



Comfort with discomfort: exploring Wadjella educators' engagement with Indigenous students

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Table of contents

Executive summary.....	1
Recommendations	2
Introduction	3
Background.....	5
Indigenous students in higher education	5
Factors impacting Indigenous student participation and retention in higher education ..	5
Closing the higher education gap.....	5
Educators at the interface of Indigenous student retention.....	6
Methods/research design.....	9
Methodology.....	9
Key research topics and questions to be addressed.....	9
Procedure.....	9
Phase 1: Literature review	9
Phase 2: Data collection	9
Phase 3: Data analysis, reporting, and recommendations.....	10
Methods	10
Participants.....	10
Materials.....	10
Procedure.....	10
Data analysis.....	11
Initial analysis	11
Comparative analysis.....	11
Findings	12
Overview of analysis.....	12
Wadjella educators —across mainstream faculties	12
Wadjella educators — Indigenous centres	13
Indigenous educators – Indigenous Centres	15
Indigenous students.....	17
Discussion	19
The student context.....	19
Uncertainty	19
Identity and identification	20
Relationships.....	21
Lived experience	22
Conclusion	23
Limitations	23
Recommendations.....	23

References	25
Appendices	30

List of Tables

Table 1. Themes from interviews with Wadjella educators in faculties	12
Table 2. Themes from interviews with Wadjella educators in Indigenous centres.....	14
Table 3. Themes from interviews with Indigenous educators in Indigenous centres.....	15
Table 4. Themes from interviews with Indigenous students.....	17

Executive summary

Indigenous people are underrepresented in the Australian higher education system. While Indigenous people comprise 3.3 per cent of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018¹), in 2018 Indigenous students comprised only 1.5 per cent of commencing students and 1.3 per cent of all students in higher education (Department of Education, 2018b). Further, their degree completion rates (~47%) are substantially lower than other students (~74%), with the drop-out rate after the first year more than double that of non-Indigenous (Wadjella¹) students (Department of Education, 2018a). These retention figures indicate the ongoing need to develop effective strategies for retaining Indigenous students in higher education through to degree completion.

National imperatives to close the gap between Indigenous and Wadjella Australians across a range of markers has led to a broad range of interventions within the tertiary education sector. However, while there has been a national push for the development and integration of Indigenous knowledge/perspectives into tertiary curriculum, and growing numbers of Indigenous students within higher education (an increase from 8,411 students in 2008 to 16,750 students in 2018), there remains limited training and staff development around ways of engaging with Indigenous Australians, and a noted discomfort of Wadjella educators in both the teaching of Indigenous content and Indigenous students (Wolfe, Sheppard, Le Rossignol, & Somerset, 2018). This research project expands on this literature on educator discomfort, moving toward deeper exploration of the experiential, psychological, and contextual factors associated with Wadjella educators' engagement with Indigenous students in both Indigenous-focused and 'mainstream' learning environments.

To undertake this exploration, we adopted a qualitative methodology, conducting interviews across four key groups (Wadjella educators in faculty, Wadjella educators in Indigenous centres, Indigenous educators in Indigenous centres, and Indigenous students), guided by the central question of this research, "What are the ways in which Wadjella educators engage and interact with Indigenous Australian tertiary education students?". Comparative analysis was conducted to explicate findings across each of the four groups, to determine similarities, differences and gaps in approaches to engagement, and the psychological, experiential and contextual factors associated with this. Our research found that there are specific interrelated factors associated with, and impeding or facilitating, educator engagement in this Indigenous tertiary education context, including:

- the educator mindset — fixed or growth
- the educators' tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty
- the lived experience of educators within Indigenous contexts
- the educators' understanding of the Indigenous student context
- the educators' capacity for, and understanding of, relationships.

From these findings, a range of recommendations have been made, at both the institutional and individual level, with a clear focus on ways forward to develop staff capacity to engage effectively and appropriately with Indigenous students. In this way, these recommendations acknowledge the role both institutions and individuals play in improving educators' capacity to engage with Indigenous students across both Indigenous- and non-Indigenous-specific curriculum contexts, and the necessity of each to take responsibility if we are to improve rates of tertiary education retention of Indigenous students.

¹ Wadjella is a Nyoongar word for a non-Aboriginal person

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research, we make the following recommendations:

1. Institutions should reinforce that student equity is—now more than ever—everyone’s responsibility, given the growing body of Indigenous students in mainstream courses. Similarly, identifying and managing racism within classrooms is the educators’ responsibility.
2. Staff development opportunities should extend beyond simple cultural awareness to cover these interrelated factors:
 - understanding of the Indigenous student context
 - educator engagement, the teacher-student relationship and support for Indigenous students
 - educator growth mindset and tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.
3. Institutions should, in conjunction with community, facilitate meaningful opportunities for staff and Indigenous community to interact more generally, so as to ensure authentic immersion and relationships over time, supporting the capacity for relationship development with students. Such transformative approaches acknowledge the fraught transactional nature of ‘ticking the box’ with regards to staff personal development opportunities.
4. Further research explicitly examining and exploring this educator uncertainty and mindset in the Indigenous context is vital to understanding what is likely to combat these psychological impediments to engaging effectively with Indigenous students.
5. Further research should focus on exploring the influence of lived experience and cultural immersion on the quality of learner-centred relationships, uncertainty and educator mindset, and its impact on Indigenous student retention.
6. Further research should focus on the development of quantitative measures of educator capacity to engage effectively with Indigenous students, based on key findings within the current research.
7. The student voice is imperative in all further research in this area.

Introduction

Indigenous people remain underrepresented in the Australian higher education system (Department of Education, 2018b). Further, degree completion rates in total, and drop-out rates after the first year, are significantly worse than those of non-Indigenous students (Department of Education, 2018a). Each of these indicate the ongoing need to develop effective strategies for retaining Indigenous students in higher education through to degree completion.

Over the last decade, there has been a significant push within the national tertiary sector for the development and integration of curriculum focused on developing cultural capability in Wadjella Australians — both to work more effectively and appropriately within Indigenous contexts (that is, within Indigenous- and non-Indigenous-specific professional settings, and with both Indigenous colleagues and clients/consumers) and to provide a more culturally secure environment conducive to the inclusion and retention of Indigenous Australians within the student and staff body (Universities Australia, 2011; Universities Australia, 2017).

Despite this, these educational environments appear to be (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) generally positioned and interpreted as exclusively a means of developing cultural competence for Wadjella students (Universities Australia, 2011). This is potentially problematic when considered in the light of growing numbers of Indigenous students accessing higher education, (increasing from 8,411 students in 2008 to 16,750 students in 2018, Department of Education 2013, 2018b), and limited educator awareness (across a range of disciplines) that many of the students they teach identify as Indigenous Australians. As such, the confluence of these two factors risks further marginalising Indigenous students within these ‘mainstream’ learning experiences. This risk is heightened when considered in terms of still limited training and staff development around ways of engaging with Indigenous Australians, and the noted discomfort of Wadjella academics teaching into these educational offerings (Wolfe, Sheppard, Le Rossignol, & Somerset, 2018) — a discomfort likely to influence how they engage as educators with Indigenous students, with potential to impact negatively on Indigenous student retention.

As such, despite both the growth of curricular offerings with an Indigenous focus across disciplines and growth in Indigenous student numbers within non-Indigenous-focused tertiary courses generally, the nature and potential consequences of engagement in each of these curricular spaces appears largely unexamined. The aim of this research then is to expand on the research around Wadjella academic engagement in the Indigenous Studies space by moving beyond exploration of the discomfort experienced in teaching or developing curriculum in this space, toward deeper exploration of the practical ‘coalface’ ways educators engage (or do not engage) with Indigenous students in both specifically Indigenous-focused and ‘mainstream’ learning environments.

We begin by outlining what is known around Indigenous student retention within higher education, and follow this with an overview of strategies developed to address this, inclusive of models of cultural competence. While educators’ discomfort in the pedagogical space is quite well-documented, the literature review suggests gaps in understanding around the influence and origins of this discomfort, particularly with regard to educators’ practical engagement with students, and the students’ perceptions of this. Through individual and comparative analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and Indigenous students, we document the gaps in educator development (and the factors contributing to these) and suggest potential ways to address these gaps, from both the individual and institutional perspective. This focus on the individual is presently both lacking and vital; policy development and development of educators within institutions will only align with the needs of students when borne from an understanding of the experiential, psychological and

contextual drivers and influencers of 'ways of doing' of educators tasked with educating them. Further, aligning the development of these structures with the voice of those 'in' the engagement process (i.e. students and educators) requires institutions to establish and maintain the means to facilitate this.

Background

The social inequalities experienced by Indigenous peoples in Australia are extensive (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013; Lancaster Jones, 1974; Wild, 2010; World Health Organization, 2010) with the existing disparities between the social and health standings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples commonly referred to as 'The Gap' (Kowal, 2015; Rudolph, 2016). Inequalities in education is just one of the pivotal interrelated social determinants perpetuating Indigenous inequalities (Andersen et al., 2008; Department of Health and Ageing, 2013; Muir, 2008; World Health Organization, 2010; Zubrick et al., 2014), with Indigenous people underrepresented in all stages of the education system, including higher education.

Indigenous students in higher education

While Indigenous people comprise 3.3 per cent of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), in 2018, Indigenous students comprised only 1.5 per cent of commencing students and 1.3 per cent of all students in higher education (Department of Education, 2018b). Given the parity rate of 2.2 per cent, Indigenous students are significantly underrepresented in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Hearn et al., 2019; Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Whilst encouragingly, Indigenous enrolment in higher education has doubled over the past decade—from 8,411 Indigenous student in 2008 to 16,750 students in 2018 (Department of Education, 2018b)—there is still some way to go before parity in enrolments is achieved.

Further, the degree completion rates (~47%) for Indigenous students are substantially lower than for other students (~74%), with the drop-out rate after the first year more than double that of non-Indigenous students (Department of Education, 2018a). Accordingly, equitable access to higher education, and equality in educational outcomes present as ongoing barriers to addressing the inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians (Behrendt et al., 2012; Pechenkina et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2019). While there is some suggestion of increasing participation of Indigenous students in higher education, Indigenous peoples remain substantially underrepresented in the higher education context.

Factors impacting Indigenous student participation and retention in higher education

A myriad of factors have been identified as contributing to Indigenous Australians' underrepresentation in access, participation, and retention in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Nakata et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2019). Factors external to the university setting include health and wellbeing; competing obligations (such as work and family); financial hardship; motivations and aspirations; supportive networks such as family, friends, and peers; and academic preparedness such as completion of secondary schooling (Gore et al., 2017; Hearn et al., 2019; Nakata et al., 2019a; Pechenkina et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2019). Intersecting with the university context, some Indigenous students may experience cultural and linguistic challenges, and difficulties settling into the university environment (Rochecouste et al., 2017). Other research highlights concerns regarding the cultural safety of universities, as Indigenous students continue to experience racism and discrimination, which in turn undermines their educational experiences (Gore et al., 2017; Rochecouste et al., 2014; Sonn et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2019).

Closing the higher education gap

The poor retention rates of Indigenous students in higher education, combined with the factors contributing to this, highlights the need to develop effective strategies for retaining Indigenous students in higher education through to degree completion (Nakata et al., 2019;

Pechenkina et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2019; Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Education provides a means for addressing Indigenous disadvantage and mitigating social inequalities (Behrendt et al., 2012; Hunter & Schwab, 2003; Nakata et al., 2019; Pechenkina et al., 2011). Strong graduate outcomes are important because, in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians have lower labour force participation rates, lower incomes, and are underrepresented in professional and managerial positions (Behrendt, 2012). Strong graduate outcomes may lead to the uptake of decision-making roles across professions, government and industry, and aid intergenerational economic and social development for Indigenous communities (Anderson, 2016; Craven & Dillon, 2013).

National imperatives that are aimed at 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have led to a broad range of interventions within the tertiary education sector (Universities Australia, 2017; 2019). Early strategies universities implemented to support retention of Indigenous students included mentoring and tutoring opportunities, flexibility in course delivery (for example online/on campus, block release options), promoting social and economic supports, and the presence of specialised Indigenous student support centres (Carter et al., 2018; Gore et al., 2017; Nakata et al., 2019; Pechenkina et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2019).

However, perhaps the most prominent recent strategy has been the push for the development and integration of curriculum intended to address both a lack of cultural capability in non-Indigenous Australians to work within Indigenous intercultural settings and with Indigenous Australians, and the need for a culturally secure environment conducive to the inclusion and retention of Indigenous Australians within the student and staff body (Universities Australia, 2011; 2017; Wolfe et al., 2018). Strategies have typically entailed developing university curricula, aimed at building the competencies of future health professionals (Wolfe et al., 2018) and the next generation of primary and secondary teachers (Behrendt et al., 2012). However, there appears to be little oversight and accountability over how universities might achieve such outcomes (Behrendt et al., 2012).

While developing the cultural capabilities of non-Indigenous peoples is seen as an imperative to 'closing the gap' (Dudgeon et al., 2010; R. Walker et al., 2014), less attention has been paid to developing the cultural competencies of non-Indigenous tertiary educators for working with Indigenous students (Wolfe et al., 2018). This is despite the recognised need to foster culturally secure environments, conducive to the inclusion and retention of Indigenous students and staff within universities (Universities Australia, 2011; 2017). Indigenous students benefit from culturally supportive educators and environments (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2019). The relationship between educators and Indigenous students is instrumental to students' learning and sense of belonging, and ultimately assists in their retention and degree completion (Carter et al., 2018; Gore et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2019). Despite this, little consideration has been given to the cultural capabilities/sensitivities of university educators and their engagement with Indigenous students (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Housee, 2008; Wolfe et al., 2018).

Educators at the interface of Indigenous student retention

With the growing number of Indigenous students within higher education, it is now not uncommon for educators to be (sometimes unknowingly) teaching to Indigenous students in a range of contexts, not simply in educational offerings with an Indigenous focus. The emerging literature suggests non-Indigenous academics experience discomfort with teaching these educational offerings. Wolfe et al. (2018) surveyed academics within a Faculty of Health Sciences about their engagement with teaching Indigenous content. Despite 90 per cent having completed professional/personal Indigenous cultural awareness training, the majority did not feel comfortable or confident in teaching Indigenous content, with almost half reporting feeling awkward in teaching Indigenous content to Indigenous students. Further,

only three-quarters of academics surveyed reported being comfortable or confident in teaching Indigenous students non-Indigenous content. Wolfe and colleagues concluded that the focus on curriculum and content developed has not been matched by developing Wadjella academics' capability in curriculum delivery. Similarly, Power et al. (2016) noted that non-Indigenous academics report "feeling ill equipped and fearful of being inadvertently inappropriate or disrespectful" (p. 441). Personifying this discomfort, in a personal reflection Krishna Lambert described her perception of lacking legitimised authority teaching into a mental health program for Indigenous students:

I found myself feeling awkward and unsure. I thought I had no claim to teaching the material, and I lacked the lived experience and understanding of Indigenous ways of learning; I was a white, privileged, non-Indigenous academic. (Lambert & McMillan, 2020, p. 45)

Combined, these findings position Indigenous students as likely to find themselves being taught by academics who lack confidence in teaching Indigenous content to them, and in some cases lack confidence in teaching them at all. This is likely to negatively impact on Indigenous student retention.

The relationships between non-Indigenous education and Indigenous students are situated within a contemporary colonised context, in which the legacies of colonisation inevitably shape such social relations (Maddison & Stastny, 2016). Stanner (2009) highlights the historical challenge herein with his reference to the 'great Australian silence' and 'the cult of disremembering' to illustrate concern over the historic silencing of Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous peoples, cultures, and perspectives remain largely out of sight within the mainstream Australian society (Atkinson et al., 2010). Stanner (2009) suggests that Indigenous Australians have been excluded and silenced to the extent that society has little competency for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous relations (speaking to the hegemony and ethnocentrism within Australian culture).

In Australia, non-Indigenous people have very little contact with Indigenous people, with many not knowing an Indigenous person (Atkinson et al., 2010). For example, in the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, only nine per cent of respondents reported regularly interacting with Aboriginal people, while 46 per cent of respondents reported not personally knowing any Aboriginal people (Walter, 2012). Consequently, people without meaningful relations with Indigenous people are likely to depend upon essentialist understandings of Indigenous identity and culture that tend to objectify the lived experience of Indigenous people (Pybus & Moore, 2019).

The social distance between Non-Indigenous and Indigenous people appears similarly prevalent within the educational context. For example, many educators struggle to develop relationships, and understand the perspectives of Indigenous students (Santoro et al., 2011). Teachers have also been found to hold essentialist views of Indigenous people in terms of myths and stereotypes (Sarra & Shay, 2019). For example, Sarra's (2005) case study found that educators had low expectations of Indigenous students, such that underachievement was expected and deemed acceptable, which played a crucial role in students' educational outcomes. Sarra's (2005) critical analysis suggested that such instances of student 'failure' were indicative of educators' inability to build a working relationship with Indigenous students and tap into their learning potential.

Intercultural contexts tend to be highly emotionally loaded (Buehler et al., 2009; R. Walker et al., 2014; Wolfe et al., 2018; Zembylas, 2010). Educator and Indigenous student relations occur against a backdrop of racialised tensions, likely to impact upon the non-Indigenous educators' engagements with Indigenous students. For example, research indicates that some academics experience distress and anger when exploring British colonisation and race relations (Gill & Worley, 2010). This may mirror feelings of shame, guilt, distress and

discomfort associated with being 'white' or 'the oppressor' of Indigenous peoples (Halloran, 2007; Maddison, 2012; Slater, 2018) and benefitting from 'settler' privileges (Kowal, 2012; Slater, 2018) reported in the wider community.

Despite both the growth of curricular offerings with an Indigenous focus across disciplines and growth in Indigenous student numbers within non-Indigenous-focused tertiary courses generally, the nature and potential consequences of engagement in each of these curricular spaces appears largely unexamined. Further research is needed to move beyond exploration of the discomfort non-Indigenous educators experience in teaching Indigenous students, toward deeper exploration of the practical 'coalface' ways educators engage (or do not engage) with Indigenous students in both specifically Indigenous-focused and 'mainstream' learning environments.

Methods/research design

Methodology

Key research topics and questions to be addressed

This project focused on Wadjella educators' engagement and interaction with Indigenous students in both specifically Indigenous-focused learning environments and 'mainstream' learning environments, with the aim of understanding the experiential, psychological, and contextual factors related to this engagement.

The central questions of the research were:

1. What are the ways in which Wadjella educators engage and interact with Indigenous Australian tertiary education students?
2. How do these means of engagement and interaction contribute and influence the retention of Indigenous Australian tertiary education students?

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How does Indigenous and Wadjella educators' engagement with Indigenous students vary across Indigenous-focused and mainstream learning environments?
2. How do Wadjella educators conceptualise their engagement with Indigenous students?
3. What are the concerns and considerations held by Wadjella educators about their engagement with Indigenous students?
4. What are the barriers that Wadjella educators perceive in teaching and interacting with Indigenous students?
5. How do Indigenous students perceive their interactions with Wadjella educators?
6. How do institutional factors, such as a Reconciliation Action Plan, and other formalised policy initiatives, influence the ways Wadjella educators engage with Indigenous students?
7. How could higher education institutions better support Wadjella educators' capacity to engage with Indigenous students?

Procedure

The project was conducted in three discrete phases.

Phase 1: Literature review

1. Systematic review of the research literature on Wadjella academics' engagement with Indigenous students in higher education.

Phase 2: Data collection

1. Recruited and interviewed three groups of academics and one group of Indigenous students from each university (Curtin University and Edith Cowan University)²:
 - Wadjella academics who teach within Indigenous centres

² The original data collection plan also included interviews with Indigenous academics teaching within faculties and Indigenous students within Aboriginal Centres. These were not pursued due to a) the scarcity of Indigenous academics teaching within faculties and b) the majority of Indigenous students interviewed who were currently studying within the 'mainstream' had previously been studying within Aboriginal Centres.

- Indigenous academics who teach within Indigenous centres
- Wadjella academics from each of the faculties
- Indigenous students who have been taught within each of the faculties

Phase 3: Data analysis, reporting, and recommendations

1. Data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).
2. Findings were reported from both the educator and student perspectives, with a comparative perspective across groups informing the final stage of analysis.
3. From this, recommendations for the higher education context were made, with regard to developing ways of supporting educators to engage effectively with Indigenous students in higher education.

Methods

Participants

A total of 28 academics across the four intended groups took part in interviews. Participants were male (N = 4) and female (N = 5) Indigenous academics from within Indigenous Centres, male (N = 1) and female (N = 8) Wadjella academics from within Indigenous Centres, and male (N = 5) and female (N = 5) Wadjella academics from faculty (outside of Indigenous centres). Participants taught across a range of disciplines (e.g., the arts, sustainability, Indigenous Studies and health), with experience as educators of Indigenous students varying from a single semester to many years.

Student participants were male (N = 4) and female (N = 5) Indigenous Australians in 'mainstream' courses. Participants were enrolled in a range of disciplines (e.g., psychology, medicine, fine arts, business and law), across years 1 to 4 of their respective degrees. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 54 years of age, with four participants of 'traditional' age (<25 years of age), three participants between 25 and 40 years of age, and one participant over 50 years of age.

Materials

Semi-structured interview guides for both educators and students were developed for this research with questions derived from the literature on the Indigenous Studies teaching context (see Appendices for complete listing of interview questions). Prompts were used to encourage participants to expand upon answers.

Procedure

An audit was undertaken, cross-referencing all current Indigenous students in both universities, with the units they had undertaken in their study up until semester 1, 2020, and the educators involved in those units (both teaching and coordinating). From this list, participants were recruited via an email, inviting them to take part in the study. Further snowball sampling was also used. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the research, and the role of participants. All participants provided informed consent prior to interview participation. Semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in duration were conducted on campus, via telephone, and via Skype. These individual semi-structured research yarns focused on the following topics: perceptions of engagement between educators and Indigenous students, concerns/considerations and barriers related to engagement, and factors that influenced and contributed to engagement and its quality. Participants were reimbursed travel costs to and from campus, and parking. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and de-identified.

Data analysis

Initial analysis

Initial analysis was conducted separately for each of the four groups. For each group, transcripts were entered into NVivo for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Individual transcripts were read in their entirety for familiarisation, with the notation of preliminary themes and ideas. Code generation was undertaken manually by members of the team, as follows:

- a Wadjella academic in Faculty coding the Wadjella academic in Faculty group
- an Aboriginal academic coding the Aboriginal academic group
- a Wadjella academic (with significant experience in the Aboriginal education space) coding the Wadjella academic in Indigenous Centres group
- an Aboriginal student coding the Aboriginal student group.

This was an iterative process — focusing on each individual transcript before moving to the next. Ongoing review of codes ensured that meaning was not shifting. Further analysis grouped codes into categories and developed themes. Codes and themes for one transcript from each sample group were cross-checked by an independent researcher. Finally, theme names were selected that reflected the context of the research.

Comparative analysis

Themes were compared across each of the educator groups initially, to determine similarities, differences and gaps in approaches to engagement and the psychological and experiential factors associated with this. Following this, student narratives of educators' engagement, and their own classroom experiences, were compared with educators' narratives to directly compare engagement style with the actual experience of this style, by the student. Student and educator perspectives were not matched (i.e. students' experiences were not necessarily associated with the specific educators in this study's sample). From here, thematic nuances were examined to further reveal meaning and artefacts of the engagement process that could provide a means of determining gaps in knowledge and practice and thus inform recommendations for future educator/practitioner development.

Findings

Overview of analysis

A comparative approach was taken to explore the ways in which educators engage and interact with Indigenous students, and Indigenous students' perceptions of this engagement in relation to their educational needs across Indigenous-focused and mainstream educational contexts. For this, the perspectives of four groups were explored: (i) Wadjella educators teaching in mainstream faculties; (ii) Wadjella educators teaching in Indigenous centres; (iii) Indigenous educators teaching in Indigenous centres; and (iv) Indigenous students. Findings are presented in separate sections for each group. Subsequently, the findings from a comparative analysis across the themes from each group is presented.

Wadjella educators —across mainstream faculties

Five key themes emerged from the analysis of transcripts of interviews with Wadjella educators teaching in faculties. These were: 'Hit and Miss: identifying Indigenous students', 'If identify, then what?', 'Uncertainty as a barrier to engagement', and 'Building relationships', and 'Finding a way forward'. The content of each theme highlights the influence of factors related to educators' engagement with Indigenous students. The themes, with descriptions and illustrative quotes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes from interviews with Wadjella educators in faculties

THEME	DESCRIPTION	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Hit and Miss: Identifying Indigenous Students	Explores issues Wadjella educators contend with when considering the relevance of students' Indigenous identity in education	<i>"It's easier when you don't think about it, which is tragic."</i>
	- lack of systematic process for identification	<i>"This semester I looked on the computer. There's five of them who've identified themselves. So who they are is anybody's guess."</i>
	- largely reliant on student self-disclosure	<i>"One I know because she was the one who came in first semester and we've had a face to face."</i>
	- 2 costs of not identifying: *reluctance to invest time and resources *no consideration of students' needs	<i>"If I have one student every four years, I can't go away on a two day training camp for that one student every four years." "there may be mechanisms to help them that I'm not aware of."</i>
If Identify, Then What?	Captures the varying responses educators reported on what they do, or would do, if they identified Indigenous students	<i>"do I need to know, why do I need to know? And then if I do know what do I do with that?"</i>
	- some take proactive stance and focus on personal connection	<i>"it's quite a responsibility for us to actually sort of nurture those students."</i>
	- majority expressed uncertainty on how to proceed	<i>"I just didn't want to single him out in the class. I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable. Looking back in hindsight now, I probably should have emailed him or something."</i>
	- some leave it to student to initiate contact	<i>"They don't always engage with me. So it's not unless they engage that I can be that bridge or that mentor for them."</i>
	- issue-focused rather than identity-focused responding	<i>"it won't be that they're Indigenous. It will be, what specific issues do they have."</i>
	- treat all students the same	<i>"I will offer the same help that I would offer to any student, which is usually 'if you are struggling, come and see me'."</i>
	- questioning impact on teaching	<i>"Does that mean that I change the way I deliver? Does it mean I change what I deliver?"</i>

Uncertainty as a Barrier to Engagement	Illustrates how Wadjella educators experience a sense of uncertainty in relation to Indigenous students' education, which seemingly prevents engaging with Indigenous students in meaningful or helpful ways	<i>"The last thing I want to do is come across as a patronising person you know, with all of this privilege, and the background of my family history, come along and say right 'this is what you need to do' so because of that context ... I don't want to force anything on anybody."</i>
	- perceived lack of knowledge and confidence	<i>"I feel unprepared. I feel... I don't feel qualified. I don't feel... not relevant. ...a bit of a fraud really."</i>
	- fear of making mistakes/being ineffectual	<i>"I have no idea whether it would do more harm than good."</i>
	- fear of repercussions	<i>"... if it goes to appeal and they bring out the Indigenous student card ..."</i>
	- uncertainty over what level of support is appropriate	<i>"... somewhere there must be a line. It's never been communicated."</i>
	- Doubts about own cultural competence	<i>"I wouldn't know what my capabilities are or what that means. I may have it. I don't know."</i>
Building Relationships	Reflects the perspectives of Wadjella educators who were comfortable engaging with Indigenous students	<i>"... all of us have connection in some way. And it's how you find that connection."</i>
	- need to connect and engage with students and develop relationships	<i>"listening to what they have to share and being respectful."</i>
	- part of inclusive approach	<i>"I've got an inclusive approach. I don't find it difficult to relate to Indigenous people. And I don't therefore have any issues about trying to understand where they're coming from and learning from them."</i>
	- establish connection before teaching starts	<i>"Just a 20 minutes, half hour to mingle over some cheese and crackers or something. And at least then they can have an interaction with you before it becomes that formal 'I am a student. You are the lecturer'."</i>
	- explicitly drawing students in within class	<i>"we always start by asking people who they are, where they come from, what they want to do"</i>
Finding a way forward	Explores what Wadjella educators felt they needed in order to work effectively with Indigenous students	<i>"It's very much about, you know, if I know about their culture, knowing how to relate that to the way we teach and then the [university] structure allowing me to do that."</i>
	- desire for training	<i>"I have never been given any particular training that I can remember."</i>
	- cultural awareness training useful, but not sufficient to inform teaching practice	<i>"... interesting in the sense that it helped me learn a bit about the Noongar culture, but didn't help me work out how to do my job based on that."</i>
	- need for supporting policies, structures and practices	<i>"Well, we don't have any systems in place. We don't have any university wide policies that I'm aware of."</i>
	- wanting support on a needs basis	<i>"I've got some ideas, but I need any further support and who I contact, who I can get help to make sense, the appropriate help. That's the thing that really would be the most useful"</i>

Wadjella educators — Indigenous centres

Four key themes emerged from within this group's data. These were: 'Cultivating the learning environment, 'A relational approach', 'Prejudgement and assumptions, 'Working together across the institution?'. The content of each theme highlights the influence and association of factors related to educators' engagement with Indigenous students (see Table 2).

Table 2. Themes from interviews with Wadjella educators in Indigenous centres

THEME	DESCRIPTION	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Cultivating the Learning Environment	Illustrates how Wadjella educators conceptualise the learning context as pertinent to their engagement with Indigenous students	
	An informal teaching approach/style, smaller class sizes, the use of humour, and a collaborative process were viewed as essential in their efforts for cultivating an environment where students could feel more secure in participating in class discussion	<p>“... students need to feel comfortable if they’re going to learn and they need to be able to trust you. And they need to feel that their voices are going to be heard and listened to.”</p> <p>“You have to be approachable because if you’re not, then the students aren’t going to learn.”</p>
	Incorporating yarning methods enables learning and educators to see learning process	<p>“... it takes away that sort of expert-novice relationship, you know they don’t see you as being the authority on things, but more creating environments for which exchange and understanding occurs.”</p>
A Relational Approach	Details how Wadjella educators perceived cultivating working relationships with Indigenous students as pertinent to education and learning processes	
	A culturally appropriate means of engaging Indigenous students for their learning is developed through past experiences	<p>“Learning from the Aboriginal mentors [within educational context] ... that if you don’t have a relationship, then you’ve got nothing to go off, and that’s that building of respect between and the fact that you respect, that you show respect for Aboriginal culture and for where people are coming from and for what they’re bringing ...”</p>
	Facilitates understanding of student context, which facilitates support methods	<p>“You’re not going to know all their life experiences. But if you have a relationship with them, then you’ll be able to find out what’s going on and if there are issues you are going to be able to... You’re going to have more luck finding how to work around it if they feel comfortable talking to you.”</p>
Prejudgments and Assumptions	Reflects how Wadjella educators perceive that one’s own assumptions and biases can shape their engagements with Indigenous students	
	Trying too hard is fraught	<p>“So, if you if you were to go in and be like, ‘I’m a good White person, and I don’t think this, and I don’t think that’ it’s almost like setting the assumption that White people do [expect to be disliked]. And you can’t just assume that everyone in that room doesn’t like White people.”</p>
	Being mindful of own assumptions and prejudgements	<p>“I just had this complete assumption that he was attacking me because I was ... White. And it actually wasn’t. That was a massive learning curve for me.”</p>
Working together across the institution?	Reflects how Wadjella educators perceive their engagement with students to be impacted upon by broader institutional issues	
	Structural issues influence quality/nature of engagement	
	Greater coordination and connection valuable between organisational areas	<p>“We wanted our students to do [a mainstream introductory unit], as one of our units in the [degree], and approached the school about having that taught, and making sure there was a review of the Indigenous aspects of the unit, but also we’d like it to be taught here under block. And then they said ‘no, we can’t do that’. Whereas I think, there needs to be really a collaborative approach ...”</p>

Indigenous educators – Indigenous Centres

Five key themes emerged from within the educator group. These were: ‘Teacher as student’, ‘Lived experience: the best professional development (PD)’, ‘The primacy of the relationship’, ‘The nature of support’, and ‘Student as the central focus’. The content of each theme highlights the influence and association of factors related to educators’ engagement with Indigenous students (see Table 3).

Table 3. Themes from interviews with Indigenous educators in Indigenous centres

THEME	DESCRIPTION	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Teacher as student	Denotes how Indigenous educators conceptualised themselves as learners in doing Indigenous education	
	Humility	<i>“It’s not sort of hiding something or conveying that you’re this guru of knowledge, but it’s being honest. If you make a mistake — ‘oh, sorry guys’ or if you stuff up, well, then you admit, you’re pretty well not faultless in that respect. So I guess being real with them in that relationship...and then the relationship will evolve.”</i>
	Wadjella uncertainty means Indigenous educators are expected to solve all ‘Indigenous problems’	<i>“When you walk into a room, the expectation that you can solve all that stuff if you’re Aboriginal. You’ll fix that.”</i>
	Indigenous educators uncertain in this space too	<i>“So working with Aboriginal people, learning, learning more about, you know, the history as well, that we’re not sort of told in schools, even though you hear bits and pieces from your parents and stuff, you know, so. So there’s still a lot of learning that as an Aboriginal person that I didn’t know and that I’ve learnt. “</i>
Lived experience: the best PD?	Being familiar with Indigenous cultures was positioned as the most important factor in relation to engaging with Indigenous students.	<i>“My life experience. And I even position that higher than my academic experience... or on par with.”</i>
	Insider knowledge	<i>“I could speak with a level of authority because I have been here for a while. I get that authority from the relationships I have with people who have it.”</i>
	Intuitive identification of Indigenous students	<i>“I just know... It’s hard to explain... It’s like, it’s not that I’m making an assumption because of the way they look or the way they talk. It’s just something else. And I don’t know how to explain that. Yeah, that might not make much scientific sense, but it just is that way - it’s a social thing.”</i>
	Being Indigenous not the same as being a good teacher of Indigenous people	<i>“But just ‘cos you’re Aboriginal, it doesn’t mean you’re going to be a good teacher of Aboriginal stuff. And it doesn’t make you a bad Aboriginal.”</i>
	Effective Wadjella academics history of engagement with Indigenous people	<i>“You know, they’ve got a long, long experience of an engagement with our mob.”</i>
Primacy of the relationship	Highlights how Indigenous educators conceptualised and experienced the importance of relationship within the education space	<i>“it’s critical to have a strong engagement almost from the get go. And even if it’s not strong, at least you give yourself to... you put yourself out there to get that... to get that reciprocation.”</i>
	On-going narrative	<i>“as an Aboriginal lecturer to Aboriginal students, you build up this relationship about who you are and where you’re from, and your mob is... and that keeps going on all the time.”</i>

	Requires authenticity	<i>"Ultimately, you are putting yourself out there. You're putting yourself out there in a way that you're leaving all your pretences out the door."</i>
	Do not have to share everything	<i>"I think it's ok to have... to say things to a point of comfort."</i>
	Feedback part of this relational narrative	<i>"The key is about these relationships and providing a comfortable space for learners to respond to the message that you're trying to deliver."</i>
	Relationships extend to students' communities	<i>"Yeah. And when you run into those aunties or whatever in the street 'oh how's, you know, whoever going, they're doing good? We're so proud of em'... all that."</i>
The nature of support	Support and a supportive mindset was positioned as a by-product of the teacher-student relationship	<i>"My teaching style is about building relationships...from a base that is kind of built around everybody's rights to stuff. You build relationships that are then rights-based."</i>
	Importance of knowing students' context	<i>"the support that you have to be able to give Aboriginal students when they go through this stuff is not about the academic stuff, or not 'just' about the academic stuff, which we focus on."</i>
	Relationships develop over time	<i>"You're thinking of things more as a dialogue. It's just time."</i>
	Decolonising the learning space	<i>"... trying to build a learning space where people don't have to worry about their culture or consider other cultures and not be compromised by their own cultural behaviours and not questioning or separating or demanding that you have to leave the culture at the door."</i>
	Student self-identification reflects class safety perceptions	<i>"if they don't self-identify in the room with a lot of other Wadjellas, that's okay, because that's a part of that creating that safe space. Yeah. And if they do it's because they feel safe."</i>
	Team-focused support	<i>"Behind the scenes, having a system set up that allowed our students to have support that was above and beyond. But not this hand holding support."</i>
Student as the central focus	Importance of placing the student at the centre of the learning environment	<i>"understanding some of the underlying sort of maybe social determinants and things like that of our Indigenous students ... and just ensuring that they've.. they're in a culturally safe and secure environment while we're teaching them."</i>
	Identity tensions must remain a focus	<i>"It's not making assumptions that they know about their Aboriginality. Yeah. And just because they're in the room, it's not the same shared experiences."</i>
	Shifting the power dynamic to accommodate students	<i>"I think a lot of academics see themselves as having all the power and it's all about their status, whereas me, I'm basically here to share and to teach: share my knowledge and to teach the curriculum."</i>
	Redistribution of power a signal to students that their context is understood	<i>"When they grasp that as academics, you know, when they grasp the idea of an ally like they know damn well that the fight is ours. Sure. But they'll do everything in their power to help push us up front and say, you know, 'let me try and make this... Let me help in some way. But you tell me what I need to do.' So it's always really powerful when people actually grasp the idea of allies and realising there is a fight."</i>

Indigenous students

Six key themes emerged from the analysis of interviews with Indigenous students: 'Overcoming hurdles just to get here', 'Alone and seeking support from Indigenous students and educators', 'To Identify or Not?', and 'The Importance of Cultural Awareness, Understanding and Sensitivity', 'It's the educator's role to deal with racism and difficult conversations, not ours' and 'Principles of good teaching are the same, whether Wadjella or Indigenous'. The content of each theme highlights the influence of factors related to educators' engagement with Indigenous students (see Table 4).

Table 4. Themes from interviews with Indigenous students.

Overcoming hurdles just to get here	Highlights the challenges Indigenous students faced related to the pursuit of education	<i>"Indigenous students have had to overcome a lot even to get here ... I don't know if necessarily the teachers understand that."</i>
	Underrepresented	<i>"one point six percent of us in tertiary spaces."</i>
	Differing backgrounds and life trajectories	<i>"... the reality is we do have different lives to a lot of the mainstream people in society. We do face more barriers and things outside of study that do make it harder for us to complete our studies."</i>
	Past experiences impacted upon their confidence at university	<i>"... self-confidence has been hit pretty hard because they've been told at school that they're not going to amount to anything, you can't do this, you're dumb, you're this, you're..."</i>
	Assumption of student homogeneity	<i>"I think they still teach very mainstream and [assume] everybody in the classroom is still on the same page."</i>
	Tension around additional supports	<i>"I struggle feeling guilty with, you know, like the free tutoring and the free printing."</i>
Alone and seeking support from Indigenous students and educators	Highlights student experiences of isolation associated with minority status	
	Often the only Indigenous student	<i>"as one Aboriginal student, you know, you don't get that support from another fellow student."</i>
	Presence and support of other Indigenous students valued	<i>"it's good and empowering for Blackfellas to see other Blackfellas in the same space."</i>
	Takes longer to develop supportive relationships with Wadjellas	<i>"it's taken me some time to get to know them before I can communicate with them on a certain level."</i>
	Indigenous educators not visible in the 'mainstream'	<i>"I don't think I've come across any Indigenous teachers, or lecturers or unit coordinators except for in my first year Indigenous unit."</i>
	Greater engagement with Indigenous educators	<i>"I feel a bit more valued, opinions respected. I feel like we're safer to say how we feel."</i>
	Indigenous educators as role models	<i>"Knowing you're supported, knowing that your teacher is an Aboriginal person who's done uni, you can do it, too."</i>
	Indigenous educators' different teaching style	<i>"it's less transactional. It's more like a personal relationship."</i>
To Identify or Not?'	A point of tension for students was whether or not to identify as Indigenous to educators and other students.	
	Identifying as a point of pride	<i>"I've got to pay homage to who I am, where I come from, simple as that."</i>
	Indigenous educators identify Indigenous students without the need for self-identification	<i>"I guess that's the thing with Blackfellas - once you start chatting, you're able to pick up a lot of the time who is ..."</i>
	Wadjella educators base identification on appearance	<i>"I don't look like a Blackfella... to them apparently."</i>
	Concern over consequences of identifying	<i>"they'd probably treat me a little bit differently compared to, you know, being a Caucasian or anything like that."</i>

	Salience of Indigenous identity varied by context	<i>"You know, it's all depending on the context of that class and what we're expected to learn and all that kind of thing."</i>
The Importance of Cultural Awareness, Understanding and Sensitivity	Educators' cultural awareness, understanding and sensitivity viewed as important	<i>"And to have a cultural understanding, I think is appropriate. You know, we live in Australia and things have happened in the past. And that needs to be understood."</i>
	Not all educators are knowledgeable about Indigenous history and culture	<i>"there are some areas that they are absolutely clueless."</i>
	Interest in Indigenous culture enhances sense of belonging	<i>"they want to give to Indigenous people, learn about Indigenous culture. And that was a good feeling."</i>
	Cultural awareness and sensitivity was viewed as most important in Indigenous-specific units	<i>"...because of the things you speak about and you need cultural sensitivity. The challenges of group discussions and some of the ignorance in the room and addressing that."</i>
	'Othering' of Indigenous people	<i>"they make it like as if we're like a separate peoples"</i>
	Lack of cultural sensitivity a barrier to help-seeking	<i>"it's going to cause barriers if they need to ask help for the unit coordinator and they feel uncomfortable doing so"</i>
It's the educator's role to deal with racism and difficult conversations, not ours	Students want educators to deal with racism when it arises	<i>"If you're the one in charge, you can kind of defuse the situation, especially if it's about race".</i>
	Tension/expectations of racism in classes	<i>"having to bite your tongue and kind of ignore the ignorance that was in the room."</i>
	Wadjella not necessarily equipped to deal with racism, or even recognise it.	<i>"they just don't want to get into it with the student or they've chosen to ignore it or it hasn't even registered for them. Maybe they feel the same way."</i>
	Up to educator to deal with it, not ignore it	<i>"you're waiting to see what the educator, how they will address it"</i>
Principles of good teaching are the same, whether Wadjella or Indigenous	Students recognised principles of good teaching as being approachable, communicating well, engaging students, and being knowledgeable.	<i>"I feel like educators have been quite, quite good for the most part."</i>

Discussion

This research focused on the educational experiences of Wadjella academics, in particular their means of engagement with Indigenous higher education students. We aimed to explore the experiential, psychological and contextual factors related to this engagement, via a comparative approach across both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics in mainstream and Indigenous-focused contexts, and the perspective of Indigenous students themselves.

Within the initial individual group findings (see Findings section), we noted clear ways in which educators approached their engagement with Indigenous students. As standalone findings, each group offers an insight into commonly held ideas about teaching Indigenous students. However, distinct similarities and differences were noted between the groups. Indigenous educators and non-Indigenous educators within Indigenous centres shared similarities in terms of approach to educating Indigenous students, but perhaps most tellingly, their reasons for adopting this approach. Stark differences were noted between these two groups and the third group – non-Indigenous educators in mainstream courses – specifically to the approach taken, underlying philosophy and background experience. As such, within this discussion section we attempt to examine the nuance of these contrasting factors, while offering some explanatory discussion as to why this may be so, followed by recommendations to address these factors more broadly. To provide practical relevance, we do this by framing this section in the context of student experiences. Against this backdrop, we outline and discuss how each of the academic groups engage with Indigenous students, and the nuance and possibility within and between each.

The student context

Students made note of the nature and prevalence of the hurdles they had historically and continued to face. This contextualising/foregrounding of their lived experiences as Indigenous Australians played a significant role in both how they saw themselves as students, and the way they positioned themselves as students. Students didn't want to be treated differently, while at the same time recognising that their needs did indeed differ, carrying this tension to the learning context at all times. This was well understood by both Indigenous academics and those Wadjella academics who had significant lived experience in the space: the former as Indigenous students once themselves, the latter as educators of Indigenous students for prolonged periods of time. However, this context of the Indigenous learner appeared to be either poorly understood, or entirely unrecognised, by Wadjella academics in faculty, many of whom stated a preference to treat all students the same. This focus on equality over equity appears similar to other findings in the Australian sociocultural context where individuals either did not feel a need to treat others differently, openly made clear why they shouldn't be treated differently, or felt they were already being treated differently (Pedersen et al., 2006), these ideas and attitudes having their basis in race. However, this interpretation is perhaps overly simplistic within the context of this research, and should be considered in light of other key findings from this group, particularly the noted uncertainty around engaging with Indigenous students, and a clearly stated fear of 'making mistakes'.

Uncertainty

Across groups, the education of Indigenous students sat clearly within the intercultural context, that is, often contested and uncertain (Nakata et al., 2012). However, Indigenous and Wadjella educators teaching in Indigenous contexts demonstrated a preparedness to enter, explore, and learn from the uncertainty that can arise when teaching Indigenous students. On the other hand, Wadjella educators from within mainstream contexts were

deeply concerned by this uncertainty, making clear a desire for concrete methods and procedures that they could follow. In this sense, Wadjella educators from within mainstream seemingly presumed that there was a 'right' or 'wrong' way to go about teaching Indigenous students, and that they could avoid potential mishaps by following a prescribed procedure of 'the right thing to do'. This mindset seemingly misunderstands, or simply avoids engaging with, the complexity of nuanced experiences that arise from diverse contexts and ambiguity. This apparent intolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty has been noted elsewhere as common in complex teaching contexts (Helsing, 2007; Dogra et al., 2007). Conversely, Indigenous educators and Wadjella educators teaching in Indigenous contexts seemed to draw from their experiences and, despite being challenged at times by Indigenous people and contexts, utilised these experiences to navigate imperfectly through discomfort in this space. Our findings suggest the latter two groups of educators better understand, or simply subscribe to, the social justice imperative of Indigenous equity and that this has been learned through a differentiated lived experience as, or among, Indigenous Australians.

We contend that this fear of uncertainty—of doing the wrong thing—may also be explained in terms of mindset, in this instance, that of the educator themselves. Carol Dweck (2008) discusses the notion of mindset, noting that those with a fixed mindset associate their capabilities and intelligence with biological immutability, while those with a growth mindset believe the opposite — that capabilities can and do develop over time, given sufficient time and opportunity to practice. While this framework is often discussed and/or adopted in the context of learners, we feel it is relevant to also consider interpreting elements of the Wadjella group findings within Dweck's framework for three reasons: 1) the clear uncertainty shown by educators in this space and their explicitly stated fear of doing the wrong thing, leading to inaction, passive engagement, or withdrawal and 2) the findings from our two other educator groups, each of whom clearly articulated experiences of having made many mistakes, but demonstrated a willingness to continue making mistakes and learning from them — to be a student, and 3) the noted student desire to have success and associated factors modelled to them in the higher education environment. While students admittedly referred to Indigenous educators in our findings in relation to this final point, in this case, we propose the idea that all educators can reflect and model a growth mindset (with regard to academic success and capacity) to students from equity backgrounds through their own engagement in this space. The importance of this is noted elsewhere (Claro et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant and salient, given suggestion within our findings of Indigenous students' feelings of 'not belonging' in the higher education environment, and the reality that there are still relatively few Indigenous educators within tertiary institutions (Asmar & Page, 2009), particularly outside of Aboriginal centres (also notable within our sample).

Identity and identification

Across all groups, the notion and context of Indigenous identity, and identifying as Indigenous, was prevalent. For Indigenous students, acceptance and value for their identity and cultures is important in general, but also specific to the learning context. Further to this, seeing Indigenous representation in the university seemingly permitted a sense of value, familiarity, and security. Such representation was however, sparse. Indigenous students demonstrated concern that their cultural identities were essentialised and/or foreign to many Wadjella educators and students. This appeared linked to an uneasiness around disclosing their Indigenous identity in learning spaces. This discomfort around identifying—in essence, raising a flag that one belongs to a marginalised, or 'vulnerable' group—betrays an underlying uncertainty, and seemingly reflects students' concerns of both being treated differently, but also the earlier mentioned sense of not belonging in this context. This collection of phenomena has been noted elsewhere, the effect of race-related factors and stressors profoundly influencing academic success and retention (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Schwartz, 2018). Within our student analysis, this noted undercurrent of 'not belonging'

appears associated with uncertainty as to how they would be perceived and received if they did self-identify to Wadjella educators teaching in mainstream contexts, despite feeling that identification was important to their wellbeing and academic success. At the same time, some Wadjella educators demonstrated a general misunderstanding of why a student might wish to identify in any case, and what its meaning and relevance might be. Certainly, these educators tended to demonstrate more essentialised understandings of Indigenous identities, and illustrated challenge in conceptualising cultural identity as relevant to education. This seemingly occurred despite some demonstrating insight into adjacent themes of privilege and social location.

Related to these points around Indigenous identity, the limited number of students who identified as Indigenous Australians was noted by Wadjella educators in faculty, with at least some discussion of the challenges of firstly identifying students, followed by concern around the perceived costs of adapting one's teaching style to engage effectively. However, the noted hesitation, and/or lack of understanding as to why one should accommodate the relatively few numbers of Indigenous students who might identify, betrays a limited understanding of both the emergent undercurrents within this research inherent to Indigenous students' university experiences in the first instance, and also the potentially profound impact of this limited understanding (Osborne & Walker, 2006) — that is, the loss of human potential for reasons other than academic capability. Conversely, Indigenous and Wadjella educators experienced in teaching in Indigenous contexts did not question or shy away from these inherent challenges of identification, nor the relevance of doing so, seeming to depend more on intuitive relational capacities, developed over time and via immersion in relevant contexts, to identify, connect and engage with Indigenous students, as subjective others — i.e., in ways that were seemingly less objectifying of Indigenous identities and contexts.

Relationships

Positive learner-centred relationships founded on respect, trust, empathy and warmth are acknowledged as important to education and learning (Cornelius-White, 2007). Indeed, across all groups, relationships emerged as a point of discussion. However, while Wadjella educators from mainstream teaching discussed relationships, most tended to do so in an abstract and hypothetical sense with the possibility of benefit; most did not demonstrate knowledge or evidence of relationship building with Indigenous students. That is, while they conceptualised relationship building as a viable technique to enhance teaching, few illustrated experiences in doing so with Indigenous students. Comparatively, Indigenous and Wadjella educators teaching in Indigenous contexts seemed to place great importance on the relationship as both significant in its own right, and as providing a conduit to teaching/learning. In this way, relationships presented as part of a way of knowing and doing, and as a fundamental teaching pedagogy, not common within mainstream teaching environments. Indigenous and Wadjella educators from Indigenous teaching contexts, and most importantly, Indigenous students, commented on the benefits of this in different ways: (i) as a conduit to transforming teaching content in ways more relatable and accessible to students; (ii) as a means of enhancing approachability and, in turn, accessibility in terms of teaching practices, and in its provision of holistic support throughout students' educational experiences. Again, we touch back on the concept of the students' context—for educators engaging with Indigenous students, the relationship's purpose and utility was multifaceted—as a pedagogical mechanism in its own right, as a means of personal connection and learning of the context, as a means of signalling you were aware and had experience in the Indigenous space, and, related to this last point, as a means of signalling that you were 'safe' or an 'ally'. Interestingly, some students suggested Wadjella academics who understood their context were ideally positioned at times to be a supportive other or ally, above and beyond an educator's Indigeneity, simply because when sensitive issues arose,

there was potential for greater objectivity, particularly in areas of personal tension such as cultural identity or racism. This notion of the relationship as multifaceted and capable of positively influencing in-group/out-group relations via prosocial behaviours and a consequent establishment of trust has been noted elsewhere (Louis et al., 2019).

Lived experience

Familiarity with a context requires time and immersion. Without knowing the context of the Indigenous learner, it is difficult to empathise with an Indigenous student's often challenging perspective of simply 'being a student', a seemingly commonplace and/or benign thing. In terms of engagement, demonstrating a 'standing alongside' of students in this space was very clear in its relevance and necessity for Aboriginal educators, and also Wadjella educators with experience in the space. Each had demonstrated an internalising of particular values that led them to engage in this way, with both of these groups clearly understanding the student context and consequently developing a sense of personal responsibility to engage and act in ways that supported the student (Osborne & Walker, 2006). There is evidence throughout our findings that exposure and immersion to Indigenous community, culture and ways of knowing played a part in this. This idea is similar to research around prosocial behaviours with regards to race and minority groups (Redmond et al., 2014; Radke et al., 2020). The key driver of prosocial behaviours in this research context—consciously engaging from the position of an ally—appears linked to the educational context, itself linked to immersion within spaces where allyship might be deemed valuable, and a natural fit, as a non-Indigenous person. Within our research, when the learning environment was not necessarily predicated on Indigenous or cultural issues and contexts, the educator involved often remained distant from equity and social justice considerations. Indeed, educators from this group noted at times they weren't entirely sure why they needed to do things differently than they would with any other student, while noting that the institution itself sent implicit messages of this also, via either personal development opportunities lacking appropriate or sufficient foci, or other structural issues that impeded the efforts of individuals or tasked them entirely with 'figuring out' how to engage students effectively. This itself is problematic, given the ongoing push toward reconciliation nationally and within the two institutions involved in this research. Perhaps more telling, and more closely related to the intent of our research, is that this perceived lack of functional coordination of policy and practice across organisational areas is suggested – in many ways, leaned on - as a critical impediment to taking action, a sentiment not shared by Indigenous academics or Wadjella academics teaching into Indigenous centres.

Conclusion

This research has shed further light on the ways in which Wadjella educators engage with Indigenous students, the ways students perceive and would like to be engaged with, potential disconnects between the two, and the potential drivers and effects of this. Through a multi-group comparative approach to analysis, we have attempted to disentangle the notion of engagement and support, bringing to the fore the importance of the student context, learner-centred relationships, navigation of uncertainty, and the importance of lived experience in the bigger picture of engaging effectively with Indigenous students. Interestingly, each of the points of discussion raised appears predicated on, or at least meaningfully associated with, two broad things: an educator's lived experiences, and the traits of these individuals themselves. While the latter may play a significant role in the means of engagement, it is both not the focus of this research, and impractical to address, the former appearing much more likely to see gains made in this space in terms of developing the capabilities of educators to better engage with Indigenous students. This appears particularly true when one takes into account each of the earlier points of discussion.

Limitations

While our findings outline important insight into educators' experiences engaging with Indigenous students, we acknowledge certain limitations. Of the educators who participated, it is possible that, due to self-selection, we have missed an important subset of educators within our sample, from both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, particularly those who may not have felt comfortable sharing their experiences, and those with a perceived lack of experience or interest in the space. Similarly, no Indigenous academics teaching in faculty were represented in our sample, despite their intended inclusion within our sample. This highlights both a need to engage these educators more broadly in future similar research, but perhaps more significant, the dearth of Indigenous educators outside of Indigenous centres.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research, we make the following recommendations:

- Institutions should reinforce that student equity is—now more than ever—everyone's responsibility, given the growing body of Indigenous students in mainstream courses. Similarly, it should be reinforced that identifying and managing racism within classrooms is the educators' responsibility.
- Staff development opportunities should extend beyond simple cultural awareness to cover these interrelated factors:
 - understanding of the Indigenous student context
 - educator engagement, the teacher-student relationship and support for Indigenous students
 - educator growth mindset and tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity
 - the philosophies of equity, with particular reference to the Australian Indigenous education context.
- Institutions should, in conjunction with community, facilitate meaningful opportunities for staff and Indigenous community to interact more generally, so as to ensure authentic immersion and relationships over time, supporting the capacity for relationship development with students. Such transformative approaches acknowledge the fraught transactional nature of 'ticking the box' with regards to staff personal development opportunities.

- Further research explicitly examining and exploring this educator uncertainty and mindset in the Indigenous context is vital to understanding what is likely to combat these psychological impediments to engaging effectively with Indigenous students.
- Further research should focus on exploring the influence of lived experience and cultural immersion on the quality of learner-centred relationships, uncertainty and educator mindset, and its impact on Indigenous student retention.
- Further research should focus on the development of quantitative measures of educator capacity to engage effectively with Indigenous students, based on key findings within the current research.
- The student voice is imperative in all further research in this area.

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Appendices

Student Interview Schedule:
QUESTIONS
1. Can you tell me about what you're studying?
a. PROMPT – degree/discipline area, year of study etc
2. How many of lecturers and tutors are Indigenous?
a. PROMPT – how do you know they are Indigenous?
b. PROMPT – How many are non-Indigenous?
NON-INDIGENOUS ACADEMICS SECTION
The questions I'm going to ask you now are about your experiences in classrooms where the educator was non-Indigenous.
1. Have your teachers been aware you're an Indigenous Australian?
a. (PROMPT) how do they know?
b. (PROMPT) is it important they know?
2. What is it like being an Indigenous student in your classes?
a. (PROMPT) How does the presence of other Indigenous students affect your experiences in class?
3. Describe your interactions with your teachers.
a. (PROMPT) Prompt depending on good or bad experiences
b. (PROMPT) Are they knowledgeable about Indigenous ways of knowing/doing etc?
4. Describe what you think is good teaching from a non-Indigenous academic.
a. (PROMPT) What things do you want the teacher to consider when they teach you?
b. (PROMPT) Is it important that the teacher considers your cultural identity?
5. Can you describe a challenging situation you encountered as an Indigenous student (in a class taught by a non-Indigenous educator)?
a. (PROMPT) What was that like personally for you? Why?
b. (PROMPT) how did the teacher respond to the situation?
c. (PROMPT) how would you have liked them to respond?
6. Think of a time where there was conflict, challenges or racism etc in the classroom. Can you talk a bit about this?
a. (PROMPT) The ways your teachers managed the situation
b. (PROMPT) The ways you have managed the situation
c. (PROMPT) how were your needs taken into consideration?
d. (PROMPT) how would you like to have seen it managed?
INDIGENOUS ACADEMICS SECTION
The questions I'm going to ask you now are about your experiences in classrooms where the educator was Indigenous.
1. Have your teachers been aware you're an Indigenous Australian?
a. (PROMPT) how do they know?
b. (PROMPT) is it important they know?
2. What is it like being an Indigenous student in your classes?
a. (PROMPT) How does the presence of other Indigenous students affect your experiences in class?

3. Describe your interactions with your teachers.
a. (PROMPT) Prompt depending on good or bad experiences
b. (PROMPT) Are they knowledgeable about Indigenous ways of knowing/doing etc?
4. Describe what you think is good teaching from an Indigenous academic.
a. (PROMPT) What things do you want the teacher to consider when they teach you?
b. (PROMPT) Is it important that the teacher considers your cultural identity?
5. Can you describe a challenging situation you encountered as an Indigenous student (in a class taught by an Indigenous educator)?
a. (PROMPT) What was that like personally for you? Why?
b. (PROMPT) how did the teacher respond to the situation?
c. (PROMPT) how would you have liked them to respond?
6. Think of a time where there was conflict, challenges or racism etc in the classroom. Can you talk a bit about this?
a. (PROMPT) The ways your teachers managed the situation
b. (PROMPT) The ways you have managed the situation
c. (PROMPT) how were your needs taken into consideration?
d. (PROMPT) how would you like to have seen it managed?
FINAL COMMENTS
Are there any other comments you'd like to make?

Educator Interview Schedule
Background to Questions: <i>While the inclusion of curriculum designed to develop and facilitate cultural competence and safety continues, equivalent growth in the development of Wadjella academics' capability to effectively deliver this curriculum has not occurred. The research team acknowledge that there are noted gaps in cultural competency training for educators. The following questions are not intended to induce potential embarrassment or feelings of inadequacy in educators, rather to encourage an open discussion that may be beneficial for both the educator and the Indigenous students they currently/potentially teach.</i>
NCSEHE Grant Questions – engagement
1. Tell me a bit about your teaching?
a. PROMPT – Can you describe your teaching style/philosophy?
2. Were you aware that you had Indigenous students in your class?
a. PROMPT – (if yes) how did you know?
b. PROMPT – (if no) do you attempt to find out if you have Indigenous students? Would you know how to find out?
3. Tell me about your experiences teaching Indigenous students.
a. PROMPT – How do you engage with Indigenous students?
b. PROMPT – How do you facilitate learning as an educator of Indigenous students?
4. Tell me a bit about your own capabilities to teach Indigenous students.
a. (PROMPT) What PD have you done around Indigenous cultural capabilities here at Curtin or elsewhere?
5. Describe the things that help you teach to Indigenous students – [ENABLERS]
a. PROMPT – personal/institutional etc.
6. Can you describe any challenges you face in teaching Indigenous students?

7. Can you describe a challenging situation you encountered when teaching an Indigenous student?
a. (PROMPT) What was that like personally for you? Why?
8. Describe a teaching experience with Indigenous students where you felt uncertainty/apprehension/tension.
a. (PROMPT) How did you manage these moments personally?
b. (PROMPT) How did you help students manage them?
9. Describe the things that get in the way of your ability to teach to Indigenous students – [IMPEDIMENTS]
a. PROMPT – personal/institutional etc.
10. Do you do/think about things differently with Indigenous students than you would with other students?
11. Can you describe an experience where non-Indigenous students in the class were expressing views about or related to Indigenous Australians that made you uncomfortable or created tension in the class?
a. PROMPT – How do you manage this, knowing there are Indigenous students in the class also?
b. PROMPT – How do you engage with Indigenous students in situations like this?
12. What do you know about the policies, resources and training at your university related to advancing Indigenous interests?
a. PROMPT – in what ways do these things influence how you engage with Aboriginal students?
b. PROMPT – How can this university better support your capacity to engage with Indigenous students?
13. Are there any other comments you'd like to make?