

Researching and reorienting mentorship practices to empower the success of Indigenous Australian young people

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This article discusses mentorship provided to Indigenous¹ Australian secondary school leavers. The authors suggest that, although current scholarship in the field is insightful, there is a dearth of material focusing on mentorship provided during the post-secondary school transitional phase. Also, much literature problematises Indigenous mentees and is contextually bound to individual programs, singular communities or cohorts. Although governments, industries, communities and further education providers have funded and facilitated many mentorship programs across the nation, little systemic or institutional impact has been made. Current data demonstrates a continuous downward trajectory in the full engagement of Indigenous Australian secondary school leavers, that is, those who are working full-time, studying, or both studying and working (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). This is concerning, as the post-secondary school transitional phase is cited as a critical stage for combating or embedding inequities young Indigenous Australians often endure intergenerationally (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013; O'Shea et al., 2016). By centring national and international First Nations scholars, the authors argue for reconceptualisations of Indigenous mentee success through Indigenous ontological lenses and reorientations of mentorship frameworks towards approaches which strengthen young people and their connections with culture, community, Elders and Country.

Keywords: Mentorship, Indigenous young people, Indigenous further education, Indigenous employment, Indigenous leadership, skill development, cultural competence, nationhood

Introduction

¹ In this paper, the term "Indigenous" refers to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and are accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in the community in which they live or have lived. It is understood that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify using the term "Indigenous", however, this term will be used for the purposes of this paper. The term "non-Indigenous" refers to all other Australians. In this paper, "First Nations people" refers to people with familial heritage from, and membership in, the ethnic groups who are the earliest known inhabitants of an area. Literature discussing First Nations peoples' experiences in America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Hawaii is considered in this paper. While we note that AJIE follows the convention of minimal capitalisation, we have chosen to capitalise "Elders", "Country", "Men's Business", and "Women's Business" as this is respectful of cultural protocols.

The transitional phase into further education or early career pathways for Indigenous secondary school leavers is a critical stage for combating or embedding inequities young Indigenous Australians often endure intergenerationally (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013; Gray & Beresford, 2008; McKnight et al., 2018; O'Shea et al., 2016; Toombs & Gorman, 2010). Therefore, it is concerning that national data from the last 15 years documents a continuous declining trend in the number of Indigenous Australian graduates who successfully transitioned through this phase and are fully engaged, with future concerns highlighted due to the added pressures of the global pandemic (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Thus, the provision of appropriate support during this transition is critical. Although there is limited Australian scholarship exploring the effectiveness of mentorship in addressing inequalities, a robust body of international research documents how mentorship may improve health, education and employment outcomes for First Nations youth (Clutterbuck et al., 2012; Windchief et al., 2018).

While there is no universal definition of mentorship, Mullen and Klimaitis' (2021) review of empirical studies concludes that mentoring is a "personal-professional relationship to an educational process; and a systemic reform strategy that builds human capacity" (p. 1). Comparably, youth mentorship is defined as "a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement" (Ware, 2013, p. 3). Mentors often aim to introduce new thinking, share valuable lessons for life, challenge limiting assumptions, and assist with the achievement of personal and career aspirations (Karcher & Lindwall, 2003; Lopresti et al., 2020).

The current dominant discourse around mentorship practices is centred on Western, Eurocentric perspectives with little to no acknowledgement of Indigenous viewpoints. Scholarship often prescribes a one-size-fits-all mandated mentorship approach wherein mentee success is measured by their ability to set learning and professional goals and then accomplish them (Rolfe, 2012). Such mandated approaches fail to recognise "Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing" (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003, p. 203). An Indigenous approach defines mentorship as capacity building and wisdom sharing, where young people are supported to actualise self-determined visions of success, sovereignty and nationhood (Brayboy et al., 2012). In this paper, building one's community nationhood refers to the (re)building of self-determining, self-governed Indigenous communities, and reclaiming authority and jurisdiction (Johnson, 2011). One's sovereignty is referred to as being multi-faceted, and a concept that is actual, spiritual, psychological and political, which relates to the ancestral connections of Indigenous peoples and their authority to manage, speak for and control Country (Birch, 2007; Bishop, 2021; Mansell, 2003).

Internationally, the array of literature discussing mentorship programs offered to Indigenous youth in primary school and secondary school is growing. Limited research evaluates post-secondary school mentorship programs and policies that have been introduced in recent years across government, industry, community and tertiary education providers. Yet there remains a dearth of research related to the transition phase for Indigenous secondary school graduates. Of such limited scholarship, much is contextually bound and tends to focus on individual programs, singular communities or separate cohorts. Much of the literature also problematises Indigenous mentees, as Western mentorship frameworks tend to identify mentees as inexperienced, rather than valuing their knowledge, experience and connections (Jacobi, 1991; MacCallum et al., 2005). Systematic analysis is therefore necessary to review how the design, methods of delivery, cultural considerations and objectives intersect with ancient traditional Indigenous mentorship approaches (Chuang et al., 2013). This understanding may then inform the development of culturally appropriate mentorship frameworks for Indigenous Australian secondary school graduates: a mentorship framework that reorients dominant Western-centric

conceptions of mentorship discourse to recognise Indigenous Australian ontological and epistemological lenses.

This paper is written by four female authors. The first three authors are Indigenous Australian and the fourth author is non-Indigenous. The first author is a PhD student and the other three authors form the supervision team. The paper honours the voices of Indigenous knowledge holders, Elders and Country in national and international First Nations scholarship. Through an exploration of the literature, the paper emphasises mentorship as an ancient traditional practice embedded in intergenerational connections, learning, teaching and cultural transmissions processes. By asserting Indigenous standpoints, this paper recognises the different mentorship approaches applied by First Nations communities internationally, highlighting the role of connections with culture, community, Elders and Country in grounding Indigenous mentorship success. The need to reassert culturally strong Indigenous mentorship will be amplified through analyses of literature which documents the post-secondary school pathway experiences of First Nations young people. Policies focused on mentorship and programs will be further analysed, making evident the criticality of reconceptualising indicators of success for Indigenous secondary school mentees and reorienting practices for establishing and maintaining mentorship relationships.

Background

While Australia's mainstream population is ageing, Indigenous Australian populations are growing and young, with almost half of all Indigenous Australians aged 19 years or younger (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The national rate of Indigenous Australian youth completing year 12 or equivalent is at 66%, with increases documented across the past decade in retention rates of Indigenous secondary school students (Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales, 2017; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Such impressive increases in retention rates are not apparent in further education sectors (Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales, 2017). Data from 2017 demonstrates growth of 8.3% in the number of Indigenous enrolments into universities, equating to Indigenous Australian entrant rates being at one-fifth of non-Indigenous university entrants (Universities Australia, 2019). Indigenous tertiary education students across most disciplines are also almost twice as likely to prematurely leave university (Universities Australia, 2019). The qualification and completion rates for Indigenous Australians participating in vocational education and training is also lower than non-Indigenous Australians (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2011).

While there is currently no literature discussing the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on Indigenous graduates' post-secondary school pathways, there is a limited range of scholarship discussing the experiences of Indigenous Australian young people with distance or online modes of working and learning, and the common challenges experienced (UNESCO, 2020). While there may be exceptions, Indigenous young people aged 15 to 19 years tend to prefer in-person learning and working contexts, as shifts to distance or online learning and working presents uncertainties about digitalised employment, education, wellbeing and cultural supports (Anthony & Keating, 2013). Further, many Indigenous young people, particularly those living in rural areas and in low-income communities, identify limitations in access to technological resources and gaps with broadband infrastructure as significant restraints in accessing online learning, working and engagement opportunities (Page, 2014). The lack of socialisation in virtual and distance learning and working environments is proven to affect the wellbeing, learning outcomes, cultural connections and mental health of First Nations young people, as studies suggest that

Indigenous young people tend to learn and work better in the context of relationships (Duffy, 2020; Doyle, 2020; Markham et al., 2020). Therefore, now more than ever in the current global climate, it is essential for Indigenous Australian young people to be provided with meaningful and impactful support.

Indigenous mentorship: Ancient traditional practices

Mentorship is not a new practice in Indigenous Australian communities (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013; McKnight et al., 2018; O'Shea et al., 2016). National and international First Nations studies highlight how mentorship is fundamental to Indigenous ideologies which promote nationhood, relationships and reciprocity (Guillory & Wolverson, 2008; Shield, 2009; Wright, 2003). For Indigenous communities, mentorship is an opportunity to share cultural knowledge, personal stories, language, lessons (O'Shea et al., 2016; Yunupingu & O'Donoghue, 2003) and cultural values, such as one being responsible to and for another as communities (Shotton et al., 2018). Dreaming stories and intergenerationally shared parables demonstrate how there has always been an emphasis on young mob developing strong learning and mentorship relationships with Elders, knowledge holders and Country for guidance, and the maintenance of customary practices of wisdom sharing (Yunupingu & O'Donoghue, 2003). For Indigenous communities in Australia, mentorship practices have empowered Elders to share knowledge and spirit during wisdom sharing, Men's Business and Women's Business, and initiation practices (Walker, 1993; Ware, 2013).

There are over 500 Indigenous Australian communities across Australia, each with unique cultures, customs, dialects and community protocols, and therefore it is important to note that there is not a singular Indigenous mentorship approach or framework (Rowse, 2014). The argument against the assumption of homogeneity will be expanded upon later in this paper. There are many different approaches and frameworks for mentorship that were and, in many cases, are still embedded to support young Indigenous Australians' success. As Brayboy, Solyom and Castagno (2014) acknowledge, while "Indigenous mentorship may be guided by the voices, practices, and worldviews of past generations and is focused on the wellbeing of present and future generations, it is important to remember that a great deal of diversity exists among Indigenous peoples" (p. 580). Therefore, mentorship frameworks need to be flexible and customised to align with community and individual needs to ensure the heterogeneity of Indigenous cultures and peoples are respected and supported.

The international experience of youth mentoring

International research documents how culturally targeted Indigenous mentorship programs that embed traditional processes often support one's ability to build cultural pride (Ware, 2013), reconnect with culture (Stacey, 2004), develop greater respect for Country and Elders (Ware, 2013), and support self-determined visions of nationhood and sovereignty (Shotton et al., 2018). First Nations American mentees describe mentorship as a privilege, responsibility and gift, and as part of "being a good ancestor" and "breathing life into a legacy that would serve future generations well" (Reyes, 2019, p. 627). Comparably, American First Nations participants in a study by Shotton and colleagues (2018) describe mentorship practices as "creating space for others who are coming behind us ... We have a responsibility to continue to widen our circle" (p. 643). For Māori, the history of traditional mentoring is well documented in a meta-review by Ehrich and colleagues (2004) of more than 300 research-based articles, and in Kensington-Miller and Ratima's (2015) study which recommends holistic mentorship approaches embedded within spirituality and connectedness.

There is limited scholarship examining the frameworks and approaches of traditional mentorship practices designed and delivered across communities in Australia, however, Farruggia and colleagues (2010) conducted a systematic review of First Nations mentorship approaches in New Zealand. They discussed four formal mentorship approaches, including group, one-to-one, team and peer mentoring. Some parallels and intersections can be found in studies undertaken in other colonised nations, such as Canada and the United States. Each type of mentoring has particular features with clear similarities and differences identified.

Group mentoring, which consists of a group of mentees being mentored by one individual, was found to be the most valuable for Māori youth when situated within “*whakapapa* (genealogical or kinship ties) and *tikanga tuku iho* (familiar customary practice)” (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015, p. 816). This model has been found to provide Māori youth with the benefits of friendship, reflection, accountability and networking, while strengthening their sense of self and determination to achieve academically and in the workplace (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Huizinga, 2012). Studies further demonstrate how group mentorship approaches also provide Māori youth with opportunities to come together as a group for a common purpose, thus supporting those involved to benefit from sharing experiences and knowledge acquisition while affirming them as individuals (Durie, 2003).

Canadian and American literature notes how the First Nations cultures across communities are characterised by a communal nature and, therefore, group mentoring processes are often culturally appropriate (Banister & Begoray, 2006; Klinck et al., 2005). American Indian and Alaska First Nations’ young participants noted that group mentorship often empowered them to develop the skills needed to work towards achieving career and academic goals, overcome common challenges (cultural and linguistic) and strengthen their contributions towards tribal nation building (Banister & Begoray, 2006). In the Australian context, there is limited research exploring the benefits of group mentorship with Indigenous participants, however, this approach aligns closely with the notion of “relationality” in Indigenous communities, a concept described by Torres Strait Islander scholar Nakata (2007) that recognises that building relationships with others is vital to respectful and ethical self and community enactment.

Other mentorship approaches discussed in the review by Farruggia and colleagues (2010) include one-to-one mentoring, which is one of the most common forms of mentoring undertaken internationally, and a particularly important method when working with high-risk First Nations youth (Blechman, 1992; Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015). There is a dearth of literature evaluating the effectiveness and experiences of other approaches, such as team mentoring or peer mentoring for First Nations youth.

Problematizing dominant discourses of mentorship

Current discourse and the lack of literature on Indigenous mentorship frameworks highlights the need to build on national and international scholarship that explores the experiences of First Nations young people during their post-secondary school pathways. There is a dearth of research exploring the experiences of First Nations young people when enrolling and enrolled in vocational training or early career pathways programs. Comparably, international scholarship records the experiences of First Nations university students, yet much focuses on individual programs, singular communities or specific cohorts. Studies in New Zealand, America and Canada document similarities in First Nation student experiences, noting how First Nations students often feel unwelcomed, isolated, misunderstood and marginalised in university or college settings (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Ehrich et al., 2004). First Nations

university students also identified inadequate educational and employment readiness, limited funds, underrepresentation of First Nations role models, racism and cultural difference as common contributors to feelings of discomfort within tertiary education institutions (Brayboy et al., 2015; Kidwell, 1986). A high proportion of Indigenous young people are also first in the family and/or first in community to enter further education and training institutions; this means often they are required to “navigate” such experiences in isolation (Battiste, 2002; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Indigenous young people from rural and remote communities further report how on-campus attendance regularly necessitates geographical relocations, which often result in changes in identity, and connections to community and Country may be difficult to establish (O’Shea et al., 2016).

Institutions for training and further education, as well as workplaces, have a long history of alienating Indigenous people. Since the establishment of tertiary education sites, Western and Eurocentric knowledge has dominated teaching and learning content and pedagogical approaches (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Holt, 2008). Studies document that the alienation of First Nations people and communities in these further education settings often compromises their sense of being valued and culturally safe (Holt, 2008; Shumar & Canaan, 2008). Herbert’s (2012) centre-periphery model goes further, noting that the education and employment of First Nations people has been, and continues to be, structurally underpinned by deficit discourses. Therefore, there is a need to reassert frameworks and approaches to best support First Nations people and institutions to unseat and liberate the dominant assimilationist natures of tertiary education institutions and workforces (Brayboy, 2005; Brayboy & Huaman, 2016).

Mentorship policies and programs: The need to evaluate repeated recommendations

To address the disparities of secondary school experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people in Australia, national and state governments, industries, tertiary education providers, the private sector and communities are increasingly setting quotas, authorising development strategies in policy and funding, and facilitating mentorship packages and programs specifically to support Indigenous youth (Colley, 2003; O’Shea et al., 2013). The New South Wales Government Aboriginal Affairs’ strategic economic policy *OCHRE: Growing NSW’s First Economy* report (Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales, 2016), for example, commits to employing more Indigenous youth by using purchasing decisions to drive Indigenous employment and business development in the private and non-government sector, and supporting Indigenous secondary school graduates to attain relevant TAFE qualifications and skills required for their industry.

Australia’s Indigenous Economic Development Strategy and the national Indigenous Youth Careers Pathways program further recognises Indigenous mentorship as a priority on national agendas (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2011). Mechanisms such as affective contacts, direction setting, coaching and advocacy offered through mentorship can contribute to improving an individual’s affective and/or psychosocial domains, wherein one gains emotional support and encouragement, and is empowered to develop goals and aspirations (Pawson, 2004). Mentorship may also support young people in the instrumental domain through re-engaging with education or employment, developing vocational skills, enhancing health, and reducing or preventing antisocial and criminal behaviours (Spencer & Liang, 2009). Effective mentorship may further result in both-ways or two-ways learning for mentors and mentees (Merriweather & Morgan, 2013). This may empower mentees to build upon vital assets, including strong community identities and networks, and

intergenerational cultural knowledge and practices that promote nationhood (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2011).

After reviewing Australian grey literature documenting the diverse policies, packages and programs specifically focused on mentorship for Indigenous Australian youth, there appears to be geographical and industry-based overlaps and gaps in support offered. There is little unification or coordination between what is offered in the Australian mentorship field. With recognition of the heterogeneity of Indigenous young people, this article does not advocate for all communities or cohorts to be mentored using the same approach, rather, it identifies a gap in research as this relates to the cross-pollination of diverse stakeholder perspectives, information, learnings and resources.

Limited national and international scholarly literature discusses the effectiveness of current mentorship approaches in alleviating inequities and supporting the success of Indigenous young people (Beresford, 2012; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2013; Ware, 2013). Scholarship further neglects to evaluate the effectiveness of mentorship approaches from Indigenous youth epistemological and ontological perspectives. There is a lack of research examining the design features that underpin mentorship approaches, including the nature of consultations undertaken to ensure that programs intersect and build upon traditional mentorship approaches taken by Indigenous communities to support young people (Rolfe, 2012). For example, research focusing on the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) tends to focus on academic progression and reducing the differences in outcomes between Indigenous youth and their non-Indigenous peers (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013; Harwood et al., 2015; O'Shea et al., 2016). Rarely does research explore critical outcomes for Indigenous young people, such as developing strength, resilience, pride in identity and culture, connections, role models or aspirations, despite these being recognised as integral to Indigenous youth success (Brayboy et al., 2014; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2009). These findings indicate the need for further research to explore how mentoring relationship development and practices may better align with Indigenous approaches and have changed to support Indigenous mentees during and post pandemic.

Reconceptualising indicators of success: First Nations ontological and epistemological perspectives

Dominant discourse around mentorship outcomes in program and policy documents is underpinned by Western values and definitions of success. As part of monitoring equity, the field of research focuses on tracking national patterns for Indigenous secondary school graduates, including enrolments, recruitments, retention and completion. This approach may be liable to affirming deficit thinking, as, in comparison to non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous youth are often portrayed through frames of deficits in representation, completion and performance (Moodie et al., 2018). While notable exceptions are present (Chirgwin, 2015; Pechenkina & Aeschliman, 2017), Indigenous Australian academic Moodie and her colleagues (2018) note that Indigenous “success narratives do not enjoy primacy in research” (p. 815).

The terms “success” and “prosperity” embedded in Australian grey literature and policies tend to focus on the economic and social outcomes of Indigenous secondary school graduates. For example, the Council of Australian Government's Closing the Gap Framework has adopted the pursuit of prosperity and Indigenous success as a goal (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Four key factors for Indigenous secondary school graduate success include:

1. maintaining wellbeing, safety and security
2. entering the workforce and staying to help meet labour shortages in key industries
3. enrolling and completing tertiary education courses in universities, TAFE or other training providers
4. participating in the economy (Department of the Premier & Cabinet South Australia, 2019; Queensland Department of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Affairs, 2013; Victorian Government Office of Aboriginal Affairs, 2013; Western Australia Government, 2016).

The key priorities identified in the aforementioned government reports demonstrate how indicators of “success” and “prosperity” for young people are often based on Western values and assimilatory frameworks (Fogarty et al., 2018). Since invasion, successive Australian governments have set and embedded assimilationist policies and indicators of youth success that are underpinned by racist assumptions and settler nationalist imperatives, which often do not take into account Indigenous Australian ideals and measures of success (Moran, 2005). For example, KPMG’s (2013) study that attempted to measure the success of AIME found that this mentorship organisation generates impressive benefits for the Australian economy, as “for each \$1 spent, \$7 in benefits is generated for the economy” (p. 4). This example, along with most studies of Indigenous youth mentorship, associate outcomes of success with one’s greater economic participation and ability to meet labour shortages in key industries (Fogarty et al., 2018). Such assimilationist thinking and deficit discourse is further identified across a range of government policies around mentorship. For example, a report by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2011) states that “the Government wants to see more young Indigenous Australians fulfilling their potential by staying in school and moving into work, rather than onto welfare” (p. 42). It is important to note that ideals of success are diverse in Indigenous communities and are not binary to Western ideals of success, and more needs to be done to reframe measures of mentorship success to include other indicators from an Indigenous standpoint (Brayboy et al., 2014).

Literature calls for the reframing of success measures through strength-based Indigenous relational, holistic approaches, which will work to widen definitions of success to include the capacities of Indigenous young people to contribute to tribal nation building (Brayboy et al., 2014; Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, 2009). From an Indigenous standpoint, success is also measured by contributions to community, kin, Country, spirit, intergenerational equity and systemic changes that support the regeneration of local and regional Indigenous economies (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua, 2009). Mentorship success needs to be founded and shaped through the guiding principles of First Nations philosophies, relationalities and knowledge systems (LaDuke, 1999). Success needs to be understood from Indigenous value systems, which extend definitions of economies to be embedded in kinship, responsibilities, reciprocity, and respect for Country and an individual’s past, present and future (LaDuke, 1999). First Nations Canadian scholar Wuttunee (2004) highlights that relational, holistic prosperity perspectives promote the importance of balancing spiritual, ecological, physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. Our paper does not acknowledge the inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as the result of an “Aboriginal problem” (Carlson, 2013). Rather, deficit discourse is overturned by promoting Indigenous perspectives and highlighting how everyone is responsible for creating equitable opportunities for all.

Reorientating mentorship relationships

Limited international research examines approaches to developing effective mentoring relationships with First Nations young people. Rather, the literature primarily focuses on common causes of relationship breakdowns when discussing the mentorship experiences of First Nations young people. Ware's (2013) research suggests that, generally, mentorship with Australian Indigenous young people is not effective if the mentor is authoritarian, or if there is too much emphasis on expected behavioural change. Research by O'Shea et al. (2013) and Ware (2013) suggests that, while there may be some exceptions, when working with young Indigenous Australians, peer mentorship is not a replacement for mentoring by adults or Elders, and setting several goals to achieve at once often results in discouragement and disengagement from the mentorship relationship.

Kensington-Miller and Ratima's (2015) review identified several common difficulties experienced when developing mentorship relationships with First Nations youth. A common issue involves finding sufficient and suitable mentors, especially in rural and remote areas where there is uneven access to mentors for students (Ehrich et al., 2004; Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015). Reactive mentoring; cultural, language and personality barriers; and ingrained racial stereotypes have been identified as problematic to developing authentic relationships (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Foote & Solem, 2009; Windchief et al., 2018). The separation of personal and cultural support from academic support has also been identified as a common difficulty experienced during mentoring (Ragins, 1997).

The study by Windchief et al. (2018) examined mentoring relationships with First Nations American and Alaskan young people. They found that those who developed strong mentoring relationships with Indigenous youth were not necessarily trained in how to be good mentor, rather, the relationship developed organically. This study also articulated the importance of the mentoring relationship being founded on cultural humility in a way that respects, acknowledges and actively works to honour the mentee as a keeper of knowledge (Windchief et al., 2018). Traditional Indigenous Australian mentoring relationships were premised on kinship community priorities, Country and seniority of knowledge holder status (Yunupingu & O'Donoghue, 2003). First Nations literature nationally and internationally also discusses cultural humility as not limited to only the mentee needing to feel comfortable and empowered, rather, it also extends to the mentors feeling respected in a reciprocal two-way mentorship learning process. Research calls for mandatory cultural awareness training to be introduced for all mentors to support the development of culturally safe environments where mentees and mentors are physically, spiritually, socially and emotionally safe through processes of shared respect, shared knowledge and the experience of learning together (Byars-Winston et al., 2018; Williamson, 1994).

Brayboy and Huaman (2016) go further, asserting that often the most effective mentoring relationships are those premised on capacity recognition—that is, the ability to identify already-existing efforts and talents—and capacity nurturance—the ability to care for the mentees entrusted. It is critical to note, however, that there is no “cookie-cutter” approach to developing meaningful and effective mentoring relationships (Brayboy & Huaman, 2016). Trust, mutual respect and ongoing dialogue are key to high-quality mentoring relationships that have long-lasting, positive effects on young Indigenous people engaging in further education, employment and community (MacCallum et al., 2005). Research suggests mentoring relationships will only be effective when the mentee-mentor relationship shifts from eurocentric master and apprentice models to shared responsibility models, where both mentee and mentor are learning from one another and working collectively towards a shared goal, which often sees both parties benefit from participation (Harwood et al., 2015; O'Shea et al., 2013; Windchief et al., 2018).

Walters and Kanak (2016) note the importance of having fun together and setting goals that become progressively more challenging.

Indigenous Australian academic Marlene Burchill (2004) also describes the importance in the Indigenous Australian context to “yarn up, not down” ensuring mentees and mentors have high expectations of each other and co-create solutions to challenges. One of the strongest research findings internationally is the importance of committing to and maintaining long-term mentoring relationships, as research suggests that the longer the mentorship is sustained the more effective it is (Farruggia et al., 2010; Moodie & Fisher, 2009; Sinclair & Pooyak, 2007; Spencer & Liang, 2009). Research suggests that mentorship engagement becomes meaningful when maintained for at least 12 to 18 months, as short-term mentoring of less than 6 months tends to reinforce a sense of disappointment and lack of trust (Dawes & Dawes, 2005; Farruggia et al., 2010). It is also particularly important to continue mentoring relationships and support young people through phases where positive changes are consolidated (Pawson, 2004; Stacey, 2004).

Extensive research further suggests that regular mentee and mentor contact is essential to forming strong relationships. In the initial stages intensive engagement is particularly important, with research suggesting mentorship engagement of 10 to 20 hours per week, depending on the needs of the Indigenous young person (Delfabbro & Day, 2003; Stacey, 2004; Ware, 2013). Studies also found that Indigenous mentees are more productive and empowered to engage when focusing on small goals which are built upon as larger issues are tackled (Farruggia et al., 2010; Ware, 2013).

International researchers Klinck et al. (2005) further discuss the importance of engaging local communities in adapting mentorship program design and implementation, especially when working with Indigenous communities. Studies found that parental involvement in mentoring processes, especially where parents or carers were provided with additional mentoring or training, resulted in mentees performing better and parent-child relationships improving considerably (Delfabbro & Day, 2003).

When studying mentorship relationships that empower the success of Indigenous young people, it is important to note that understandings are more complex than exploring binary distinctions between challenges and facilitations. Studies may unintentionally increase the risk of perpetuating discourses that render failure to succeed as an individual problem or lack of capacity by focusing only on barriers and enablers of the success of Indigenous young people (Moodie et al., 2018). Further studies are needed to explore current approaches to building relationships with Indigenous secondary school graduates, their effectiveness and ways in which approaches can be reoriented to better support Indigenous young people to achieve their aspirations (Ware, 2013). Further research may have the potential to empower mentees to develop “strong connections to culture, coupled with high self-esteem, a strong sense of autonomy, living in cohesive, functioning families and communities, all of which are often protective factors that result in Indigenous young people choosing productive life pathways” (Ware, 2013, p. 1).

Conclusion: The future of best-practice Indigenous mentorship

This paper highlights significant gaps in literature and the need for research to be reframed through Indigenous standpoints. Research also highlights disparities between First Nations mentorship approaches and the mentorship approaches and objectives often embedded in government, industry and tertiary education mentorship programs. It is, therefore, critical to develop and embed a best-practice mentorship model to empower Indigenous Australian secondary school leaver success (Brayboy et al.,

2014; Reyes, 2019; Shotton et al., 2018). The prescription of a best-practice mentorship framework is complex and will require carefully considered and nuanced instructions based on evidence. This paper forms part of the first author's PhD study. The "Maarang Gulbanha: Mentoring Indigenous high school graduates towards excellence, leadership and community nationhood" project will review, compare and evaluate mentorship provided to Indigenous Australian secondary school graduates to establish a best-practice model of Indigenous Australian mentorship. (In Wiradjuri language, Maarang Gulbanha translates roughly to "knowledge circles", referring to the cyclical processes of intergenerational knowledge sharing and mentorship processes).

The research project will examine indicators of mentorship success for Indigenous Australian mentees in order to inform and develop a best-practice Indigenous mentorship framework. The objectives of the project may be considered bold; however, the authors believe this research is crucial to better supporting Indigenous young people to build their capacities and community nationhood. This research may further inform policy and program reform that will better empower the next generation of Indigenous Australian leaders, change-makers, innovators and knowledge holders, and their development of self-determination, skills, knowledge and networks (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs, 2011).

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Matilda Harry is a proud, young Wiradjuri woman who is passionate about making positive social change for all Australian young people. She has commenced candidature in a Doctor of Philosophy at Western Sydney University. Her thesis is examining mentorship provided to Indigenous Australian secondary school graduates and will establish a model of best practice, culturally strong, two-way Indigenous mentorship. Matilda graduated with a professional certificate in Indigenous Research from Melbourne University and a master degree in Primary Education from Western Sydney University. Recently, she published several papers discussing youth needs with the Greater Sydney Commission. Matilda has been an invited keynote speaker at multiple state and national events and has achieved several awards for community engagement and academic excellence.

Professor Michelle Trudgett is an Indigenous scholar from the Wiradjuri Nation in New South Wales. Michelle holds the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Leadership, at Western Sydney University. Prior to this appointment, she served as the inaugural Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney, and was previously the Head of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. In recognition for her contributions to higher education, Michelle has received several awards including the highly prestigious National NAIDOC Scholar of the Year Award, the Neville Bonner Award for Teaching Excellence, and the University of New England Distinguished Alumni Award.

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