The Australian Educational Researcher (2024) 51:1161–1176
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00633-9

Negotiating senses of belonging and identity across education spaces

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Received: 4 May 2022 / Accepted: 20 April 2023 / Published online: 20 May 2023

Abstract

A multitude of educational programs attempt to facilitate young people's engagement with ideas and practices of active citizenship. For young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous people in Australia, such interventions are often subject to complex experiences of senses of belonging and non-belonging. This paper responds to calls from researchers to develop better understandings of young Indigenous people's own senses and practices of belonging and to better understand the ways in which these perspectives and practices are spatially influenced at the level of local communities, 'country' and cultural groupings, and within larger state, national or transnational settings. Their testimonies illustrate the tensions that young Indigenous people must navigate in a settler colony that has never truly recognised Indigenous sovereignty but show that sovereignty remains intact. Focus groups were conducted with 58 young Indigenous people in Melbourne and regional Victoria who were participating in an Indigenous youth leadership program designed to foster formal and informal active citizenship practices, and to nurture a strong, affirming sense of Indigenous identity. The testimonies of these participants provide valuable insights into educational sites as spaces in which young people experience a spectrum of weak to strong senses of belonging. They also provide insights into the possibilities of engaging the challenges faced by many young Indigenous people in educational settings, challenges that include race discordance and exclusion, deficit discourses and gaps and distances in educational practice. They highlight the need to recognise the aspirations of young Indigenous people and the capacities of colonial education systems to meet them, and the imperative to celebrate young Indigenous identities in meaningful, non-tokenistic ways.

Keywords Young people · Indigenous youth · Belonging · Identity

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Introduction

A range of recent Australian educational programs and interventions have sought to enable young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous people to engage with ideas and practices of active citizenship and to 'leverage their lived experiences […] into meaningful, collective action' (Gustafson, Cohen & Andes, 2021, pp. 669-670), but their participation in these programs and interventions may be subject to complex experiences and senses of belonging. These may be further complicated by the unique and disrupted relationship which young Indigenous Australians necessarily have with citizenship and with the experiences of weaker and stronger senses of belonging which it implies. As Halse explains, 'what belonging involves […] is not straightforward in a world of increasing racial, religious, ethnic, cultural and language diversity in schools, cities, societies and nations' (2018, p. 3). For young Indigenous people in Australia, this complexity extends to their educational experiences and outcomes.

The depictions and discourses that attend the education of young Indigenous people are often characterised by distance and gaps: 'between practice and perceptions of practice, between mapping cause and effect, and between the aspirations of Indigenous students and families, and the ability of settler colonial education systems to meet those aspirations' (Moodie et al., 2021, p. 1). These young people are also frequently portrayed in deficit terms in educational contexts. These 'institutionally sponsored discourses of deficit' (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 225) or 'sociopolitical narratives of alterity' (Pechenkina, 2019, p. 1) position them as educationally vulnerable, at risk and in need of more support than their counterparts. They reflect and transmit the normative sociocultural assumptions which permeate educational practice and policies (Vass, 2012). In particular, the persistent narrative of "closing the gap" between the educational achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students reflects 'a lack of cultural awareness or knowledge of different life-worlds' (Cuervo et al., 2015, p. 11). It also reflects an approach to education that has 'settled into the "business" of doing schooling for Indigenous students' (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 225).

These deficit discourses speak to the failure of the Australian education system to understand or respond to the real needs, values and priorities of Indigenous students (Lowe et al., 2019; Moodie et al., 2019, 2021). They compound the loss of identity and culture that may be experienced by such students in and through their experience of schooling (Shay & Wickes, 2017). They also complicate young Indigenous people's already complex experience of belonging: they add to what Pechenkina calls the 'precarious discourse of belonging and non-belonging' (2019, p. 11). This experience is the product of a colonial nation-state embedded within an ongoing history of dispossession and exclusion from mainstream society. It is produced by educational systems and normative educational constructions which frame young Indigenous people as 'citizens who work, not citizens who belong or indeed already belong' (Moodie et al., 2021, p. 7). They may also be disconnected from young Indigenous people's own identity positions (Kowal & Paradies, 2017) and the new ways in which some are forging their own practices and senses of belonging.

This paper presents the findings of an evaluation of one program designed to foster Indigenous students' active citizenship and leadership: the Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leadership (REAL) program conducted by the Korin Gamadji Institute (KGI). Working with ideas of space and locality, this paper asks how experiences and practices of belonging are played out, and complicated, among a cohort of young program participants. It explores these young people's understandings of what it is to be young, Indigenous and to engage and belong across a range of spatial domains. Specifically, it investigates how the dynamics of senses of belonging in weak and strong manifestations shape and influence such young people's educational experience. Their testimonies shed light on the difficult tensions these young Indigenous people must navigate in a settler colony that has never truly recognised Indigenous sovereignty. At the same time, they show that Indigenous sovereignty remains intact and can be fostered beyond schools and other settler colonial dominant spaces.

Education and belonging

As we have indicated above, young Indigenous Australian people's experience of citizenship and belonging exists in a troubled relationship with Australia's status as a post-colonial nation-state. This state is characterised by a history of land dispossession as well as current tensions and conflicts relating to continued state control over many aspects of Indigenous lives (MacIntyre & Simpson, 2009; Pruitt, 2016). It is also characterised by a view of national identity that is still underscored by hegemonic values produced by an Anglo-Celtic majority in which those constructed as 'other' are asked to take part (Harris, 2013). As Walton and their colleagues explain, schools are particularly implicit in 'reproduc[ing] and reinforc[ing] the privileged position of a white Anglo identity as the foundation for an imagined Australian national identity' (2018, p. 3).

Schools may also be implicit in perpetuating a white Australian notion of belonging, one which is 'inextricably tied to white possession and power configured through the logic of capital and profound individual attachment' (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xxi). As Moreton-Robinson (p. xxi) proceeds to argue, this notion of belonging may be essentially different for young Indigenous people who may have different 'ontological relations to land'. Belonging can be described as a naturalised feeling of safety characterised by emotional ties to sites of importance (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is a 'sense of being at 'home'–a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment' (Durham et al. 2022, p. 197). It is one of the key resources which young people may utilise 'to navigate the institutional and structural opportunities and constraints in their lives' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017, p. 221), but it is also, as Durham and their colleagues argue, 'racialised, classed, gendered, and linked to social processes that construct spatial and symbolic boundaries of belonging (2022, pp. 197–198).

The importance and the complexity of belonging mean that, as Cuervo and their colleagues propose, 'it is timely for research on youth, and particularly Indigenous youth, to take seriously the conceptual framework of belonging' (2015, p. 5). It is

important to better recognise that young Indigenous people's experiences of belonging identity are 'varied, fluid, ever-changing, and highly dependent on their experiences within various spaces' (Smallwood, 2023, p. 1) and to better understand how such young people 'build meaning through their connections with people and places over time' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017, p. 220).

It is also important and timely to better understand young Indigenous people's own perspectives, senses and practices of belonging, and how these may be supported by the kinds of education programs we explore in this paper. As Kidman explains (2015), there is evidence that young Indigenous people are creating their own narratives of belonging drawing on a range of seemingly conflicting, complex and multi-faceted articulations of national identity. They are 'produc[ing] their own historical memories and practices of belonging and national identity that sit outside official discourses' (p. 638). These need to be better recognised within educational systems and institutions.

Space and locality in young people's belonging

As Cuervo and their colleagues explain, place plays a powerful role in young Indigenous people's educational participation and achievement (2015). It also plays a particular role in shaping and framing their experiences of a spectrum of senses of belonging. Bringing spatial understandings to the exploration of these experiences can acknowledge the 'plurality of scales at which belonging is articulated' (Antonsich, 2010, p. 653). It can shed light on young Indigenous people's sense of belonging within their home communities, 'country' and cultural groupings, as well as the degree to which they feel that they belong within larger state, national or transnational settings. It may illuminate how what Antonsich terms 'place-belongingness' (2010) intersects with and shapes young Indigenous people's experiences and senses of belonging to varying degrees within and across these spatial sites.

In particular, it may yield deeper understandings of such young people's experiences of belonging and non-belonging within the local places that shape their daily lives. While Halse explains that 'belonging can operate on multiple scales' (2018, p. 5), the local is a particularly important scale or site, one in which young people are embedded and engaged in everyday practices and acts of citizenship and belonging (Harris et al., 2021). It is also a key site in which some young people indicate feeling empowered and having the capacity to drive needed change, perhaps because local contexts afford them unique opportunities to be 'experts' in the issues that directly affect them (Walsh et al., 2018).

Schools are one component of the local that are especially pertinent to young people's sense of influence and belonging (Wood & Black, 2018). For young Indigenous people, they can be sites for the implementation of place-based pedagogies that highlight 'respect for local knowledge, and development of social competencies, a strong sense of identity, and a sense of responsibility to the local community' (Burgess et al., 2019, p. 310). Alternately, they can be sites of weaker senses of belonging or even exclusion for such young people, both implicitly and explicitly (Walton et al., 2018; Rudolph et al., 2018; Rudoph & Hogarth, 2020).

The experience of non-belonging can also extend to local community contexts, where the marginalisation of young Indigenous people from local civic institutions and places is well recognised (Priest et al., 2019). Yet educational programs outside school contexts can provide alternative spaces for young Indigenous people to come together to share experiences of Indigeneity and culture and to subvert and challenges the structures and cultures in which weak senses of belonging or exclusion are encountered. Such spaces may be seen as safe, comfortable and culturally appropriate environments for young people to hang out with peers and develop stronger senses of belonging (Martínez et al., 2017; Pruitt, 2016). They can also provide contexts in which young Indigenous people can develop the counter-narratives to which we refer earlier, 'parallel stor[ies] that speak […] to a set of cultural and historical memories that differ, sometimes substantially, from official accounts' (Kidman, 2015, p. 645). In the process, young people can reinvent or remake ideas and practices of belonging for themselves.

The program

The REAL program is designed to support emerging Indigenous youth leaders, foster formal and informal citizenship practices, and nurture a strong, affirming sense of identity and belonging amongst young Indigenous people. Participants are nominated by teachers and Koorie Education Officers based on their leadership potential. They leave their home communities to stay on site with other participants for the duration of the program, which takes place over four days during school holiday periods. The core of the program is a series of intensive workshops conducted by a youth association and facilitated by an Indigenous youth worker and youth mentors who were previous participants in the program (Korin Gamadji Institute, 2019). Participants can attend two of these intensives over consecutive years. The program explores five core areas designed to support participants' skills and explorations in relation to their cultural identity, leadership and active citizenship, career pathways, and health and wellbeing. Programmatic activities also explore ideas of political literacy and education and employment pathways. An evaluation of the program was conducted in 2016 to determine its efficacy in achieving its aims. As part of this evaluation, young participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in the program as well as in their home communities.

Method

Focus groups were conducted with 58 young Indigenous people in the Australian city of Melbourne and regional locations in the wider state of Victoria. Long-term and new participants of the program were recruited using a database of participants provided by the program facilitators. Focus groups comprising 8 to 10 participants were deemed the most appropriate method to explore synergistic

insights through group interactions not possible within a one-to-one interview format (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Group discussions included participants' perspectives and opinions about the issues we have described above. Participants also had an opportunity to respond to each other in familiar and comfortable environments (Madriz, 2000).

Each focus group was co-facilitated by members of the evaluation team in collaboration with the program's Indigenous youth worker. The team that collected this data were from various cultural backgrounds, including a lead researcher from an Indigenous background. The authors of this paper are from a predominantly white background and acknowledge that their privileged backgrounds potentially have implications for power in relation to the research. This is why it was critical that the team consulted an Indigenous advisory group at the university in which the evaluation team were based to ensure that an appropriate degree of cultural awareness and sensitivity was applied throughout the data collection and reporting phase, and ethics approval was gained from the Human Ethics Committee in the university which the researchers were based. Discussions were conducted in a culturally sensitive way under the guidance of the advisory group, encouraging participants to describe their experiences in their own terms (Yin, 2003). The authors have sought to preserve the testimonies of participants, with pseudonyms used for all participants.

Four activities were conducted during each of the focus groups. These started with participants considering the issues of concern to young Australians that were previously identified during an annual national survey (Mission Australia, 2012). They were invited to select three issues that were most important to them, or else to add their own. Secondly, participants were invited to identify the geospatial domain/s (local, national and/or global) in which they felt they could have the greatest potential influence over each of those three issues. Thirdly, discussions explored the enablers and barriers to their ability to influence their nominated issue/s at the three levels (and the intersection of those levels). Finally, a conceptual framework was presented to further explore participants' self-perceptions of their engagement and ability to influence these issues of concern, a framework which has been explored in detail elsewhere (Walsh et al., 2018).

All data were first analysed as independent events with their own integrity and importance (Eisenhardt, 2002) then pooled and examined using a thematic approach to identify common and contrasting themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). Transcripts were closely read to map patterns of meaning and identify emerging themes. A code-book was developed drawing on the emergent themes identified in the initial phase of analysis, and also informed by key themes from the literature that addressed the research question. While codes were compiled, the context of conversations was maintained and used to contextualise participants' experiences and perspectives.

In the following section of this paper, our findings are divided into four key analytical themes that emerged from the data. The paper will not analyse the full dataset collected as part of the evaluation but will focus on fragments of participants' voices within a particular space and time that shed light on those young

people's sense of Indigenous identity and their sense of belonging and opportunities for influence at different spatial scales.

Results and discussion

Addressing questions about authentic identities

The question of identity emerged as a key theme among our participants' discussion about their Indigeneity and characterised one of the challenges to belonging that they faced on a regular basis. Several participants mentioned that they did not have, or had struggled to develop, a clear sense of their Indigenous identity. For some, not 'appearing' to be Indigenous (for instance, being light skinned) contributed to a sense of ambiguous identity, as Sarah explained:

> *I still feel like that's a big issue today "You're not Aboriginal because you're white [skinned]." there's still that prejudice regarding skin colour which is pretty sad I must say…We come from a strong line of Indigenous women (Focus Group 3).*

Several of these participants highlighted their experience of what Kowal and Paradies (2017) have termed 'race discordance'. They expressed their frustration at being 'misrecognised' by those who did not know them well and who assumed that they were not Indigenous because of their appearance. Misrecognition can result in harm when an inauthentic version of self is mirrored by others (Taylor, 1994). For some participants, the experience of being continuously misrecognised created a sense of having limited visibility and recognition within their school and of being a minority within the school community. Others continuously asserted their Indigeneity, contending with challenges to their identity position by teachers, staff or other students, and refusing externally imposed identity positions. In their discussions with the researchers, these young people were keen to assert their Indigeneity and declare a sense of belonging and connection to their culture (Kowal & Paradies, 2017), as Sarah and Pam explain:

> *Sarah: … everyone thinks that I'm not Aboriginal because I'm not dark enough or-and so it's kind of hard to get the message across that... This one girl said about me that I wasn't considered Indigenous because I come from the islands and stuff like that. So that kind of ticks me off and stuff, so yeah.*
> *Pam: I used to get it a lot-"You don't look Aboriginal," or something like that, I'm not expecting you to believe it but deep down I know that I'm Aboriginal (Focus Group 3).*

These young people responded to their experiences and the challenges to their Indigeneity by reiterating their belief that their sense of identity comes from within. In another group, Anita explains:

> *There's about eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the whole school, and because me and my sister have an Italian background…*

we get looked at like you're not Aboriginal because you've got an Italian surname and you're white… I know what my skin colour is, I still have blood (Focus Group 2).

Experiences such as these meant that for many of our participants, the school as an institution was a space of exclusion. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Rudolph et al., 2018; Walton et al., 2018) that school curricula and pedagogies can serve to obscure the experiences and perspectives of young Indigenous people and that a hidden curriculum of dominant cultural values and practices can preclude such young people from feeling that they belong in their schools (Rahman, 2013). This stands in contrast with the experience of the REAL program by many of our participants.

Identity and belonging

Going away to a camp that focussed on opportunities to celebrate positive Indigenous identities helped many of the participants to solidify and shape an affirming and meaningful sense of that identity: many spoke about this aspect of the program in effusive terms. They found that they could develop this sense of identity in part by sharing similar stories of non-belonging and race discordance (Kowal & Paradies, 2017). It was also important to them that they could develop a strong sense of connection with other Indigenous young people outside the formal school context (Pruitt, 2016), as Sandra explained:

They're [fellow program attendees] not related to you but you call them cousins still. They're not related to you but you feel a connection (Focus Group 2).

The camp represented an educational place where these young people felt safe and free from the identity challenges and other forms of racism and exclusion that they experienced in their schools. It also gave them the resources to counter these. For John, for example, a bolstered sense of identity emboldened him to confront the experiences of racism that he had previously encountered:

Before going to REAL I always thought to myself you're not Aboriginal or white because that's all I got told when I was younger and so coming to this camp, it really gave me the effort to engage into my Indigenous side and before I just let racism pass me, but now I do everything that stops racism there's heaps of kids that are discoloured [light skinned] but we're still Aboriginal. We still have Aboriginal in our blood (Focus Group 2).

Like other participants cited above, John articulated his response to regular experiences of race discordance by asserting an internal sense of Indigeneity. For him, as for these others, the program represented an educational space that was markedly different to their normative experience within their schools, a space that fostered a sense of belonging and that clarified and distilled a collective experience of Indigeneity. This sense of commonality with other participants stood in contrast with some participants' experiences of disconnection from their home communities. It

also highlighted the ways in which young Indigenous people experiencing a lack of cultural connection could be brought closer together through the medium of educational programs such as this one. As Jenny explains:

> *I know for me, I just had no cultural connection [in my home community] whatsoever. My grandmother is Stolen Generation so we don't get anything from her and then, just over the years from KGI [REAL program], [I got] that continuous support (Focus Group 3).*

Their experience of the program also served to counter the low educational expectations that some participants routinely navigated at their schools. As Vass (2012) has explained, low educational expectations of young Indigenous students may lead to low aspirations and higher rates of non-completion for such students. For young people such as Rick, they were also a source of frustration and anger that shaped their daily lives within their schools but that were ameliorated by the strong sense of belonging, respect and welcome which they encountered during the course of the program:

> *People going to judge you for the facts that you are Aboriginal and stereotype you and say, "Oh your mum must be a drunk,"… or they expect you to drop out of school, something like that, but going on the camp has made me realise that being with people who are similar like me, it makes me feel welcomed and it makes me feel I'm needed and I feel like I've got genuine friends that actually care about me and stuff like that (Focus Group 2).*

Their observations suggest that these young people's disrupted and disrupting experiences of belonging and identity within the school context have been balanced, at least in part, by the affirmations of the program, affirmations which have supported them in crafting an increasingly robust sense of themselves and their Indigeneity. While the spatial context of the school was too often a site of contentious and challenged identity, the spatial context of the program represented a site in which they felt a sense of connectedness and voice.

Belonging at national and global scales

Among Indigenous communities, belonging or attachment to particular places has been associated with belonging to specific local communities or groups (Kidman, 2015), but it is also important to understand the degree to which young Indigenous people may feel that they belong and can exert influence at wider scales. To do this, we asked our participants about the spheres of influence in which they felt they had the greatest ability to engage and exert influence: global, national or local. Unsurprisingly, local contexts afforded the greatest opportunities for engagement (see Walsh et al., 2018), but discussions about those spheres where they felt they had the least influence yielded additional insights.

Despite recent arguments by youth scholars that global and globalised settings and contexts are increasingly important to understanding young people's belonging (Harris et al., 2021a), studies continue to suggest that many young people feel

disengaged from global issues, scales and contexts (Walsh & Black, 2018). For our participants, too, issues taking place at global scales, such as climate change, were seen as too distant and unrelated to their everyday lives to elicit significant interest or a desire to influence. Instead, the global tended to be understood as the jurisdiction of remote others, such as foreign political leaders with more power and resources to effect change. Many participants, such as Josh and Max, explained that being young, feeling invisible and lacking agency and material resources meant that they would never have an opportunity to have a voice at the global level:

Josh: Yeah. It's too hard to get up there and make a change for the whole world
Max: You've got to know someone to be known (Focus Group 1).

If we accept the suggestion by Harris and her colleagues that belonging is 'about membership, rights and duties […] and the emotional and social bonds that come of feelings of being part of a larger whole' (2021b, p. 3), then it would seem that few of our participants felt any sense of belonging at a global scale. Some explained did feel that they played a part at the national scale, albeit one that operated within specific parameters, such as their role as youth parliamentarians, as participants in national-scale protests or through their interest in national legal and policy issues. Some also described a sense of delayed engagement: they felt that their current capacity to exert national influence was limited but that they had the potential to do so in future. Peter, for example, described his hope and his will to influence national change in relation to issues of Reconciliation and the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty:

there's still more work that needs to be done at a national level even though it happened in the past. I still feel like I've got the determination one day to change things on a national level sort of thing (Focus Group 3).

For most, however, there was a marked absence of any current sense of belonging or capacity to influence events or policies at the national level. For some, this was associated with the systemic racism that can exclude Indigenous people from sites of power (Elias et al, 2021). Even those who felt that they had a voice described a sense of disillusionment and an understanding that voice in itself did not necessarily translate into opportunities to belong or effect change beyond the local, as Will explained:

being Aboriginal [is] a hard barrier because there's not many Aboriginals that try and have a voice and stuff, and the ones that do don't really get that far (Focus Group 4).

That young Indigenous people experience a weak sense of belonging in relation to international spheres of influence-while forging a stronger sense of belonging within more intimate spaces of their immediate locales-may in part be due to how identity-formation is bound with micro-territories of everyday life. International spheres seem more abstract and remote.

Belonging at the local scale

As we discussed earlier, research indicates that the local is the spatial context in which young people operate with the greatest sense of confidence and belonging. Our participants, too, described local sites or organisations such as schools, the local Country Fire Authority branch and sporting clubs that afforded them opportunities to lead or influence through their roles as school captain, captain of a sporting team, or sports coach. Along similar lines, their greatest concern and interest was in local issues that were most directly related to their lives. These often related to being young and being Indigenous. Cam, for example, felt that he had the greatest scope for influence and the greatest chance of being heard and respected by authorities in relation to issues 'that relate […] to us':

> *Like something to do with Aboriginal something. They'd probably take our input, since we are Aboriginal or something like that (Focus Group 1).*

What emerges from Cam's observations is a sense that belonging is tied to one's culture, which he linked to a perceived capacity to influence on local issues. It may be that the imagined close bonds of identity, community and belonging are also at play here. As Harris explains, the local community is commonly perceived 'as one physical, bounded space that coheres as its members share a sense of ownership, and an imagined environment where conflict is absent and security and trust are valued above all else' (2010, p. 574). Local settings did seem to offer our participants some access to this kind of idealised community, but belonging is not static; rather, as May argues, it is 'something we have to keep achieving through an active process' (2011, p. 372).

This notion of belonging as an evolving experience had particular resonance when participants described their sense of belonging within the spaces of their schools. Despite their regular experiences of marginalisation and race discordance which we described earlier, our participants generally characterised their school as a 'sphere of influence' within which they might effect change. This aspect of the school emerged from Daniel's discussion about the work of one dedicated Indigenous teacher and how that facilitated a sense of inclusion and participation for the school's Indigenous students:

> *our school is really good at working with Aboriginal students and that [is] because we have our own Indigenous [teacher] there and he organises stuff that we can do. It's kind of like education but also comes with culture and that. More cultural sensitivity and all that (Focus Group 2).*

Daniel's experience illustrates the sense of belonging that can result when schools openly and directly respond to and respect their students' Indigeneity. Other affirming experiences described by our participants included the ability to share opinions and perspectives about Indigenous events taking place at the school. Even in these cases, though, there was an acknowledgement by some participants that such positive engagement was not the norm or was problematic. In other schools, participants continued to feel relegated to the margins.

These accounts suggest that there limit points for belonging for young people in schools and other settler colonial dominant spaces. While this is somewhat reflective of Webb's (2014, 718) identification of schools as sites of 'monocultural forms of citizenship' that tend to exclude Indigenous perspectives, the 'invisibilisation' referred to by Webb is not as pervasive in our findings. Rather, our participants described educational strategies within their schools that demonstrated limited understanding and a reluctance to explore alternative approaches with and alongside young Indigenous students (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). Jane, for example, explained that she was regularly asked to represent her culture on behalf of the school, including perform acknowledgements of country for school events, whether she wanted to or not. She felt that this engagement with culture was tokenistic and limited, serving the interests of the school rather than its Indigenous students:

> *I know if the school wants to do something, they usually get me to represent the school or something or make me do speeches or something like that... I think they just get me to do the speeches so it kind of makes the school better, saying, "Oh we've got an Aboriginal student here" (Focus Group 2).*

For Jane, in the words of Walton and their colleagues, 'being 'included' provides only a very weak sense of belonging; that is, it marks her and other Indigenous students 'as people who needed to be included, thereby reinforcing the idea that they do not belong in the first place' (2018, p. 8). Her experience is also emblematic of the experience of several other participants, experiences that ultimately left them feeling underrepresented, marginalised and inconsequential.

Conclusion

The accounts described in this paper highlight the complex nature and range of young Indigenous people's experiences of belonging in educational and other contexts. In contrast to the marginalisation and cultural discomfort which often characterised our participants' experiences within their schools, many felt a sense of belonging during their time in the REAL program, a belonging that arose from the strong confirmation of their Indigenous identities by that program. Despite the tensions and challenges that our participants encounter in a settler colony that has never truly recognised Indigenous sovereignty, our findings show that sovereignty remains intact. At the same time, they illustrate how young Indigenous people may find opportunities to foster perspectives, understandings and practices of belonging outside of settler colonial institutions such as schools.

Our participants' sense of belonging is anything but binary, however. First, their testimonies illustrate a range or spectrum of belonging. Second, a stronger sense of belonging evident in the micro-territories of their immediate, everyday locales intersects with identity-formation. Third, because of the complex settler colonial histories and presents that we describe earlier, the young Indigenous people who participated in this study navigated between being neither fully excluded nor completely included within this spectrum of belonging. Instead, at each of

the spatial scales explored by the study, their degree of belonging was partial, tempered by personal experiences of systemic racism that excluded them from the kind of influence inherent in the concept and rhetoric of active citizenship which informed the program. This raises the question of whether there are limits to the senses of belonging that such young people can develop in schools and other settler colonial dominant spaces. At the same time, while our participants described seemingly insurmountable barriers to effecting change as well as frustration at regularly having to respond to others who challenged their sense of identity, they nonetheless articulated a commitment to engaging and making change to address issues of direct relevance to their everyday lives.

The spaces occupied and traversed by these young people shaped and produced senses of belonging in complex ways tied to intersections of space and identity. Beyond the triptych of local/national/global sites of change, the program afforded opportunities that affirmed young Indigenous people's positive sense of cultural identity even while they experienced marginalisation and thwarted belonging. In this sense, these young people were able to produce their own counter-narrative that incorporated complex and multifaceted stories of belonging and identity informed by their own communities, the KGI REAL leadership camp. Some did express a frustrated, limited sense of voice in relation to wider social and political life, but this is not to presume that they lacked the ability to critique the sociopolitical contexts which produce such silence (Greene et al., 2018). For most, their sense of capacity to influence change was solidified during their time in the program, mitigating their feelings of non-belonging in other spatial contexts.

The findings we have described above highlight the dynamism and contingency of young people's experiences of senses of belonging. They also suggest educational possibilities within and beyond schools to engage the challenges of race discordance and exclusion, deficit discourses and gaps and distances, and to celebrate young Indigenous identities in meaningful, non-tokenistic ways.

Acknowledgements In 2016, the Victorian Electoral Commission and the Tigers in Community Foundation Limited through the Korin Gamadji Institute contracted one of the authors as part of a team to evaluate the Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leadership (REAL) program. While this paper draws from data collected during that evaluation, the analysis and views expressed in this paper are beyond the remit of that evaluation and are those solely of the authors and not those of the Victorian Electoral Commission, the Tigers in Community Foundation Limited or the Korin Gamadji Institute. The authors acknowledge the key work of Peter Anderson, David Zyngier, Venesser Fernandez and Hongzhi Zhang in the initial evaluation that informed this paper.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. No funding was received for this paper.

Declarations

Ethical approval Ethics approval was granted by the human research ethics committee at which the lead authors are based prior to the collection of data.

Conflict of interest No competing interests are disclosed by the authors.

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