformative change?
3. In what way does change manifest for Indigenous university students?

Method

A narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) was employed to reveal and examine the stories and lived experiences that shaped Indigenous students' university learning journeys at the cultural interface. Within the narrative inquiry approach, stories act as both method and phenomenon (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), unveiling the narrator in all their complexity and individuality (Kramp, 2004), while also amplifying participant voices to a broader audience (Wang & Geale, 2015). Analysing Indigenous students' narratives covering their lives prior to, and throughout, their engagement with university enables critical insights into their experiences at the cultural interface and an understanding of and to what extent such a journey is transformative for themselves, their families and communities. This method of inquiry is especially well suited to our contemporary framing of transformative learning as a process which impacts the narratives individuals develop about their academic identities.

Participants

This study examined the experiences of three Indigenous undergraduate students at a small to medium-sized university in Western Australia. These participants, and their stories, were drawn from a larger sample of 19 Indigenous students who took part in a study about transformative learning at the cultural interface. To participate, students had to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (validated by the university's student information system and its Indigenous centre), be over 18 years old and have completed one full-time semester of study. In a previous study (Hill et al., 2020), the stories of all 19 participants were subjected to a thematic analysis which identified common themes across students' experiences and university journeys. The current study drills down into the stories of three students whose stories were illustrative of the common themes analysed across the broader cohort narratives. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide rich, detailed and nuanced descriptions of the data across multiple narrative texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hill et al. (2020) report the demographics for the full sample. Notably, the most common parental educational background of participants was years 8-10 as highest level of education (see Table 2). Having a university-educated parent/guardian in Australia nearly doubles the chance of a child pursuing higher education (Patfield et al., 2020). Such parental influence also significantly affects students' academic outcomes (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Thayer, 2000; Tramonte & Willms, 2010).

Additionally, Wilks and Wilson (2012) argue that Indigenous people's exclusion from Australia's education system has caused them to believe they cannot succeed at university. Teachers' low expectations further reinforce individualised Indigenous failure early in the educational journey (Moodie et al., 2021). This demographic information provides an additional layer of understanding to the diversity of narratives captured in this study.

Table 2: Participants' parental/guardian level of educational attainment

Highest levels of education	Parent/Guardian 1 attainment	Parent/Guardian 2 attainment	Total	%
Primary School	1	1	2	5.4%
Years 8-10	8	8	16	43.2%
Years 11-12	2	3	5	13.5%
Cert IV – Advanced Diploma	3	2	5	13.5%

Bachelor Degree	4	3	7	18.9%
Postgraduate Degree	1	1	2	5.4%
Total	19	18	37	100%

Data collection

The study involved three data collection phases: (1) written autobiographical narratives, (2) focus group interviews, and (3) one-to-one interviews. A total of 19 participants provided written narratives, while 11 of those in Phase 1 participated in a focus group interview and three of those from Phase 2 took part in individual interviews. In Phase 1, students were asked to submit an online autobiographical narrative about their life prior to university and future plans after graduation. This phase also collected primary demographic information (Table 2). The aim was for participants to reflect on their personal experiences before moving onto Phase 2.

The study then employed Bessarab and Ng'andu's (2010) "yarning" method in Phase 2, which comprised two focus groups for students to collectively delve deeper into themes explored in their autobiographical written narratives through dialogue with their peers. Several prompts guided discussions based on emergent themes from Phase 1. For instance, participants reflected on the impact of their study journey, how going to university may affect families and important relationships that influenced their educational journey.

Finally, all participants in Phase 2 were invited to engage with follow-up in-depth narrative interviews (Phase 3) to share their stories in full. Three students participated in this final phase of data collection having participated in all preceding phases. In this phase, following the narrative inquiry approach outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2004), participants were invited to re-tell their stories in full, with no interruption. Using the open prompt of "tell me your life story from as early as you remember to where you find yourself now here at university", the participants were asked to tell their individual story from as early as they remember to present time, preceding and during their time at university. Students were also provided with information on internal and external counselling support should they require it. The interviewer, taking note of key events and moments throughout their journeys, developed several follow-up questions that were used to explore and clarify details, timelines and meaning underpinning the students' narratives. This later enabled the development of more comprehensive narratives that captured the experiences of each participant. Both focus groups and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Data analysis

The three participants' stories are analysed against Mezirow's transformative learning phases to demonstrate the ways in which transformations are a continuing and ongoing process of change for the individual students. Additionally, these narratives are mapped to themes generated in our original thematic analysis (Hill et al., 2020) to highlight how the students' stories coalesced with the themes which were common across the larger sample. Table 3 (below) presents the themes and sub-themes derived from the thematic analysis of the participants' narratives. Data from written autobiographical narratives was coded in NVivo 12, capturing all relevant narrative segments for each participant.

Researcher positionality to avoid coercion

The project was led by a Noongar academic (Braden Hill) from the university where the research was conducted. The participants were not directly associated with the researcher, though some may have been familiar with him due to his position. Recruitment was conducted by an independent administrative staff member to avoid coercion. As the researcher oversaw operations at the Indigenous centre, he took care to avoid letting his personal biases and assumptions affect the study's trustworthiness through the process of "bracketing" (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Findings

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes from participant narratives

Themes	Sub-theme/Descriptor
1. Perceived development of self-efficacy	Development of persistence through supportive and changing relationships among Indigenous students that fostered confidence and academic success
	Development of confidence through sense of accomplishment and success that led to stronger sense of belonging and persistence at university
2. Navigating family perceptions, expectations and relationships	Importance of family support from key members of their family to their motivation and success at university
	Negotiating families' (mis)understandings and (mis)perceptions on the opportunities and risks of studying at university (e.g., racism, loss of potential income, costs associated with study, disconnect from family and culture)
3. Affirming cultural identity	Strengthening of student relationships to their Indigenous cultural identities

Declan's story

Declan (23 years old), a second-year nursing student, had his education significantly disrupted by the death of his grandfather, whom he described as being "like a second dad ... always there, always a good support". This loss impacted him and his family at the age of 12; he reflects that "the whole Aboriginal side of my family just fell apart". Substance abuse became an issue within the family home.

Despite such challenges and sporadic school attendance, Declan's academic performance at school remained commendable. However, the eventual separation of his parents pushed him to disengage from schooling. He recounted, "I just dropped out of the academic stuff. Hardly went to school." Declan's school attendance was further impacted by racist bullying, which exacerbated existing anger issues. Nevertheless, he persevered, completing high school amid family challenges and a strained relationship with his mother.

Following high school, Declan's first attempt at university was interrupted by a car accident that left him with a broken ankle. Choosing not to study, he instead took up work in the remote mining industry, describing it as "lonely and depressing". Discontented, he returned to university but fell into drug use. Resulting financial issues pushed Declan into debt collection for drug dealers, a period he found challenging to discuss. He expressed, "I think the drugs messed with my head a little bit because I was hurting people, and that was the last thing I wanted to do." Declan's recall of this phase of his life is consistent with Phase 2 of transformative learning – self-examination, with feelings of guilt or shame.

Declan's struggles reinforced negative perceptions from some broader family members who believed he would amount to "nothing". This tension was common among the student narratives, whereby some family members were doubtful or expressed resistance about their loved one's intentions or ability to engage with university study.

A turning point in Declan's life occurred when his grandmother confronted him about his drug use: "I saw my Nan crying one night and she told me she knew what was going on and about all the crap I had been getting into. That hurt me a lot but made me decide to go get help the next morning." This "disorienting dilemma" (Phase 1 – disorienting dilemma) was followed by Declan taking actions which map well to transformative learning. He decided to seek help, encouraged by his father and grandmother (Phase 4 – recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation is shared); he attended anger management classes and changed his degree to nursing (Phase 6 – planning a course of action), inspired by a compassionate male nurse who cared for him. Throughout all student narratives, a supportive family member was critical to the student's motivation, persistence and success at university (Theme 2 – Navigating family perceptions, expectations and relationships).

Today, Declan's academic progress and achievement has provided him with a sense of confidence: "Passing my first full semester was a key moment for me. While they weren't the best marks, a credit here, distinction there, it was pretty good coming from fails and not showing up, I kind of felt for the first time that I could do it." (Phase 9 – building of competence and self-confidence; Theme 1 – Perceived development of self-efficacy). Indeed, reflection on academic success was important in the students' narratives of their learning journeys, particularly in enabling students to develop academic self-efficacy – the belief that they had the capacity to succeed at university.

Declan credits his progress to the support of university staff, particularly at the Indigenous centre. His ITAS tutor also played a vital role, providing assistance that showed immense care and support. He values the broader support of the Indigenous centre, which gives him direction and a sense of belonging. In this context, peer support has also been crucial to Declan's journey, especially in terms of providing motivation. He shared, "We've all come from different areas, different places, different stories, but we're all blackfellas, and I thought if you guys can do it, then why can't I?" (Phase 5 – exploration of new relationships; Theme 3 – Affirming cultural identity). This increased sense of self-efficacy was attributed to the importance of supportive and/or changing relationships in the development of persistence, feelings of accomplishment and success at university. Many of the participants articulated having found a sense of community and like-mindedness amongst the university's Indigenous student cohort. As Declan expressed, "Seeing everyone here kind of inspired me ... I am finding like-minded people here ... and now that I'm passing and everything, and surrounding myself with good people and having direction, I don't feel lost. I feel like I can be something." Looking ahead, Declan aspires to become a registered nurse and make a positive impact in his community and more broadly.

Will's story

Will (32 years old, second-year environmental conservation student) undertook university studies after deciding his trade career was ultimately unfulfilling (Phase 1 – disorienting dilemma). Despite being a qualified carpenter since age 22, he had struggled with unstable employment in the resources industry, which led to burnout and a sense of dissatisfaction. Insecure employment and the pressures of working in the resources industry eventually began to take its toll on Will: "I became burnt out pretty quickly and began searching for alternative career options. I got sick of the tradie banter bull-crap, it was so boring I got over it pretty quickly but just put up with it too long, I reckon. I'd gone through a heap of different

jobs and stuff, and my self-esteem took a bit of a hit. I just thought there must be more than this.” (Phase 1 – disorienting dilemma).

While searching for employment opportunities, Will considered taking up studies in sport and exercise science to make a career out of a keen interest in sport, recreation and fitness. In doing so, he said, “I eventually found the [Indigenous centre] on the university website and made an inquiry. They contacted me straight away and told me about the Indigenous enabling program, I was nervous about it, not having studied since school, but I was determined to give it a go.” Reflecting on this supported pathway, Will says, “It sort of gave me the confidence I’d been searching for in the workplace. It wasn’t until I came here that I found it.” (Theme 1 – Perceived development of self-efficacy). This initial and ongoing supportive relationship with the Indigenous centre bolstered Will’s ambition to pursue further education. The importance of the Indigenous centre to their engagement and success at university was consistent across most of the student narratives.

Upon beginning the enabling program, Will changed his mind about where he wanted to go study-wise: “I realised that I enjoyed health and fitness, however, as a career it wasn’t for me. During [the Indigenous enabling program] the sustainability/environmental issues we discussed really appealed to me. Growing up in a remote Aboriginal community in the Kimberley then later working throughout the Pilbara, I’d always had a concern and a connection with ethical environmental issues.” (Phase 7 – acquisition of new knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan). Engaging with Indigenised curriculum not only inspired a new future career direction, it also affirmed Will’s cultural identity and its alignment with a future career (Theme 3 – Affirming cultural identity).

For Will, academic achievement was critical to his sense of self-efficacy: “A key moment for me was starting to get those good grades. To begin with, I was only getting like 50% or worse. But things started to improve, and it made me realise, yeah, I can do this.” (Theme 1 – Perceived development of self-efficacy). While Will perceived university as a platform for a change in career direction, having progressed to his second year of study, he reflected that he had become someone different—someone more confident: “It wasn’t until maybe last semester that I thought, you know what?, I’m a different person now. I’m not that person anymore. I’m more confident. A lot of my friends that didn’t do anything [post-secondary education] ... they seem so boxed in now. They can’t see out of that ... just still stuck in that same box and can never see a way out of it.” (Phase 3 – a critical assessment of socio-cultural assumptions). Such shifts in perspective reflect Mezirow’s notion that students may experience engagement with learning and learning contexts that prompt significant self-reflection and shifts in existing perspectives, ideas or worldviews.

Looking ahead, Will envisages his degree presenting him with a number of rewarding opportunities: “I see this degree as a platform and opportunity that I value and won’t take lightly. I think this degree presents a wide range of options for me. I could possibly go into a local council, Parks and Wildlife, NGO, resource industries, etc. I feel a sense of excitement about it.”

Michelle’s story

Michelle’s drive for academic achievement began early in life, as she saw education as her path to a better future: “I just saw from an early age that school was the way out, the way to get somewhere else.” As a child, Michelle struggled with things at home, to escape this, at times, challenging environment, she often found solace in school. However, knowing this, her mother occasionally disciplined her by keeping her home: “I always wanted to be in school, but it was because I didn’t want to be at home. So mum would

punish me by making me stay home from school. I think I just saw from an early age that school was the way out, the way to get somewhere else.”

Her aspiration to attend university grew from this attitude towards education. She was the first in her family to pursue higher education and was motivated by a desire to break free from her family’s circumstances. She observed that people she met, who had “achieved more in life”, often had a connection to education, motivating her to follow suit.

Michelle’s school life clashed with her family environment, particularly in terms of her educational and social growth. At a young age, she felt she outgrew her mother, causing friction (Phase 1 – disorienting dilemma). An example of this was when she confronted her mother, a non-Indigenous woman, about racist remarks she made towards Indigenous people, a confrontation that deeply affected her: “I remember saying to her, ‘Mum, you can’t say that, that’s racist’ ... I remember being mortified, like asking quietly, ‘What kind of parent are you?’”.

Despite the challenges, Michelle successfully completed high school and earned the opportunity to enter university directly. However, she initially struggled academically and eventually discontinued her studies, got married and had two children. Struggling with post-natal depression, she was also diagnosed with ADHD, which, when treated, enabled her to excel academically. She also discovered she had dyslexia and began accessing equity support at university. This made a considerable difference to her learning experience.

Connecting with others and learning more about her father’s Torres Strait Islander culture at university (her father was part of the Stolen Generation) gave Michelle a sense of belonging and pride: “To me it was a relief. I was like I finally knew where I belong. This pride is something that is now positively impacting the rest of my family.”

She became actively involved with the Indigenous centre at her university, connecting with other Indigenous students with shared experiences: “I still feel that it’s [the Indigenous centre] where I need to be to grow, and that’s what it can offer me. Nowhere else can offer me that.” (Phase 4 – recognition that one’s discontent and process of transformation is shared; Phase 5 – exploration of new roles and relationships; Theme 3 – Affirming cultural identity). In doing so, this sense of cultural pride positively impacted her views on Indigenous people and culture (Phase 8 – provisional trying on of new roles). Michelle reflected, “Because I’m proud of my cultural identity I think it’s beginning to rub off on my family, especially my dad. For him it used to be a shameful thing.” Michelle’s engagement with the Indigenous centre was a profoundly affirming experience in terms of her cultural identity and affinity with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This sense of belonging was critical to her success as a student when life became more challenging.

As Michelle progressed through university, her marriage dissolved. While her studies were not the direct cause, she believes her growth became intimidating for her partner, contributing to the breakup: “He’d be like ‘you think you know better’ and all that stuff ... so I think he decided this life [relationship with Michelle] wasn’t for him.” Despite selling her house and going through a divorce, Michelle remained committed to her studies, which provided a constant source of stability and support during this tumultuous period.

However, her deepening involvement in higher education led to a growing disconnect from her family. She felt like “the odd one out” among her family, who she believed did not fully understand her commitment to university (Phase 1 – disorienting dilemma). Nevertheless, her father gradually became

more supportive of her studies. While navigating these familial tensions was difficult, being at university enabled Michelle to respond constructively and with emotional maturity. She gained empathy for her mother's struggles, which stemmed from a traumatic past, and this understanding allowed her to rebuild their relationship: "Mum was given up by her parents. Her mother stood in a courtroom and said ... I don't want you. I know now that Mum did the best job she could ... I just remember thinking, geez no wonder she is the way she is. Thinking about that made me a lot more patient with her."

Michelle's education gave her tools to manage difficult relationships and cultivate new, positive connections with fellow students and her new partner (Phase 9 – building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; Phase 10 – reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective). Therefore, through her studies, Michelle learned to embrace her emotions, understand trauma and re-evaluate her family dynamics (Phase 7 – acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan).

She recognised that education was her path to growth, purpose and a sense of belonging. Now, she is on the verge of completing her university degree and preparing for the birth of her third child. Michelle is determined to give back to young people from similar backgrounds and continue her journey of personal and academic growth.

Discussion

The student narratives explored and examined in this study suggest that universities have the potential to be sites of transformation for Indigenous students. While Mezirow's theory has been predominantly concerned with transformation at the cognitive level (transformed frames of reference, habits of mind and points of view), for Indigenous students, such transformation occurs within and beyond this domain. The student stories reflect the ways in which transformation occurs primarily outside of formal learning and teaching environments. Transformations emerge out of relationships with peers and with friends/family, gaining confidence through academic achievement, learning to navigate existing and new relationships, and building a strong sense of identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Moreover, the first step of transformation – a disorienting dilemma – often occurs well before Indigenous students enter a university classroom.

While the transformative experiences of the Indigenous students who participated in this study reflect a broader impact of transformative learning, what is consistent with Mezirow's theory and the literature pertaining to transformative learning is the concept of change. Change is central to transformative learning theory; learners immersed in particular contexts are transformed by their engagement with new knowledge and new relationships (Mezirow, 2006). From these interactions emerge new identities and relationships (Illeris, 2014) that promote confidence and self-belief (Mezirow, 1991). For the participants in this study, engagement with higher education led to the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy and persistence. This increased sense of self-efficacy was attributed to the importance of supportive and/or changing relationships and further enabled through a sense of accomplishment, belonging and success at university.

Worth noting is that achievement in assessment marked a pivotal moment for many students in their narratives, enabling them to shape a new, self-determined, academic identity that led to persistence with their studies. A key factor in overcoming "imposter syndrome" (Clance & Imes, 1978; Schwartz, 2018) for any student is the development of a "student identity", reinforcing Chapman's (2017) and Kasworm's (2010) notion that achieving in assessment is a key point of validation and confirmation of students'

academic ability and capacity to engage successfully with university study. This finding reinforces calls for Mezirow's theory to incorporate academic identity into discussions about what actually transforms in the transformative learning process (Illeris, 2014).

Also prevalent throughout the student narratives was that the concept of family. Students regularly identified their families, particularly individuals in their immediate family, as being critical supports for them throughout their university studies. For some, family encouragement was the reason they pursued university in the first place or was critical to them remaining motivated to complete their studies. Importantly, all students in the study had at least one person close to them in their family who was integral to their success at university. However, a key point of tension that did emerge for some of the students related to their need to navigate or negotiate their families' views on education and university study, particularly the potential problems for Indigenous people in engaging with academia. Where these concerns were raised, often through supportive relationships or newly acquired knowledge, students were able to successfully navigate these complexities to maintain their focus on their studies. For one of the participants (Michelle) engaging in university studies had a bidirectional effect where she was able to take what she was learning at university to empathise with the family member (her mother) who had initially strongly discouraged her attendance.

Additionally, many students expressed that being at university, surrounded by their Indigenous peers, strengthened their sense of identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While not evident in the narratives presented in this paper, from the broader sample, prior to coming to university some students held somewhat stigmatised views on their own identities and communities (Hill, 2020). Nevertheless, entering the transformative space at the cultural interface, these students were encouraged to reflect on these previously held frames of reference to develop stronger relationships to their culture and identity as Indigenous people. Much of this came not from what they studied, but from with whom they had relationships with, further highlighting that transformation occurs beyond the walls of the classroom.

While much of the transformation evidenced in this study was catalysed within the context of higher education, these shifts occur at the broader and more blurred boundaries of the cultural interface. The students' narratives elucidate the subjective realities of Indigenous students living and learning at the multi-layered and multidimensional space that is the cultural interface. Within this unique space, the intersection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories, cultures, knowledge and people intricately influence the manner in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprehend and articulate their identities (Nakata, 2007a). It is crucial to recognise that these experiences are distinctly individual, shaped by personal perspectives and circumstances. The students' narratives reinforce and clarify how Indigenous learners' engagement with academia, at the cultural interface, positions them in a contested space that, to varying degrees, necessitates a process of change, negotiation and adaptation (Nakata, 2007a). The potential complementarity of transformative learning theory to Nakata's theorising of the cultural interface is the insight it provides into the individual processes of change that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners experience in their engagement with academia. However, this theoretical complementarity comes only with an embracing of a more contemporary and broader interpretation of Mezirow's work that introduces an important focus on social and affective elements of change within the discourse on transformative learning. Integral to this understanding of transformative learning are contemporary sociological and psychological conceptualisations of identity that understand identities as being diverse, malleable, changeable and fluid, as opposed to fixed or essential (Illeris, 2014). It is through this perspective that these student narratives and Nakata's theory is most instructive to the discourse pertaining to transformative learning; transformation for Indigenous students can occur within and

external to formal learning environments through supportive relationships, in this instance, often fostered through the Indigenous communities within the university. This is particularly important for Indigenous students for whom the educational contexts they are navigating through construct them epistemologically as the “known” and not the “knowers” (Mukandi & Bond, 2019; Nakata, 2007b). It is this understood reality for Indigenous students that makes an important contribution to the largely culturally homogenous literature focusing on transformative learning (Hill, 2020).

Understanding and being able to reflect on the tensions and transformations Indigenous students may experience at the cultural interface has the potential to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their family and friends, their peers, their academics and student support professionals to anticipate the tensions, challenges and opportunities students are likely to encounter throughout their higher education journeys.

Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ engagement with higher education has the potential to be transformative. The narratives highlighted in this study not only elucidate further the complexities of Indigenous student experiences at the cultural interface, but they also provide critical insights into the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relationality in fostering student success and transformation. At the cultural interface of academia, students engage with complexity and contradiction, but manage to do so with confidence and a sense of purpose and agency because of the support and encouragement of others, particularly Indigenous peers, staff and broader community members. Whether this be through peer-to-peer support, supportive relationships or families who enable their loved ones to thrive, Indigenous peoples’ successful navigation of the cultural interface and academia is often fostered by these important relationships. These support foundations are found to be complemented by processes of change for students that catalyse new or nuanced ways about how they understand themselves as not only students, but also as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Such changes lead to greater confidence and self-efficacy in relation to university studies, and empower students to embrace the idea that higher education is somewhere they may belong, thrive or at least be able to find what they (or their family and community) need from the journey. However, evident also is the need for concerted, sustained and committed work by university leaders to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students engage equitably with the academy in ways that whole-heartedly benefit Indigenous students, their families and their communities. The student narratives in this study attest to the potential for universities to be positive, transformative spaces.

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Please cite this article as:

Hill, B., Nilson, C., Uink, B., & Fetherston, C. (2023). Transformation at the cultural interface: Exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 52(2). DOI 10.55146/ajie.v52i2.656



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The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education
Volume 52 | Issue 2 | © The Author/s 2023 doi 10.55146/ajie.v52i2.656
