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Understanding the Complex Work of Aboriginal Education Workers in Schools

Anne Price,[1] Elizabeth Jackson-Barrett,[1] Graeme Gower[2] and Jan Herrington[1]
[1] *School of Education, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA 6150, Australia*
[2] *School of Education, Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, WA 6027, Australia*

The work of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) in Australian schools is complex and multifaceted, and yet it is often misunderstood, or worse, devalued. Added to this, the conditions of employment for many AEWs is often insecure, with minimal pay, few opportunities for career progression or meaningful professional development. Despite this there continues to be, as there have been for decades, research findings, policies and reports attesting to the invaluable role of AEWs in schools and communities. The theoretical standpoint of Nakata's (2007) 'cultural interface' is used in this paper to critically (re) examine the role of AEWs in Australian schools. Drawing from relevant past and contemporary literature, this paper draws attention to past and contemporary theorising and policy concerning the roles of AEWs. It asserts that if the work of AEWs is to be better understood and valued then it must be reconsidered in a more transformative way that benefits both the students and schools which they support.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal education workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, teacher education, cultural interface

Within the context of recent Australian Federal, Statex and Territory policies set to impact on Indigenous communities — such as a raft of controversial interventionist strategies in the Northern Territory; further reforms of the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2015), pre service teacher education and teacher registration standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015); and the emergence of Aboriginal cultural frameworks, such as Department of Education Western Australia Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework (2015) — it is imperative and timely to reconsider the work and employment conditions of AEWs. This discursive paper seeks to add to the debate by examining the work of AEWs within the broader socio political context of Indigenous education in Australia. This context is important if the discussion about the work of AEWs is to move beyond a deficit, essentialist, reductionist or even technical/instrumentalist view, to a much deeper understanding of the complexities and dilemmas of this work.

Theoretical Grounding

This paper aims to better understand the roles of AEWs within schools. To do so we have drawn from and utilised a number of theorists (Foley, 2003; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2010; Grande, 2015; Marcuse, 1964; Nakata, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2014; Smith, 1999) as a way to maximise the research analysis. The authors of this paper are Indigenous and non Indigenous, all of whom have teaching experiences that span across curriculum areas, primary and secondary school settings, in both urban, rural and remote areas throughout Australia. It is these collective experiences that give a unique representation to our research — our standpoints, our world views, our understandings — all of which we acknowledge have conceptualised and shaped our critical consciousness as educational researchers.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Anne Price, School of Education, Murdoch University, 90 South Street, Murdoch, WA 6150, Australia. Email: A.Price@murdoch.edu.au.

Working on different educational research projects in diverse contexts over time, we have established the building blocks of working alongside, and with, Indigenous participants, so that we are able to encapsulate the research through a critical lens. Importantly, as Foley (2003), puts forward, 'both critical and standpoint theory/s are emancipatory and liberatory epistemologies in the deconstruction process [. . .] and are guided by the view that there is more than one worldview and interpretation' (p. 45). Like culture, theory is not static and we utilise a 'bricolage' of theorists to assist us in highlighting and untangling the roles of AEWs. Broadly, we draw from both critical and standpoint theories, however, principally as the driving force, we are working with cultural interface theory so that we are able to better understand the roles of AEWs at the cultural interface which we interpret to be schools in this paper.

The cultural interface is a theoretical framework originating out of the work of prominent Torres Strait Islander scholar Nakata (2007). The cultural interface is designed as a way to unpack, understand and critique the complexities of the 'contested space between two knowledge systems — Indigenous and Western' (p. 9). Nakata conveys that the 'interface is multifaceted and multilayered' (2014, p. 199) entwined in the 'interconnected space of histories, politics, economics and social practices between the two knowledge systems' (2007, p. 9). In the context of this research we place the framework at the intersection where the two knowledge systems meet on a regular basis — in schools — where we identify AEWs are situated, and who, we believe are at the central nexus of the cultural interface. In this paper, we discuss the beliefs and values that underpin much of the educational theory and policy that has shaped the varying roles and status of AEWs in schools over the past 50 years since they were first employed. We use Nakata's cultural interface framework to examine how their roles play out at the 'interface' of the school.

The cultural interface is not just a transitioning point for mainstreaming Aboriginal students or education but rather a space where Indigenous agency fosters change within the institution of education itself to centralise Indigenous knowledge. Further, the interface creates the space for AEWs to have a voice, to share their views and experiences on how best they can work at the cultural interface with all stakeholders, because, at present, the 'lived reality' for many AEWs is still one of experiencing marginalisation. The elements of the organisational processes and practices contained within the entire institution of education and its schools, as noted in MacGill's (2008) findings, appear not to have been 'conducive to their voices being heard' and contributed to 'the lack of recognition for their work' (p vi).

Methodology

The task of gathering data from the literature on the roles of AEWs was complicated by the various titles that AEWs have been given over the past 50 years across the various states and educational jurisdictions in Australia. For example, in Western Australia alone the terms used are Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), or Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATAs).

In the first stage of the literature review, we began by exploring the research topic, using key words including: Aboriginal Educational Workers, Indigenous Educational Workers, Aboriginal/Indigenous Teacher Aides, Aboriginal Cultural Workers, Koorie Educators, Aboriginal Education or Indigenous Education and Teacher Assistants (TA). We limited the search to peer reviewed published works from the year 2000 onwards. In this stage we searched the Murdoch University library catalogue for published books, journals and reports, completed a keyword search through Google Scholar, then data bases, including Australian Indigenous studies *key* databases, Australian Indigenous studies *other* databases, education, social science and sociological abstracts (e.g. APA-FT, Jstor Indigenous collection, Pro-Quest, ERIC, A+ Education). An initial search returned thousands of results, with many articles appearing repeatedly across databases.

A closer study of the titles and abstracts identified 169 relevant publications. These were reviewed, and we found that the majority focussed on health education, childhood services, early childhood workers and TA, who were predominately in mainstream classroom settings. We rejected publications that did not focus on the role of AEWs in schools, however, we did include older publications that seemed relevant for their historical significance. Official documents that articulated AEW roles, including duty statements and job descriptions, were added, as well as evidence from public commentary. Each reference was annotated individually by the authors to determine current roles, possible future roles, and what could be considered driving and restraining forces on the transformation of said roles. Each author then brought their annotations to a series of meetings where further analysis and discussion lead to thematic groups which informed this paper.

Indigenous Education in Australia

We contend that the work of AEWs must be considered within the broader context of Indigenous education policies and discourses in Australia and elsewhere, as these have and continue to impact on the nature of the work and the status of the workers. According to Nakata, the education policy agenda in Australia, like many other colonised places, has been shaped by anthropological and human rights discourses which first described and explained Indigenous culture as primitive and inferior, and later emphasised 'unique and distinctive cultures and identities worth preserving and maintaining — not inferior just different' (Nakata, 2004, p. 2). While this has arguably brought more resources, cultural awareness

and sensitivity, it has also lead to a conceptualisation that so-called learning difficulties or the comparative underachievement of Indigenous students — is the result of cultural difference, and this has provided a 'convenient explanation of student failure that exonerates teacher practice' (Nakata, 2004, p. 2). Much of the literature reviewed highlights the way in which currently and historically, the roles of AEWs have been caught up in the prevailing dominant discourses surrounding Indigenous education that Nakata refers to. Perhaps, not surprisingly, there is little in the literature written by AEWs themselves, although there are quotes that come to the reader via reports and research literature. As MacGill (2008) argues spaces for AEWs to speak up and out about their roles seems a much needed focus for research.

The work of AEWs must first be considered against the backdrop of Indigenous education in Australia since colonisation. Indigenous education has been described as a 'tool for acculturation and assimilation' (Fogarty, 2014, np). This is supported by Green's (2004) comprehensive history of schooling for Indigenous children in Western Australia between 1840 and 1978. In his thesis, Green argues that, regardless of policy, 'education for Indigenous children was directed towards changing their beliefs and behaviours from being distinctly Aboriginal to recognisably European' (p. 2). The early policies aimed at Amalgamation were followed by Protectionism in the late 19th and early 20th Century. During this time, policies of segregated schooling continued with schools for Aboriginal children mostly focusing on teaching 'useful' skills and basic literacy.

From the 1950s, a policy of Assimilation began. The aim was to enable Aboriginal Australians to have access to education and training so that they could learn to live in white society (Green, 2004). In 1973, the newly elected Commonwealth Government announced a major policy of Aboriginal self-determination, and established an Indigenous task force to make recommendations on Indigenous education matters. As will be described later, the 1970s were a time of significant changes in political thinking in the national arena and many policies were enacted to change the paternalistic and racist policies of the past. Despite these improvements, nearly 40 years later, there are still glaring anomalies between the educational and employment opportunities for Indigenous and non Indigenous students as evidenced by successive Closing the Gap reports which note little or no improvement in meeting several significant educational targets (Australian Government, 2015; Australian Government, 2017; Council of Australian Governments, 2008).

The Work of AEWs: The Past and into the Future

Indigenous educator, Mark Rose describes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers (IEWs) as falling just outside human rights and industrial violations. 'The IEW is often the lowest paid employee in the school, yet in a quick review of their day you will find them making principal-like discipline and curriculum decisions' (Rose, 2015, p. 76). There is much literature that spans across the decades that highlights the importance of employing AEWs at the cultural interface, however, funding around and for their positions is tenuous, despite the fact that Aboriginal students and their families recognise the importance of the roles AEWs perform at both the cultural interface and the broader interface (Nakata, 2007, p 198).

This is not a new scenario. For decades now, numerous Indigenous education committees and taskforces have clearly and consistently argued that one of the most important factors to influence the success of Aboriginal students in Australia schools was to increase the number of Indigenous staff in schools, including AEWs (Australian Government, 1985, 2009). A fundamental dilemma arises, however, in terms of what the work of AEWs in schools is, or what it could be. Articulation of this work, as the following sections demonstrate, has evolved since the early 1940s and has been subject to the swings and roundabouts of dominant government policies and ideologies sometimes driven by the advice of researchers.

MacGill (2008) doctoral research provides a substantial review and analysis of the way in which past research into the roles of AEWs has been shaped by dominant theories about Indigenous peoples and Indigenous education. MacGill explores how this research has, in turn, played a role in shaping attitudes and beliefs about AEWs, the work they do (and should do) in schools and communities. In particular, MacGill argues that the work of two prominent early researchers in the 1960s and 1970s, Watts (1971) and Penny (1976), '. . . informed teachers' and researchers' perceptions of AEWs roles in schools in a way that profoundly shaped the subsequent status and use of AEWs in schools' (2008, p. 57). Partly, this is the result of the use of qualitative research methodologies during this period, which enabled the researchers to interpret results and findings based on themes observed in the data from observations and interviews. MacGill contends that such themes generated by mostly non Indigenous researchers reflect dominant and privileged theories of the time, and ignored the voices of the AEWs (2008, 59).

The Early Years

The first paid ATA was appointed in the Northern Territory of Australia in the 1950s. Importantly, recognition of the unpaid work of Indigenous workers prior to and throughout this period has, as MacGill (2008) also notes, generally gone unacknowledged. With South Australia beginning employment of AEWs in 1969, by 1974, such roles had also been established in Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia (Winkler, 2006). The initial function of the role of AEWs, according to Harrison was

to assist Aboriginal students with literacy and numeracy inside the classroom (2011, p. 65).

There was an expansion in the employment and duties of AEWs during the mid 1970s. This was a time of great political and social change in Australia, with the election of a new Commonwealth government, lead by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, after decades of conservative governments. The political and research agenda for Aboriginal issues changed direction, according to Nakata, from 'the traditional fields of inquiry in archaeology, anthropology and linguistics to one of reform through international discourses that were driven by human rights, equal rights and civil rights into the fields of social sciences' (2007b, p. 158). It was a shift in thinking from inferior to equal — culturally different.

During the Whitlam years (1972–1975), many far-reaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy initiatives were introduced, including the first handing over of title deeds of part of traditional lands to Vincent Lingari of the Gurindji people of Northern Australia, and the enactment of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975. In the field of education, the Commonwealth government began to increase its influence over what was traditionally, and constitutionally, a state government responsibility. Within a year of the election, a number of decisions were made that directly affected Aboriginal people in the field of education. These included; the establishment of the Australian Schools Commission which enabled Aboriginal languages to be recognised as the medium of instruction in distinctive Indigenous communities, and assistance for the training of teachers and teachers' aides, some of whom were 'aboriginal' [sic] (Beazley, 1977). By June 1975, a newly established national Aboriginal Consultative Group (ACG) also recommended the need for specially trained Aboriginal Liaison Officers (ALOs) to 'assist and support many of the projects we have recommended' (Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975, p.10). The officers were to be initially funded by the Schools Commission but appointed, and eventually financed, by State Education Departments. Duties of ALOs included (1975, p. 11):

- Liaising with parents, children and teachers.
- Assisting in involving parents with school councils and school activities.
- Publicising scholarship and other schemes relevant to further education.
- Assuming responsibility for arranging liaison with vocational guidance council, and help in other cases where no service available.
- Assisting and counselling school leavers and immediate ex-students in employment.
- Generally counselling students in their educational activities and plans.

The ACG also made recommendations regarding the employment of ATAs (1975, Rec 4.3). The preamble notes that ATAs were, by then, employed in all mainland states and the Northern Territory. 'A major concern, however, is employment conditions and opportunity for professional advancement' (1975, p. 12). The ACG recommended the following:

- Status and duties of ATAs should be para-professional and not ancillary.
- Comprehensive training schemes which will lead to full teacher qualifications should be organised for those capable of and desiring to be teachers.
- Employment conditions should be designed to allow for a progression salary scale.
- All ATAs should be employed on a permanent basis.

Changes During the 1980s (Hawke Years)

Affirmations of the important role of AEWs in schools continued through the 1980s, as did repeated calls for improved wages and conditions and better training opportunities. Expansion of roles and new categories of employment emerged as demands for bilingual/bicultural education (particularly in self-determining Indigenous communities) gained momentum. The Australian Government House of Representatives (HoR) Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, for example, stated that the 'importance of ATAs and teacher aides in schools with Aboriginal students is universally acknowledged' (1985, p. 185).

In its submission to the Select Committee, the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) added that the presence of teacher aides provided a means for principals and staff 'to develop awareness of Aboriginal culture and issues, a liaison between the school and Aboriginal community, a point of contact for Aboriginal children in the classroom and a success model to whom Aboriginal children might relate' (as cited in Australian Government, 1985, p. 185). However, it also noted a lack of training schemes for Teacher Aides, as did the Select Committee on Aboriginal Education (Australian Government, 1985), which recommended:

> The employment of Aboriginal teaching assistants and teacher aides, and other support staff, has been an important initiative in Aboriginal education. Evidence suggests that it is from the ranks of para-professionals that many future teachers will come. Schemes for training teacher assistants and support staff are required. A career structure for teaching assistants, with opportunities provided for them to upgrade their qualifications are also needed. (p. 188).

The HoR Select Committee (Australian Government, 1985, p. 185) also noted that there were factors limiting the potential effectiveness of both positions. These included:

- Teaching assistants and teaching aids in some schools were allocated routine and menial tasks.
- Conditions were often inadequate, particularly the low salary levels and lack of permanency.

- There was a lack of adequate provision for formal training and lack of appropriate career structure for both teaching assistants and teacher aides.

1990s – 'It has Been Said Already'

In 1989, the Commonwealth Government and all States and Territories adopted the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) funded through the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (AESIP) (Davis, Buckskin, & Woodberry, 1995). Some of this funding was directed towards the employment of AEWs. By 1993, there were close to 1500 AEW positions throughout Australia, mostly funded by AESIP allocations, with others funded by Commonwealth Development Employment Programmes (CDEP), or State/Territory governments through short term projects.

At this stage, the profile of AEWs' work began to change significantly according to the *Ara Kuwaritjakutu Project: Towards a New Way Stages 1&2 report* (Buckskin, Hignett, & Davis, 1994). While some remained working in classrooms or following up on attendance, others began to take on more administrative and managerial tasks including 'providing training and development for teachers about teaching Aboriginal students or about teaching Aboriginal studies', (Buckskin et al., 1994, p. 2). Others worked as attendance officers and advisors to behaviour management teams, while many were developing programmes for parental participation, extending the roles of Aboriginal Student Support Parental Awareness (ASSPA) committees, setting up homework centres and providing career counselling for secondary students. Buckskin et al. (1994) noted:

> The programmes are multiple, the skills demanded are complex and the impact upon Aboriginal students is recognisable . . . and yet . . . many AIEWs are still employed in temporary positions with no guaranteed funding to protect their employment, with little access to superannuation or job security. Salary scales take little account of skill levels or qualifications and the demands of the job . . . training opportunities are still piecemeal and there are still no national career structures (p. 3).

The *Ara Kuwaritjakutu Report Stages 1&2* found, in summary, that: there was a high turnover of AEWs, a significant level of role confusion reported by AEWs, no national definition of roles, rights and responsibilities, and there were many players in the context (e.g., students, parents, community, teachers, principals, regional directors), all with different views on the roles, which lead AEWS to feel pressured, over managed and poorly led. Salary levels were uniformly low and did not compensate for their skills, knowledge and contribution. AEWs requested skill development in conflict resolution, mediation and curriculum (requests which were overwhelmingly ignored); AEWs were often used to 'fill-in' as teachers or to run Child-Parent Centres without being paid appropriately; with permanent employment often hindered by the fact that much of the funding is non recurrent Commonwealth grants; and that AEWs experience racism of all kinds across all situations within schools and in their relations with employers (adapted from Buckskin et al., 1994, pp. 4–5).

Stage 3 of the project made a series of recommendations related to this, including relevant unions and employers act to protect the employment conditions of AEWs; community members and other education workers are informed and educated of their duties and responsibilities, in particular that principals are 'trained in how to work with and manage AIEWS and that that training is a condition of an allocation of AIEWs hours to that school'; Unions and employers ensure AIEWs are aware of and have access to paid study leave entitlements, and that relief is provided; RPL processes are incorporated in training programmes and are culturally appropriate (adapted from Davis et al., 1995, pp. 3–8).

Current Work and Employment Conditions

In Australia, the employment terms and conditions, including job descriptions and role statements for AEWs, are determined through the State and Territory Industrial Relation systems and are articulated in various Enterprise Agreements negotiated between employer groups and unions. In Western Australia, the employment conditions of AEWs in the government sector are determined by the Education Assistant (Government) General Agreement, 2013 with other sectors often following suit. The Job Description Form for AEWs in this Agreement lists over 30 tasks. These include:

- to assist teachers in delivering planned educational programmes and encouraging a supportive and inclusive learning environment
- to assist students to access the educational programme and have an increased understanding of the multicultural nature of the learning environment
- to act as a liaison between the community and school to develop and educational programme relevant to both educational and cultural needs
- to perform tasks that require discretion in problem solving, decision making and choosing methods and processes to achieve outcomes
- supervision of students within or outside school without the presence of a teacher and under limited guidance
- provide support and advice to schools and teachers on the management programme of students at risk, under the supervision of relevant professionals
- provides information to parents on the education system and relevant school policies and procedures
- assist teachers to meet the educational and cultural needs of students by identifying opportunities and

providing advice on programme content relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

- provide knowledge and understanding of the history, language and culture within the classroom, school and community that promotes respect, understanding and harmony
- provide orientation to staff in relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Drawing on the industrially defined roles, the Western Australian Department of Education and Training AIEO Handbook, for example, emphasises that AEWs 'have an important role to play in supporting Aboriginal students in schools in academic achievement, social engagement, participation, attendance and behaviour' (2015, p. 6). With further articulation, the responsibilities of AEWs and functions they perform are divided into three areas:

- supporting Aboriginal students in teaching and learning, motivation and performance, behaviour management, attendance, supervision, yard duty, bus duty, out of class activities and excursions, transporting students and child protection;
- linking school to community through supporting parents, engaging with Elders and liaising with external agencies;
- providing whole school support through whole-school planning, Aboriginal cultural awareness and influencing the curriculum.

Such broad statements about the work of AEWs are commonly used in public documents and duty statements. Many are vague and easily open to wide interpretation and confusion, compounded perhaps by the fact that quite often the roles are determined at the local school level with a number of competing interests; including those of teachers, principals, community, agencies, students and parents (Winkler, 2006, p. 19). Armour, Warren, and Miller (2014) also note that there is often a discrepancy between the intended roles of AEWs and their actual role. Many AEWs are actually employed to provide functional support in the classroom, and are given minor roles such as preparing teacher directed activities, limited small group supervision and cleaning and tidying up (Warren, Cooper, & Baturo, 2004, cited in Armour et al., 2014). The following sections draw together key themes that have emerged from our review of the literature concerning the reported work that AEWs do. Within each section possible tensions, dilemmas and potentialities for these roles are highlighted.

Linking School to Community — Cultural Bridges?

> To me, the most important part of the job is making sure the links between school, parents, agencies and the community are there. People talk about the importance of improving numeracy and literacy, but if there is no link between the school and community then you won't get the kids into the school to do that learning. That is why I think that linking work is the most important thing I do. (Winkler, 2006, p. 19)

One of the key roles of AEWs, identified throughout the literature and in various role statements, has been to provide a link between the school and the community — often referred to as cultural bridges. This role is multifaceted, and it can be perceived or conceived in various ways. Gervasoni, Hodges, Croswell, and Parish (2011) considered the role of AEWs as a link between community and school as a form of reconciliation: it is 'about listening and caring, working together and appreciating people and their values, language and learning styles' (p. 310). The AEWs they interviewed for this research emphasised the importance of making connections between teachers, students and parents:

> Just to know each other and get an understanding. Like get [parents] to understand where we come from at the school, and what we do, and then how they feel at home, like you know, if they're feeling left out of the loop; then it's kind of like for us to explain it to them. Like that connection . . . If . . . they feel they don't want to speak to the teacher about it, then there's always us there, and you even actually get the connection between non Indigenous parents coming up to us as well . . . I think you feel that connection as soon as you start talking, as soon as you know everybody in your community, then it's a good, like, fostering that relationship. (p. 311)

AEWs in this study also emphasised their role in helping teachers appreciate the community, and parents to appreciate the school. They gave the example of how they had taken the children's term reports down to the community at Willow Creek:

> So we sat down with (the parents) and we actually went through it saying, "He's good at this" or "He needs work on this" and this sort of thing . . . . And they enjoyed it, and we actually got invited back again.

ATAs interviewed also said:

> Our role isn't just confined to the classroom . . . we're a member of the community, but we're also, we have a lot of input, and value to the rest of the school. But a lot of teachers think, oh you're just there to assist them, that's it. But it's not . . . there's a lot more to our role than that. (2011, p. 310)

A significant role for AEWs in the WA Department of Education AIEO Handbook is described as 'linking school to community'. The handbook describes the AEWs as a 'bridge' between teachers, student's parents and the local Aboriginal community. Providing support to parents in the education of their children, it is argued, helps to improve attendance and reflects on student academic achievement and engagement. These tasks include encouraging parents to be actively involved in school activities and committees, providing parents with information about school policies and procedures and encouraging parents to contribute to the development

of school policies. AEWs are also expected to provide parents with information about the various support agencies available to them.

This expanded role in the community was included as part of the Victorian State government's education strategy for Koorie students (*Wannik: Learning Together — Journey to Our Future*), where the roles and responsibilities of Koorie educators (KEs) were redesigned and rebadged. The focus of the work of the newly titled Koorie Education Support Officers (KESOs) was to shift 'dramatically from inside the classroom to outside, and from acting as de-facto teaching assistants to becoming engagement officers' (Australian Education Union, 2009, p. 16). The shift was accompanied by higher salaries, more secure employment, improved professional development and greater autonomy. It was reported by one KESO that the new workforce plan was a recognition that the position is 'a 24/7 gig' (AEU, 2009, p. 16). Gower et al.'s (2011) review of the AIEO programme in Western Australia, based on surveys and interviews with principals, teachers and AIEOs across the state, also found that cultural and community liaison skills were the most important contribution made by AIEOs.

The concept that AEWs should be a 'bridge' between the school and the community can, however, invoke connotations of schools and communities as separate entities existing on either side of a river or road for which there needs to be a bridge. It is for the AEW to cross the bridge back and forth from community to school performing a complex range of tasks. For some observers this role is an abrogation of responsibility for 'white' principals and teachers who themselves should be engaging more fully with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Institute of Koorie Education also notes the common practice in schools where 'The onus is not placed on the white teachers within the school system to recognise and negotiate different cultural ways of behaving; rather it is the duty of AEWs to mediate between the two' (n.d., p. 20).

The handing over of responsibility for almost anything related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, particularly with respect to relations with communities and Indigenous languages and cultures, substantiates Rose's powerful contention that the entire institution of education is 'an abrogative culture [that] simply diverts every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issue to the "Blackfella"' (2015, p. 76). Craven names this absolving of responsibility the 'Indigenous Business Principle' (2011, p. 233), and, in doing so, reminds us that 'Aboriginal education is everyone's business', not just the business of Aboriginal peoples.

This role of cultural bridge also brings with it issues connected to professional status and community identity. The role sometimes involves being cultural brokers, which can create tensions between a professional identity and cultural expectations or professional/personal boundaries. The dominant professional discourse of separating personal and professional identities challenges a fundamental aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity and obligations (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003). Adding to the dilemma, Sarra also talks about the higher level of accountability AEWs have to the community. As one AEW commented, 'In many ways I didn't feel like a teacher aide but more like a parent or father figure . . . accountability goes well beyond the school day' (Sarra, 2011, p. 154). From another perspective, it is a general lack of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and how to communicate respectfully with Aboriginal communities by most teachers and principals that makes it necessary for AEWs to act as cultural bridges or liaison workers.

Cultural Knowledge Workers

Many studies provide examples of how the 'cultural knowledge' of AEWs can be used in classrooms and schools to improve Indigenous student learning, but this is neither simple nor uncontested. Two-way learning is a common term used to describe the role AEWs can play in enabling Indigenous students to be empowered by both Western and Indigenous knowledge. AEWs may face particular challenges, having to move between Indigenous worldviews and those of the Western education system (Armour et al., 2014). Two-way learning, as it has played out in reality, has lead, in some cases, to a division of knowledge with AEWs being viewed as the 'cultural expert' and non Indigenous teachers being the 'learning expert'. Nevertheless, there are many examples in the literature of how AEWs have successfully assisted in bringing some Indigenous knowledge into the classroom to promote learning. AEW involvement in teaching programmes also ensures sustainability and joint ownership over the programme. Principal and teacher turnover in schools, particularly those in rural and remote locations, reinforces the importance of joint ownership/participation in the delivery of teaching and learning programmes, ensuring continuity, sustainability and success of the programme.

Gleaned from interviews with AEWs, Gervasoni et al. (2011) noted that AEWs play an important role in bringing relevance to the learning experience of Aboriginal students. In their study, AEWs were aware of the mathematics students used outside the classroom (e.g., in card games and using money), but that students did not necessarily make the connections between what they know at home and the textbooks. Ewing (2013), describes a pilot project in a Torres Strait Islander community where members of the community came together in Indigenous Knowledge Centres to share their communities' *Funds of Knowledge* of mathematics gained through shopping, cooking and gathering food. Children learned to sort and classify objects when collecting edible and non edible shell fish. Rich, authentic, and purposeful learning situated in context and

in home language can be facilitated by AEWs. Treacy, Frid and Jacob's (2014) study of counting strategies used by 18 Aboriginal students in a remote community identified the important role that AEWs could play in assisting teachers to develop mathematics teaching strategies that account for different cultural perspectives, and to develop more purposeful and relevant activities.

Nakata also argues that where knowledge traditions mix, it is important that 'eyes should be wide open (2010, p. 55)'. It is important that Islander knowledge is not simply codified into western science knowledge, or that Islander content is placed into the science curriculum without understanding traditional forms of transmission and practice. 'Both knowledge need to be privileged in the appropriate contexts and for appropriate purposes' (2010, p. 56). AEWs, whose knowledge is respected, can play a role in facilitating this understanding with teachers.

Linguistic Knowledge Workers

Some 50,000 people have an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue, and many Aboriginal people speak English as their third or fourth language. A large number speak Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) a language variety of English with distinctive features of accent, grammar, words, and meanings, as well as language use. Approximately 30,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders speak Kriol. Some students struggle in English-only schools because they have difficulties understanding what the teachers are explaining (Creative Spirits, ND). This may be because some students appear to speak English as their first language but the language of the classroom is quite different to home language, especially in subjects with specialised vocabulary such as mathematics.

Warren et al. (2004, p. 44) found that teachers in their study did not acknowledge the language differences among the Indigenous students and therefore did not believe that translating for students was an important role for Indigenous Teacher Aides. The teachers did not recognise that Kriol words have particular nuances and social capital attached to them that go beyond simple translation of the word. Students are often subjected to unsuitable instruction or methodologies, and inappropriate referrals for educational remediation, as a result of this lack of understanding on the part of some teachers (Australian Government, 2012). AEWs' ability to 'code switch' between Aboriginal English, Kriol, community languages and Standard Australian English (SAE), is therefore an important skill in aiding learning. This misunderstanding of language is highlighted in Gower (2011, p 379) as a need for teachers to be 'culturally competent', which is viewed as a 'foundation for a constructive action' (Giroux, 2010), leading to transformative pedagogy.

Communication difficulties can be compounded by the prevalence of hearing loss among many Indigenous students. Lowell and Devlin's (1998) ethnographic study of one bilingual school in the Northern Territory found that miscommunication between Aboriginal students and non Aboriginal teachers was commonplace. 'Cultural differences in communication were not easily differentiated from hearing-related communication problems and there was a lack of appropriate training for teachers in cross-cultural communication and ESL strategies' (1998, p. 367). AEWs can and do play a significant role in supporting students with hearing loss, but often they are not provided appropriate professional development.

Howard (2004) studied the impact of different communicative approaches when working with children with Conducive Hearing Loss (CHL). To overcome difficulties some students with CHL used peer learning strategies, however, these were often limited by non Aboriginal teacher attitudes which further restricted the AEWs' use of effective non verbal teaching strategies (e.g., by being told to 'teach by talking not by showing') (Howard, 2004, p. 2). Children with bilateral hearing loss tend to participate less in class, are more disruptive and require more one to one assistance. Howard argues for the importance of having Aboriginal adults in classroom to support children with CHL. 'Access to Aboriginal adults familiar with Aboriginal styles of verbal and non verbal communication, preferably who have established relationships with the students can help support Aboriginal children with hearing loss' (2004, p. 6).

Role Models

Many public documents emphasise the importance of AEWs as role models in schools. The Institute of Koori Education (Institute of Koorie Education, n.d.) warns, however, that such statements regarding the importance of role modelling need to be critically appraised with recognition of the unequal power status of AEWs in the hierarchical structure of many schools. This can happen when, for example 'the AEW is not presented as an equal member of the professional staff but rather as a tool that non Indigenous staff can use to better understand the "complexity" of the social milieu Indigenous students come from' (Institute of Koorie Education, n.d., p. 20). As role models this can then be seen as self-perpetuating the unequal status quo. 'Despite their importance, AEWs do not occupy the same status, or enjoy the same pay or benefits, or the same security of tenure as do most qualified teachers' (Institute of Koorie Education, n.d., p.20).

Teachers Working at the Cultural Interface

The Aboriginal Standards Cultural Framework (Dept of Education, 2015) indicates that both teachers and their respective schools need to be continually reflective of their cultural responsiveness and existing practices. Understanding the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) and more importantly how to work effectively within this space, is

the initial step in becoming culturally responsive. The cultural interface of classrooms is complex and AEWs are well versed in both the community and schools' contexts to assist all parties especially teachers in building collaborative relationships with Aboriginal students, parents, families and communities. The cultural interface of classrooms is the space where Aboriginal students arrive to education and where it is essential that teachers understand and value the cultural diversity that they bring — it is a prerequisite to building sound relationships that will ensure engagement within the cultural interface context, classrooms. The direction of Aboriginal education policies (ASCF, 2015; Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2008; National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), 2017) at all levels is calling for areas such as access, achievement, attainment, attendance to 'close the gap' all of which occur at the cultural interface – classrooms.

Factors that Help or Hinder AEWs Doing Their Work

In 2009, the Department of Education and Training of Western Australia commissioned Edith Cowan University to conduct a review of its AIEO programme (Gower et al., 2011). This was the first time the programme had been formally reviewed since its establishment in the 1970s. Based on extensive surveys and interviews, the report identified factors that impeded and/or assisted AIEOs to work effectively in public schools. Specifically, it was found that factors contributing to success included: clear identification of role consistent with the Job Description Form (JDF); existence of promotion levels; negotiated roles over which AIEOs felt they had ownership; collaborative planning where AIEOs participated as equals; community participation in schools and support for AIEOs; and acknowledgment and support for the AIEO role.

Inhibiting factors included: where principals and teachers were unsure of the role; where AIEOs were all employed on the same level regardless of skills; where they were directed to perform specialised roles without consultation; where they were isolated in schools, or working alone on tasks other staff do not consider important; and where their role was not recognised (Gower et al., 2011).

Support and good leadership from school principals is consistently identified as a key to the effectiveness of AEWs. Gervasoni et al. (2011) noted that the AEWs they interviewed considered being highly valued and appreciated by the principal as significant. 'Mike (principal) will come to us and ask us questions. We've never had that sort of a principal before. And it's that feeling valued and knowing that your opinion counts' (2011, p. 310). Nick Yates, a project officer with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum found that 'Closer relationships and increased understanding between Indigenous Educators, school principals and mainstream staff are crucial' (Winkler, 2006, p. 18). However, this is not always easy, as one AEW from South Australia said:

> When it comes to leadership as an AEW, a lot of us haven't had any formal education . . . For me personally I get intimidated by leadership. For me to go into a principal's office to talk to him was a huge step. It was like crossing a line. Sometimes an AEW like myself will find it very difficult to get over that perception that the principal is at a different level. (Winkler, 2006, p. 19)

According to Susan Matthews, Vice President of the NSW AEC Group:

> Principals can allow their own self-importance to get in the way — to think that they are the educated ones, with the piece of paper, and they need to do the job alone. There is nothing that will bring you undone more quickly in an Aboriginal community than that reliance on your own self-importance. (Winkler, 2006, p.19)

Working effectively with teachers is also a major contributing factor to the success of AEWs working in schools. Gower's 2011 review found that teachers identified good working relationships as important but that this required joint planning and collaboration: 'However, time constraints, cultural issues, a lack of skills and formal education among AIEOS and some AIEOs' poor attendance records, unreliability and low confidence levels are seen as hindering the development of effective working relationships' (Gower et al., 2011, p.ii).

Warren et al. (2004, p. 38) note that most teachers in Indigenous schools tend to be young, inexperienced and ill-prepared for Indigenous teaching. They do not enter communities with the necessary cultural capital to appreciate concepts within Indigenous societies, and they bring with them attitudes and values that need to be deconstructed before they understand the context. AEWs can play a role in this but it is difficult if they suffer the same prejudices:

> In contrast, many teacher aides at these schools are Indigenous, older, more experienced, have a strong commitment and connections to the local community and, according to Clarke (2000), should therefore be the key to teaching success in a school with indigenous students (Warren et al., 2004, p. 38).

To address such issues, the Western Australian Department of Education has recently developed an Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework, which provides a 'structure for all staff to reflect on their practices and identify opportunities for improved action to build on existing knowledge and skills' (Department of Education, 2015, p. 5). The Framework provides a continuum of standards for school staff and leaders from emerging (cultural awareness) to proficient (cultural responsiveness) with regard to relationships, leadership, teaching, learning environments and resources.

A lack of appropriate professional development opportunities for AEWs is also considered an inhibitor to the successful conduct of their work. Research conducted by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum found that:

> There is a mismatch between the skills required to be a successful IE and the types of training provided . . . Successful approaches to this mismatch may include the provision of training opportunities in such areas as conflict resolution, time management, effective communication, information technology, basic book keeping skills and literacy and numeracy pedagogy. (Winkler, 2006, p. 18)

To counter this, part of the Koorie educator Wannik strategy redesign was a 'ground-breaking' professional learning package, with individual professional development plans that built on and recognised the skills Koorie educators had. It is a lack of any real authority within the school, and lack of high stakes professional training opportunities for PD that limit Indigenous Teaching Assistants (ITAs) ability to perform the broader intended and more complex roles, according to Armour et al. (2014).

Conclusions — What Is and What Could Be

The Gower et al. (2011) review of the work of AIEOs in Western Australia articulated several factors that contributed to the success of AIEO roles. These included the need for clearly defined and negotiated roles, time for collaborative planning, opportunities for promotion and performance management, access to resources such as rooms, ICT and phones. Another key contributing factor to success was where the work of AIEOs was acknowledged, valued and rewarded. The review found that the work of AIEOs was enhanced in schools where there was a positive attitude to tasks by both teachers and AIEOs, where teachers were patient in developing relationships with AIEOs, and where AIEOs have strong relationships with community and students.

Similarly, the Productivity Commission's recent review of schools' workforce received many proposals aimed at the better deployment. These included greater career progression and skills development opportunities for teacher aides, improved training for teachers on how best to use teacher aides, and improved training for support staff to assist teachers in dealing with specific pressures including student behavioural issues and technology (Productivity Commission, 2012, p. 213). The final *Skilling Up* (2016) Project report highlighted that for transformation to take place within Aboriginal Education then serious consideration must be given to the following recommendations at the cultural interface:

- Embed 'understanding the role of AEWs' or 'working with AEWs' in all pre service teacher, in-service teacher, and school leader professional development. The literature review highlighted that there was a gap in the knowledge of teachers and school leaders in the current and potential role of AEWs in schools and communities. While there were many examples of positive and innovative practices where AEWs play an integral and equal part in schools, many other examples highlighted misunderstandings and confusion over their roles.
- In consultation with AEWs, review their roles, working conditions, and status in schools. Some cultural attitudes in some schools, combined with low wages and insecure employment conditions add to the often lower status of AEWs in school communities. These conditions serve to perpetuate the gap between Indigenous communities and the wider Australian community and undermine the role of AEWs as Cultural Bridges, Cultural Knowledge Workers and Role Models (p. 9).

The possibilities for the future roles of AEWs is clearly an area that is worthy of further study. It is clear that much of the research surrounding Aboriginal education, and, in particular, around AEWs, has spring-boarded from a deficit platform, and yet the cultural interface is waiting to be interpreted and understood as a transformative space. There is enormous variation the in the active role of AEWs at the interface.

In this paper, we contend that reflecting on the roles and responsibilities of AEWs is necessary, opportune, and timely, given the current context of the new Australian curriculum (ACARA), high stakes national standardised testing (NAPLAN), professional standards for Australian teachers, and national accreditation for pre service teacher education providers (AITSL). All of the above require that educators across Australia engage with Aboriginal Australia in significant ways; firstly, by directing that all educators teach Aboriginal content and perspectives throughout the Curriculum, and secondly, by implementing standards that require both pre service and in-service teachers to demonstrate their broad knowledge and respect for Aboriginal Australia. The presence of AEWs in schools as equal and valued members of the school workforce is essential if this shift toward real reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is to be achieved. To achieve this, we suggest that a deeper understanding and appreciation needs to be demonstrated with regard to the dilemmas presented by the role of AEW, especially with regard to the cultural interface of schools and Aboriginal communities.

What has become evident from this review is that the value of having AEWs in our schools is significantly underestimated, and perhaps this is why the Western Australian, Department of Education's Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework (2015) highlights that culturally responsive schools in Standard two must 'build relationships and draw on the expertise of Aboriginal staff and AIEOs' (p. 6).

In Western Australia the public education sector (the largest employer of AEWs) is in a unique position to address the many issues AEWs face in their roles. The Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework (2015), which

is the first in Australia, is a platform where schools and the leadership within them can implement new and innovative strategies when working alongside and with Aboriginal students and their families (J. McGowan-Jones, personal communication, November 2015). The framework provides the perfect opportunity for all staff working in education, regardless of level, to reflect on and improve their practices and; in this case, how AEWs function in their roles and positions within schools and classrooms. Whilst we acknowledge that not all practices are negative, it is clear that there is vast scope for improvement in re developing the vital roles of AEWs, all of which can strengthen and assist the effort to close the gap in educational achievements for Aboriginal students.

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About the Authors

Anne Price is a Senior Lecturer in Curriculum and Professional Issues for Teachers. Her teaching and research interests include curriculum policy, theory and practice with a particular focus on current global and national curriculum change and the impact such changes have on the work of teachers and para professionals including AEWs in schools.

Elizabeth Jackson-Barrett is a Lecturer within the School of Education at Murdoch University. Currently Libby teaches in the School of Education's Initial Teacher Education program and is passionate about improving educational outcomes and access for Aboriginal students regardless of educational context. Libby's research interests include exploring factors that promote and develop successful outcomes for Indigenous students in education and developing pathways into tertiary education for AEWs. Libby has a particular interest in On Country Learning (OCL), culturally relevant and critical pedagogy, diversity, inclusively and Indigenous education issues.

Graeme Gower is a Senior Research Fellow in the Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research at Edith Cowan University. Graeme is a descendant of the Yawuru people of Broome and has been involved in Indigenous education for 36 years, eight years as a primary school teacher and 28 years in higher education. He is actively involved in teaching and research, and is particularly interested in developing Indigenous cultural competence among teachers, the health profession and researchers who work with Indigenous Australian people.

Jan Herrington is a Professor of Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia, where she teaches in the educational technology area in the School of Education. Jan's current research focuses on authentic e-learning, mobile learning, the design of effective online learning environments and opportunities for Indigenous learning through technology. She has written over 200 refereed journal articles, conference papers and chapters, and is a former Fulbright Scholar who, in 2002, conducted research in authentic learning environments at the University of Georgia, USA.