


Aboriginal Youth Mentoring: A Pathway to Leadership

EVALUATION OF THE ALDARA YENARA
MENTORING PROGRAM WITH FIRST NATIONS
YOUTH ON YORTA YORTA COUNTRY



“Mentoring keeps our culture alive. It’s keeping who we are and our identity alive and strong. We’re here. We’ve survived this long and we’re going to keep surviving. It just takes that one step, that one generation.”

- ABORIGINAL YOUTH MENTOR

COVER ARTWORK
‘WOKA’ - ALKINA EDWARDS, 2022

Alkina Edwards is a proud Yorta Yorta artist. The name of this artwork is Woka (Land in Yorta Yorta language). It represents young people being mentored and nurtured, learning what it means to be out on Country, connecting with the lands they live on and are from, connecting with mob and how important it is to listen to leaders and Elders. Throughout the design, Alkina has placed many different symbols that represent ‘our’ people, Elders, Dungala (Murray River in Yorta Yorta language), gum leaves, water ways, water holes, sandhills, oven mounds and native animals.

ALDARA YENARA & LA TROBE RURAL HEALTH SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the beautiful and unique Country, waterways, skies, plants, seasons, and animals of Victoria. We acknowledge Victorian Aboriginal communities, their Elders and their Ancestors. We acknowledge their living cultures and their continuing worldviews, governance, ways of knowing, being and doing.



GLOSSARY

The word 'Aboriginal' reflects a broader international perspective of various Indigenous communities across Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada, including First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, as well as Māori and Pasifika communities. Aboriginal is an overarching term and can refer to any of the above communities. In Australia, there are many Countries and communities with different traditions, cultures, languages, and lived experiences (Bennett & Gates, 2019).

In this report, we use the word 'youth' for young people of all ages. We acknowledge that some adolescents may prefer the term 'young person'.

We use the word 'mentoring' in a First Nations context; mentoring approaches fit well with First Nations' ways of doing, being and knowing and can help to build strong collective ties within communities. Mentoring is a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement (Youth Affairs Council Victoria, 2022).

POSITIONING OF THE STUDY

*Gaka Yawall Ngulla Yenbena Yorta Yorta Woka
Come walk with us, the people on Yorta Yorta Country*

By acknowledging Yorta Yorta Country, the authors pay tribute and show respect to First Nations peoples, recognising enduring relationship to Country. This report was written on unceded land. To address relational accountability (Steinhauer, 2002), the people involved with the Aldara Yenara evaluation are introduced. Dr Mishel McMahon is an Aboriginal researcher and Yorta Yorta woman. The staff at Aldara Yenara are proud Aboriginal people. Michael Chisholm is a Gamilaraay and Yuin man. Non-Indigenous allies team members are Dr Werner Vogels, Julia van Vuuren and Dr Corina Modderman. They acknowledge that they can never truly see beyond their Eurocentric lens, having been born, raised and educated in the Netherlands. First Nations team members led, reviewed and edited this report through a co-writing model, enabling greater presentation of findings through a First Nations lens (Stanley et al., 2020).

This evaluation is positioned in First Nations worldviews that are relational and require deep listening to local communities, Country and Ancestors. A central tenet of a relational worldview is that all entities, including animals, the elements, Country, seasons, humans, the spirit world, Ancestors and waterways, are in a web-like relationship. Consequently, a sense of belonging to the whole lifeworld is a key element within Aboriginal worldviews (McMahon, 2017; Townsend & McMahon, 2021).



CONTENTS

Executive Summary	//06
Introduction	//07
Methodology	//09
Findings	//11
Summary	//20
Recommendations for Aboriginal Youth Mentoring	//21
References	//23
Appendices	//24

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Collective group mentoring aligns with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. Mentoring has been used as a teaching process for thousands of years, and this tradition continues today with Aboriginal youth participating in the Aldara Yenara Aboriginal Corporation programs.

The La Trobe Rural Health School (Shepparton campus) evaluated the existing Aldara Yenara mentoring program in partnership with Aldara Yenara, funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Aboriginal Engagement East Division. Central to this evaluation is a better understanding of, and respect for, the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and ways of doing in mentoring practices. This includes First Nations perspectives on health and wellbeing that emerge as a unique discipline from First Nations communities internationally. These perspectives inform practice models and mentoring approaches and will increase understanding of the key concepts that deepen these models. This Aldara Yenara mentoring program evaluation aims to better understand 'service models' that respond to the local needs of First Nations young people and their communities. The overarching goal is to increase positive outcomes for First Nations young people, aligned with the DFFH Korin Korin Balit-Djak 2017–2027 plan to improve the health, wellbeing, and safety of Aboriginal young people in Victoria (Department of Health, 2022).

The Aldara Yenara mentoring program evaluation included a review of contemporary mentoring literature honouring First Nations knowledge, two Yarning Circles to draw on the expertise of Aboriginal leaders and young peoples' voices, and researchers attending two On Country camps to spend time with young people during the cultural mentoring camps.

A key finding from the evaluation is that Bush or Country is a place for healing and stakeholder in Aboriginal mentoring programs. For some young people who attend the Aldara Yenara mentoring program, it is the first time Aboriginal youth spend time with strong Black people and spend time On Country and learn about their Ancestors. The Aboriginal mentors and Elders at Aldara Yenara keep culture alive and identity strong. A trusting mentoring relationship creates Circles of Healing, where young people become part of an Aboriginal community where they feel strong

in their identity. Findings from the evaluation demonstrate that only Aboriginal mentors can lead this work as they have communication skill sets and cultural knowledge that only Aboriginal people hold through cultural consciousness

Strength-based cultural conversations in mentoring need to be repeated in the family home and embedded in a holistic partnership with agencies and services that young people navigate (for example education, health services, sporting clubs, police, child protection, youth justice). This may be a challenge, Aboriginal ways of learning may not fit easily within mainstream service delivery approaches. As such, Aboriginal mentoring and healing programs must somehow grow within an incompatible system.

A key finding from this evaluation is that mentoring young people is not a one-off event On Country; culture is ongoing and growing strong. Aboriginal leaders need ongoing secure funding and resourcing. Young people who attend the Aldara Yenara mentoring programs On Country are walking out strong in who they are. They are the leaders of the future and they are strong in their identity and strong in their culture.



Uncle cooking up Johnny Cakes



Boat trip on Dungala river on youth camp

INTRODUCTION

1.1 ALDARA YENARA

Aldara Yenara is a proudly owned Aboriginal Cooperation on Yorta Yorta Country focused on improving the lives of young people through culture, identity, education, employment and positive lifestyle opportunities. In Yorta Yorta language, the words Aldara Yenara mean *'Defending/ Leading the Way'*. Aboriginal culture is central to all Aldara Yenara's youth, adult, family and community programs.

The organisation provides a range of employment, mentoring and support services designed to advance Aboriginal cultural knowledge and engagement. Aldara Yenara aims to fill gaps in service delivery by providing culturally appropriate services designed and delivered with individual and community needs at the forefront. One of the critically acclaimed programs that Aldara Yenara is running is a youth mentoring program. The mentoring program gives young people a chance to connect with Country, culture and spiritual needs (Aldara Yenara, 2022).

1.2 MENTORING

First Nations group mentoring, as delivered by Aldara Yenara, aligns with Aboriginal tradition, values and beliefs (Klinck et al., 2005). Group

mentoring aims to create safe spaces that enable a sense of belonging, supporting young Aboriginal people to explore their culture and identity (Fast, 2014). A sense of identity and history is a crucial factor in supporting resilience and wellbeing in Indigenous youth (Wexler, 2009). Aboriginal youth who are disconnected from their community or culture may seek ways to reconnect, and mentoring programs may support such connections (Carriere, 2015; Fast, 2014). Although the occurrence of group mentoring for Aboriginal youth is evident and frequently empowers and engages Aboriginal young people to be strong, healthy and proud (Crooks et al., 2017), there is limited understanding regarding what elements contribute to a positive mentoring experience for Aboriginal young people from First Nations led practice and research.

Wellbeing within Aboriginal worldviews involves physical, emotional, social and cultural wellbeing of the individual and the whole community. This is strongly tied to Aboriginal peoples' connection to Country and culture (Yap & Yu, 2016). Mentoring programs emphasise cultural connectedness associated with mental health, wellness and healing for Aboriginal youth. Cultural connectedness can be defined as the knowledge

of, and engagement with, belonging to aspects of Aboriginal culture, as well as philosophical ways of knowing, being and doing (Snowshoe et al., 2017). This evaluation investigated Aboriginal led mentoring programs On Country. The Aldara Yenara mentoring program delivery and La Trobe evaluation are led by First Nations perspectives for collective transformational healing. The word transformational includes a combination of positive changes related to identity, belonging, wellbeing and cultural connection (Crooks et al., 2017; Fast, 2014; Wexler, 2009).



Eucalyptus Tree

1.3 CURRENT EVALUATION

The Aldara Yenara mentoring evaluation reported here is informed by Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing that align with the purpose of Korin Korin Balit–Djak plan: Self-determining, healthy and safe Aboriginal Peoples and communities. This evaluation took place with financial support from the Department of Fairness, Families and Housing East Division. Korin Korin Balit–Djak funding enabled deeper exploration into service models responding to the local needs of Aboriginal youth, with measurable outcomes. Aldara Yenara is the lead agency of the project and received funding to run mentoring groups and camps, with part of the funding allocated to researchers from the La Trobe Rural Health School to evaluate the youth mentoring program with a focus on the following questions:

Change

What changes are emerging because of youth mentoring?

Learning

To what extent are current practices sufficient to foster sustainability?

Process

To what extent is Aldara Yenara addressing the identified needs of Aboriginal youth in the Greater Shepparton region?

To what extent is the youth-at-risk mentoring program an intervention strategy that can assist in building protective factors for young people at risk?

Principles

What principles can be captured and transferred into the design of an evidence-informed best practice cultural mentoring framework?

METHODOLOGY

2.1 ETHICS

This study received ethics approval from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) on the 25th of October 2021 (EO265–20210701). This Human Research Ethics Committee is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) and the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (2020). La Trobe University Research Governance Authorisation for the project was granted on the 1st of November 2021.

2.2 DESIGN

First Nations research needs to be transformative. Positive or beneficial change must occur for the Aboriginal communities. This study applied a qualitative participatory action research design. This approach enabled an emergent and iterative process of data collection and analysis. Action research is a qualitative methodology that is suitable for ethical and culturally responsive research in collaboration with First Nations peoples (Mertens, 2009). The evaluation design involves purposefully sampling a group of participants who have relevant knowledges and experiences, and are able to work together through a collaborative process of planning, action, evaluation, and reflection to understand and address the research aim and questions.

The evaluation consisted of the following parts:

1. A scoping review of the literature with a total of 13 papers included addressing the research question: *What is needed to create transformational mentoring experiences for Aboriginal young people?*
2. Researchers participated during the mentoring camp. At the girls' camp, two female researchers were present of which one identified as Aboriginal. At the boys' camp, two male researchers were present with one researcher being Aboriginal. During the activities, the researchers talked with Elders, mentors and mentees present at the camp. Observations were shared with young people in the evening during a Yarn around the fire.
3. Two Yarning circles were held following the camp. One Yarn was with Aldara Yenara staff and Elders, and one Yarn with young people.

Shared authorship and reflective conversations were integral during the research process and provided credibility to findings in which First Nations voices are privileged. Drafts of the scoping review, observations during camp and findings from the staff Yarning circle were shared with Aldara Yenara staff for feedback and consultation.



Bigarrumdja (Emu) feathers

2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection and analysis occurred as an iterative process throughout all research steps. To locate literature written by Aboriginal scholars, relational mapping was applied (McMahon, 2021; Rigney, 2001). This involved checking the reference list of an article authored by an Aboriginal person to learn about other key articles, talking to Aboriginal community members, and searching for articles on websites to identify Aboriginal organisation resources. This method enabled the focus to be placed on locating Aboriginal texts in Aboriginal youth mentoring, overcoming historical systems of gatekeeping in academic journals (McMahon, 2021).

All field data (research participating in youth camps and Yarning Circles) was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis techniques (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Data analysis focussed on the experience and process of mentoring from Aboriginal perspectives to provide qualitative evidence to address the research questions. Coding was led by a First Nations researcher (MM) and cross-referenced by a non-Indigenous researcher (CM). Reflection and discussion improved the credibility of the study findings and the trustworthiness of the results. This process acknowledged individual positions and enabled new insights and knowledge about mentoring, informed by meaningful and culturally respectful relationships (Bennett et al., 2011, Modderman et al., 2021).

2.4 SHARING THE FINDINGS

In most Universities and Western-led research, the methodology concludes once the data analysis is complete or the participants approve the findings report. Then, informed by the background literature reviewed, research discussions are prepared for publication. This process needs altering for research aiming to position Aboriginal-led decision-making as a central tenet throughout the research process. After analysis, the research findings will be reviewed during an Aboriginal-led decision-making meeting with stakeholders of the study, ensuring careful attention to the use of language and First Nations' principles to centre the strong voice of Aboriginal participants.



Eucalyptus Bark

FINDINGS



Starry night

3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The scoping review of the literature offered a greater understanding of group mentoring (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) and provided guidance for the data collection phase, participation during camp and Yarning Circles. The review was informed by First Nations perspectives, and the overarching question driving the research was: *What is needed to create transformational mentoring experiences for Aboriginal young people?*

The papers included (n= 13) were predominantly written by non-Aboriginal authors; only two (Farrugia et al., 2011; Hirsch et al., 2016) referenced three identified First Nations authors. The findings included wording as 'interpersonal' and 'intrapersonal'; these clinical terms may not resonate with Aboriginal-informed ways of talking. The evidence presented in these studies was mostly led or owned by non-Aboriginal people. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature review can be found in appendix one, while appendix two provides an overview of the search strategy. An academic paper describing the findings is currently under review with one of Australia's leading social work journals. A distilled overview of the four themes that emerged from the review and critical appraisal is presented as follows:

1. Mentoring programs that are culturally strong from a First Nations standpoint is a key element in providing a transformational experience for young people. Cultural connectedness encourages and creates healing spaces for Aboriginal youth. This approach involves cultural activities facilitated on Country informed by cultural protocols and Aboriginal-led decision-making during program design and delivery.
2. Mentoring programs contribute towards expanding intrapersonal skills that increase emotional strength and wellbeing for young people. This includes the development of everyday skills to grow self-confidence, leadership, building self-identity and individual resilience.
3. Mentoring programs develop interpersonal relationships that are crucial in developing collective identities, community resilience, a sense of belonging and social confidence. These all contribute to mentoring programs being a transformational experience for the individual and inclusive of broader community cohesion.
4. Important elements of program design are program duration, specified program goals, program location, and involvement of staff who understand the youth's Ancestral heritage. Mentors for Aboriginal youth need to be Indigenous and cannot be replaced by non-Indigenous mentors-. Mentoring programs benefit from the prolonged engagement between mentors and mentees and need a strong partnership with local Aboriginal communities during all steps of the program. Men's and women's business in program design is important; however, deeper thinking and Aboriginal-led community conversations are required to be inclusive towards young LGBTQIA+Aboriginal young people. This is a gap in current research and mentoring practices.

TRANSFORMATIONAL MENTORING EXPERIENCES FOR FIRST NATIONS YOUNG PEOPLE - A SCOPING REVIEW

WORLDVIEWS THAT INFORM THIS REVIEW

First Nations worldviews are relational and require deep listening to local communities, Country and Ancestors. A central tenet of a relational worldview is that all entities, including animals, the elements, Country, seasons, humans, the spirit world, Ancestors and waterways, are in a web-like relationship. Consequently, a sense of belonging to the whole lifeworld is a key element within Aboriginal worldviews.

RESEARCH QUESTION

“What is needed to create **transformational mentoring experiences** for Aboriginal young people?”



MENTORING

Collaborative group mentoring has been used as an Aboriginal teaching process for thousands of years and continues today with Aboriginal youth.

WELLBEING

Wellbeing within Aboriginal worldviews encompasses the physical, emotional, social and cultural wellbeing of both the individual and the whole community and is strongly tied to the connection to Country and culture.



INCLUDED STUDIES

13 studies included were mostly written by non-Aboriginal authors. The evidence in these studies is not led or owned by Aboriginal peoples. Connection to Country, through a First Nations lens, was missing.

RESULTS

Four distinct, but intertwined, themes relevant to the experiences of mentoring for young Aboriginal people emerged from this scoping review



CULTURE

The programs need to be culturally embedded in a First Nations' standpoint.



INTRAPERSONAL

The programs need to involve the development of intrapersonal skills.



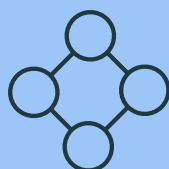
INTERPERSONAL

The programs need to involve the development of interpersonal skills.



PROGRAM DESIGN

The program design requires involvement from First Nations staff.



These elements contribute to transformational experiences for young people when aligned with positive interrelationships with both Country and community. Mentoring programs that are culturally strong from a First Nations worldview encourages cultural connectedness and creates healing spaces for Aboriginal youth.

Understanding the nuanced benefits of Aboriginal youth holding or growing their relationship with Country for their wellbeing and personal development represents a gap in the existing youth mentoring literature.

3.2 FINDINGS FROM CAMPS AND YARNING CIRCLES

The findings presented here emerge from Yarning Circles and researchers' participation in youth camps. For ease of presentation, each theme will be discussed separately; however, they may operate concurrently, in varying order and iteratively rather than sequentially. An Aboriginal-led relational analysis revealed best practice for Aboriginal youth mentoring included 'On Country' healing (1), then described the need for a family and community integrated model (2), followed by the importance of understanding Aboriginal communication and language (3), the influence of mentoring on developing a strong cultural identity (4), Aboriginal youth leadership as the desired outcome for all youth (5), and finishes with components of program design (6).

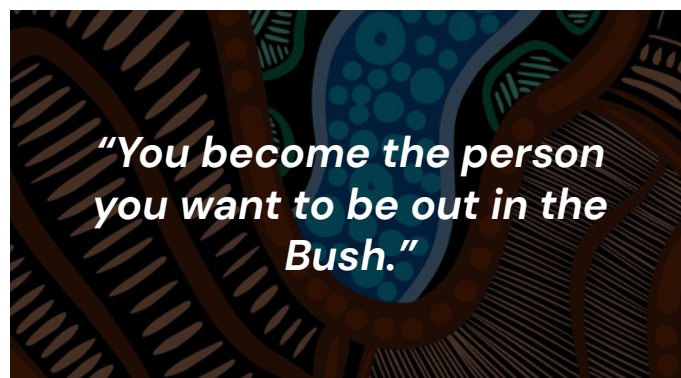
Culturally Restorative 'On Country' Healing

Aboriginal youth participating in mentoring programs 'On Country' proved to be a key element of therapy or healing. The findings demonstrate that 'Bush' was repeatedly referred to as a stakeholder in healing during the mentoring program. Youth explained 'Bush' changed their mindset, enabled healing, wellbeing, was their connection to Ancestors, was medicine, and was a mentor and family.

"Going camping is honestly one of the biggest releases of my stress. I feel that connection when I'm out in the Bush. Mental more than anything. That's what needs healing. That does it. The Bush. That is such a powerful thing."

"Uncle William Cooper. He was right there, right in front of me, his – I was like, this is unreal. Yeah, it's honestly – yeah, it just is such a special feeling (On Country graveside visit)."

This embodied experience of Bush also held collective outcomes; youth developed a new community with each other while On Country. The findings show that youth also experienced a heightened sense of identity as they expressed that the Bush felt like home. Immediate and longer-term outcomes of 'On Country' were improved mental and psychological health for youth. Youth and mentors both reported this phenomenon, explaining healing through culture and being in the Bush improved mental health and well being, which in turn created healthier habits for physical health.



"..... from the psychological healing in your mental health...that leads on to making better everyday health decisions."

"You take them out the streets, their street mind, and the roughness of the streets and that. Get them out in Bush, they're running around like beautiful little kids. You become the person you want to be out in the Bush."

Participants explained they experienced increased pride as Aboriginal people learning about their Ancestors, and increased understanding and respect for the leadership their Ancestors demonstrated. Positive discourse such as 'I am a warrior' from On Country healing enabled the youth to hold a more positive outlook for their future. Visiting Ancestors at graveside gives youth a vision for their future and who they want to become.

"The young girls were like, oh my God, that's my great-great-grandfather. You see tears, literally emotion (On Country graveside visit)."

"When she got onto Country and she just felt like she could be herself, that is I think that's your DNA just...resonating with home. These kids are learning this and they're going, oh my gosh, these people before us have done what they have done. We need to continue on and be that next legacy and follow their footsteps of going, okay, I'm proud of who I am."

Family and Community Integrated Model

The findings demonstrate that Aboriginal youth mentoring programs need to integrate family members and members from the community, with whom the individual youth must communicate, as part of the design. Strength-based cultural conversations must be backed up or repeated in the family home. This is to support the youth, so they do not need to be the educators in their family spaces. The young person's family members may also be on a similar healing journey; the program needs to be holistic and provide support, when required, to the youth's family. Family members often hold cultural information for the youth's healing journey and information regarding the child's Ancestors and relations. Youth and family members participating in the program together enable positive experiences to be shared. So, the relationship between the youth mentoring program and the youth's family is two-way.

"What's happening now with the young kids and what we're doing with them, taking them back on Country and healing them inside, because they're troubled at school. To me trouble stems back home in the house as well and they're taking it to school. That's where with Aldara's program where they're taken to Bush, the parents need to be involved to connect and heal with them."



Banksia



Banksia

Equally, findings show that mentoring programs need to include community networks or key workers within the program. For instance, Aboriginal liaison staff within the education system, justice workers, health workers, housing staff, police and staff from government departments.

"Then we've also got to think about how we can then support these kids outside of the camps, because it's – as much as, yes, taking these kids On Country, it's then supporting them at home as well, because we can't have them On Country all the time. Then having the supports within the family units and the wider community units."

Aboriginal youth have no choice but to navigate all of these community-based networks. One of the most significant support an Aboriginal youth mentoring program could provide is to include these key workers in the program, assisting youth in navigating these systems, and educating these jurisdictions about the progress the youth is achieving through the mentoring program. This is an integrated, holistic partnership model.

"Not everyone is on the same page of support for these young people. You need to include both youth and family support workers, education support workers and Aboriginal liaison officers within the police, we need to connect to these programmes."

"From the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep, you are part of the community. If those kids need it or the family need some additional support, we need to show that we're there for them..."

Aboriginal Communication and Language

A growing number of studies currently emphasises the importance of cultural resonance within programs for intended audiences (for example: Simard & Blight, 2011). Cultural resonance is when a participant of a program experiences a strong rapport with the program and the language or communication style within the program. The findings in this evaluation demonstrate that using Aboriginal ways of talking as part of Aboriginal youth mentoring programs led to high levels of engagement with the mentoring program, which in turn increased successful outcomes. The use of Aboriginal language may mean using local Aboriginal language within the program or using English with Aboriginal meanings attached. It may also mean Aboriginal conceptual ideas are embedded in the program, such as understandings around age groups and terms used to identify different age groups. The additional benefit is that it keeps the Yorta Yorta language alive.

"Even the little ones. Oh, they make us laugh, the little ones, watching them. But they're just beautiful, the way they all connect (Aboriginal reference to age group)."

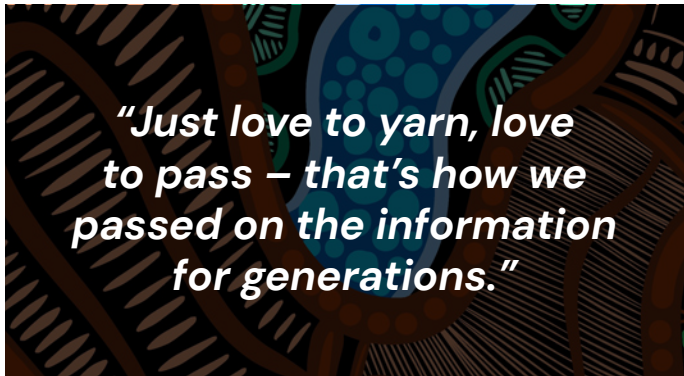
Within the theme of language and communication, the study also demonstrated the importance of separating men's and women's business. The meanings of these terms are different in different areas, so programs need to

Observations during the camp highlighted that humour, storytelling, teasing, silence, modelling, or yarning during an activity were used instead of directly telling another person what to do.

"A lot of Mob are storytellers. That's how we are. Just love to yarn, love to pass – that's how we passed on the information for generations."

During this study, this communication style was referred to as gentle talking. Gentle talking or the skill of understanding this mode of communication was essential for building trust and rapport with the Aboriginal youth. Alongside gentle talk was the practice of non-hierarchical relationship between the mentors and mentees. This communication style necessitated professional self-disclosure, a degree of vulnerability, and deep listening so that mentors would discuss their culture and their families in two-way conversations with mentees. This enabled strong mutual trust, power imbalances addressed, and mentees were encouraged to 'step up' into responsibility roles when ready.

"This style of yarning suited the girls better, because they could have their paint and they could do the...Not looking up, not making contact with people but just still yarning...It's getting it out of them through earning their trust, and listening, really listening and really interested in them...as a human. I think that connection there goes very, very deep."



"Just love to yarn, love to pass – that's how we passed on the information for generations."

Communication and language also included the urgent necessity for youth mentoring programs to drop deficit language. An example is the use of 'at risk youth'. This term is at odds with Aboriginal strength-based positionality for healing. As discussed below, Aboriginal youth who may be a priority for mentoring programs were clearly identified as their communities' future leaders.

"Changing that language from 'young at-risk offenders' to young Aboriginal leaders, 'we are warriors, not gangster'."

be informed locally.

The findings show that mentors of Aboriginal youth mentoring programs need to be skilled in Aboriginal styles of communication. From the strong ontological beliefs around equality and respect, communication styles may be indirect.



Tree on Yorta Yorta Country

Strong Cultural Identity

It is imperative that mentors understand cultural connections. These connections include between people, between people and Country, and between people and their Ancestors. Connections as a term is defined as 'relationship to', these relationships hold stories, knowledge and responsibilities. They also determine a person's priorities, what enables a person to feel strong, and their sense of belonging. A strong cultural identity is an individual's personal mental health strategy and extensive family support system.

"It was honestly the most invigorating thing to see that he went from not knowing anything to now he is welcoming his own child onto his own Country.

That child's going to grow up in a way that we didn't, because we did the work because of what we're doing here."

Belonging as an 'Aboriginal' person to this extended family, human and non-human, became their identity. Mentors' ability to understand and grow a youth's cultural identity sits at the heart of Aboriginal youth mentoring and emerged strongly during Yarning Circles and observations.

"I have all this history. I've learnt my family tree. I know who my ancestors are. I know exactly where I come from. That's helped me realise who I am. Then I can then pass this information on to my friends who don't know as much, because I was in their shoes once. To me it's really big on the self-identity. I feel like I'm a part of my family. I feel like I'm a part of a family of Aboriginal people, because we are one big family."

Youth reported the relationship between learning their cultural connections, their healing experience and self-pride. They explained that their strong cultural identity became their anchor as they navigated challenges, and it gave them hope and a new positive mindset for their future.

"It's going from I don't think I'm worth – I don't know who I am. I don't think I'm worth anything. I'm not going to bother about my health. To I am strong. I am full of pride. I have an identity. I'm going to put in the effort for that I can stand up, be strong in who I am and teach the next generation. It's that flow on. Like all of us have said, having that identity of who they are and then teaching the next generations, our culture's going to live on forever."



Set up at the campsite, Barmah

Aboriginal Youth Leadership

Aboriginal youth mentoring programs are specific in their intent and positionality. Youth involved in the programs are transitioning to leadership as Aboriginal people. They are learning respect for themselves, their Country and their communities. This positionality informs language used in the program, processes within the programs and how youth are encouraged to understand their histories, culture and responsibilities. Youth are encouraged to step up into leadership in any capacity they demonstrate they are ready for. This link between mentoring and leadership exists, irrelevant of the youth's current lived experience. Youth may be involved in the justice system, child protection, could be homeless, or struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues. These context factors do not prevent youth from being positioned from a strength-based Aboriginal understanding, which is that all youth are our future leaders. This means that Aboriginal youth mentoring programs either hold an Aboriginal 'On Country' leadership component for youth or refer youth to an Aboriginal leadership program once the mentoring program is complete.

"They're learning to respect themselves, our youth become leaders, they choose their journey and are the narrator of their own storyline."

"Youth mentoring is a real opportunity to grow leadership within young Aboriginal people. Through the program developing their cultural connection, youth have found their voice and then they get their voice cut off if there is no follow-on leadership component."

The findings show that mentoring programs are for youth to hold their own agency, self-efficacy, speak up with their own unique cultural voice, and to begin to experience community roles and responsibilities. The positioning of leadership within Aboriginal youth mentoring means there is a cyclical component to the programs. As youth transition towards leadership, they in turn provide mentoring to younger participants of the program. This cyclical mentoring was very evident within the Aldara Yenara program and held its own set of benefits as younger youth responded positively to modelling and conversations with older youth.

"When we get back to camp, they know the responsibilities is on the Elders, show the respects of the Elders, look after the little ones, make sure everything's right with the little ones. They start to give guidance to the younger ones. They take a role, a very significant role. Stepping up to what is expected of you."

Program Design

Throughout the evaluation, particular principles and components of best practices for program design became apparent. The leading principle is that mentors need to be Aboriginal people. There are communication skill sets and cultural knowledge that only Aboriginal people hold or should hold. Even if an Aboriginal person is still learning aspects of their identity, under the guidance of Elders and Aboriginal leaders, this cohort demonstrates higher capability than non-Aboriginal mentors. However, if staffing is difficult, mentors can be supported by non-Aboriginal staff with extensive experience working with Aboriginal communities. For example, the cook at the Aldara Yenara was non-Indigenous but filled important roles within the program under the supervision of Aboriginal colleagues.

"You need an Aboriginal person to teach."

"Do these camps need more mentors? Instead of two, you need three or more. Yeah, we do. We need more mentors."

Program design needs to be funded for long term delivery and provide appropriate resources to enable partnerships with other areas, such as education and justice, so that a holistic model can be implemented. Adequate resources also include equipment for camping, transport, and activities from the understanding Aboriginal mentoring will always include time in the Bush. This means On Country experiences are foundational for program design, as is the opportunity for youth to transition to leadership programs. Funding stability and adequate resourcing were also discussed; particular requirements of Aboriginal youth mentoring need to be understood and supported. Programs need to be holistic to build



the required levels of trust within the mentor–mentee relationships. This means mentors have the capacity and partnerships to discuss education, housing, mental health and physical health issues with youth, and not sideline these discussions to be picked up or not picked up by other services.

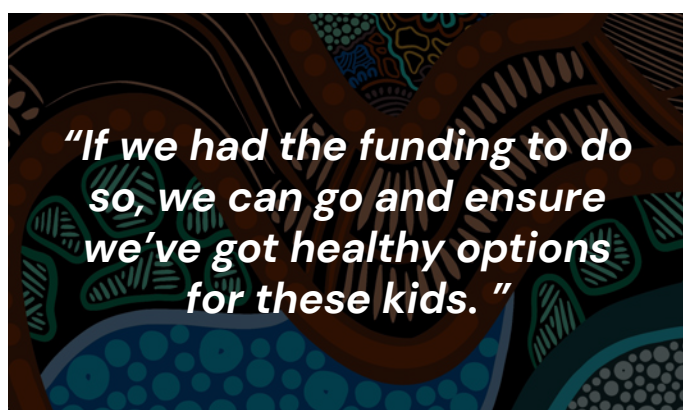
"Access to adequate and good-running facilities such as the bus, making sure that we've got everything that we need for these kids on the camps."

"They wanted us to deliver to 150 children, so that would mean one visit On Country for every child that was in the programme. It's not enough. We want them to come back three times, four times."

"It's disrespectful for everybody involved to think that this (mentoring) is going to be a one-off."

Elders are a pivotal part of Aboriginal youth mentoring. This needs to be factored into the cost, in that local Elders are stakeholders in program design and are paid for their expertise and their time during program implementation. Families are another key stakeholder in program design; there needs to be established processes and opportunities for family members to participate with youth in the program if this is appropriate. Healthy habits need to be part of youth mentoring. Once youth's mindsets shift to culturally strong identities, then the mentoring program can incorporate healthy eating, self-care and Aboriginal ways of healing into program design.

"If we had the funding to do so, we can go and ensure we've got healthy options for these kids. We can try and teach them about eating the healthy options."



Program design also needs to demonstrate an understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing as discussed through other themes in this report. This includes Aboriginal definitions of Family, Country, Ancestors, Community and Healing, plus other terms, especially Aboriginal terms specific to each area. This means that program design for Aboriginal youth mentoring is stand-alone and should not be required to fit within mainstream mentoring models.

“When department ask the young person, what is it you want – and they will quote the young person with quotation marks, ‘I want to be with my family’. They take that as just the family that they’ve just been removed from. They don’t seem to understand that family for Aboriginal youth is huge. Youth lose their many connections.”

“We can’t put the Aboriginal model of learning over this model that we live in. We have to grow the Aboriginal model within this system, you’re fitting that round peg in that square hole. The concept of learning and lifestyle for Aboriginal people is completely different from this numbers-driven model.”

“The concept of learning and lifestyle for Aboriginal people is completely different from this numbers-driven model.”

Camping equipment Aldara Yenara



SUMMARY

Aboriginal youth mentoring programs, as delivered by Aldara Yenara, create healing circles that ripple in the young person's life and should include their families and communities. These healing circles open opportunities for a young person that were unforeseen, enabling each young person to find their unique pathway. Healing circles are intergenerational; young people attending Aldara Yenara learn positive stories about their Ancestors and connect with their Elders and as communities. This enables positioning young people part of the program, to become adults who pass these teachings onto future generations. Youth proudly stated: 'We have survived, our culture is alive, our culture continues'. There is an opportunity to foster sustainability in current practice once the mentoring program at Aldara Yenara is granted secure long(er) term funding.

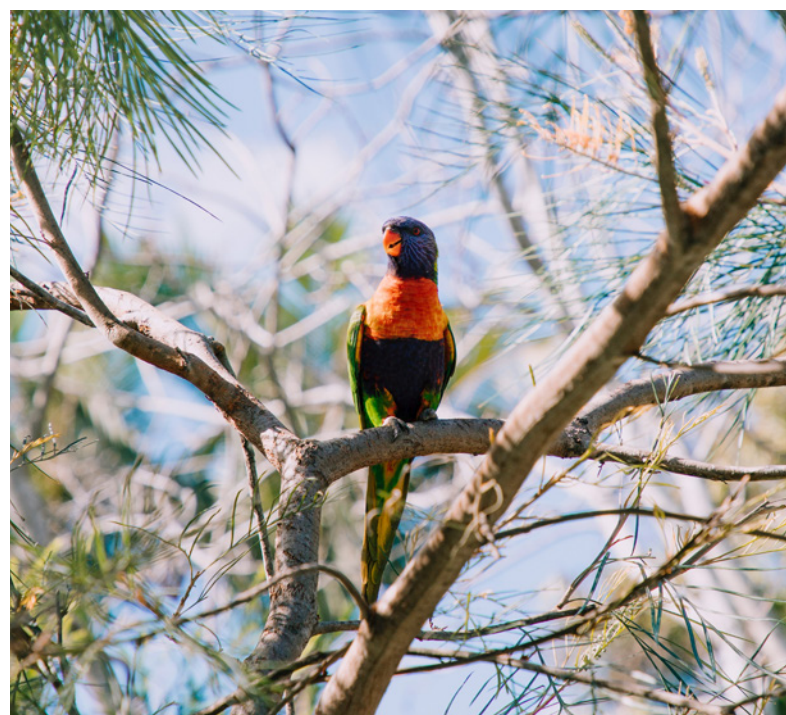
Healing circles are transgenerational and are informed by Aboriginal understandings of how young people transition from childhood to adulthood. The access to culture and healing transitions a young person from being a 'little one' to youth and then onto leadership in adulthood. Healing circles cross structural barriers and highlight the necessity to include youth who were part of the justice system and labelled 'high risk'. Young people involved in the Aldara Yenara mentoring program experienced the same cultural healing as other youth; however, they now hold connections and knowledge that will support them when they leave the justice system. Aldara Yenara is addressing identified needs of Aboriginal youth in the Greater Shepparton region, young people's cultural pride and identity are strengthened through interaction with mentors and Elders.

Another strong element of mentoring is networking or relationship building. When a mentoring program takes a holistic approach embedded in the community, youth develop connections related to sport, employment, education, and the broader Aboriginal community. A strong cultural identity reduces the risk for young people.

These are the changes emerging because of youth mentoring at Aldara Yenara, endorsed by findings of contemporary literature. As youth grow their sense of belonging to their cultural connections and Aboriginal community, they

are less likely to look for this sense of belonging from other groups, which may include risk. As such, youth mentoring is preventative of adult incarceration and recidivism, Aldara Yenara provides a powerful intervention strategy that contributes to protective factors. Youth explained that through the program, their outlook had changed and that they were more likely to participate in community activities, sport, or agree to leadership opportunities. First Nations' principles of communication inform the design of the Aldara Yenara mentoring framework and have proven beneficial for young people; it is the start of transforming their pathway to leadership.

The staff at Aldara Yenara is closely connected with the community and Country. For some young people who join the mentoring program, it is the first time they see strong Black people, proud Aboriginal people. Remodelling self-identity and reframing self-determination to know that you are Aboriginal and have a sense of belonging are what the Aldara Yenara's mentoring program is giving back to the community. The current practices demonstrate that the mentoring program is sustainable and will continue to benefit Aboriginal youth. The recommendations below emerged from the evaluation and holds an important message: Aboriginal mentoring is not a one-off event On Country; culture is ongoing, and growing strong Aboriginal leaders needs long term secure funding and resourcing that is different than non-Aboriginal services.



Lorikeet | Djundunga (little bird)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH MENTORING

01

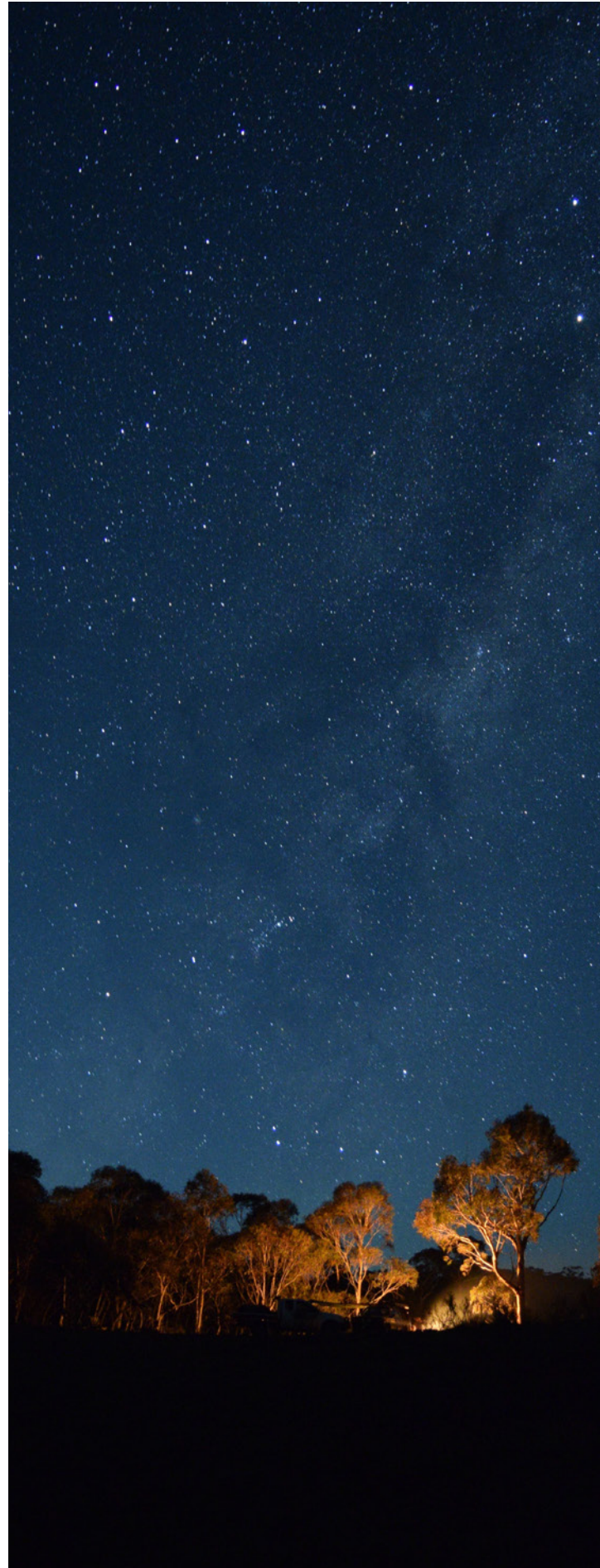
Mentoring programs need to be delivered 'On Country'. Country is a stakeholder in the mentoring program, equally facilitating healing as mentors and Elders do. In practice, this may mean Aldara Yenara needs to develop an even stronger relationship with Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria to have access to places that allow the facilitation of On Country programs.

02

Mentoring is not just for young people; the family, extended family, members of the community, and services need to be part of the program and embedded in program design. In doing so, young people do not have to navigate these spaces alone. Including family and extended family into the youth's journey to leadership means the youth are hearing the same messages at home. The Aldara Yenara mentoring program reduces punitive service involvement and gives meaning, hope, culture, and purpose to the young person by being On Country more and with Elders, community, and Ancestors. Aboriginal mentoring programs adhere to a holistic, and Aboriginal led, wrap-around approach. Therefore, they should be implemented as a primary service model to make a real impact in the Goulburn region.

03

Mentoring program design, evaluation, practice, and reporting documentation needs Aboriginal-led language that moves away from deficit-based language. Aboriginal mentoring and healing programs must somehow grow within a system that is incompatible and fragmented. Mentoring young people is not a one-off event On Country; culture is ongoing, and growing strong Aboriginal leaders needs ongoing secure funding and resourcing that may be different than non-Aboriginal services. Program design needs to be localised, including gravesite visits, visiting Cummeragunja, and other significant cultural places. All these are important as they share the history of Country and provide an opportunity to learn about inspirational leaders such as Uncle William Cooper. Discourse needs to change from tackling or combatting to investing in future leaders and creating access to culturally relevant supports like mentoring On Country.



Starry night

04

Aboriginal youth mentoring can only be done by Aboriginal people. Program funding will need to extend service delivery to bring in Elders or qualified Aboriginal healers skilled in cultural restorative practice. Aldara Yenara has a strong skill set in Aboriginal-led communication that can be used to train future Aboriginal mentors across agencies. There is a need to acknowledge that Aboriginal young people respond to communication skill sets and cultural knowledge that only Aboriginal people hold in program design and delivery. Local Elders are stakeholders in program design. There needs to be remuneration for their expertise and time during program implementation. Aldara Yenara delivers an intergenerational program with continuing Aboriginal knowledge provided by Elders; they are the governance body, teach respect and cultural knowledge and create space for healing. They operate at all levels of the program. Elders are a pivotal part of Aboriginal youth mentoring; this needs to be factored into the cost.

05

Healthy habits and healthy eating must be incorporated into Aldara Yenara's mentoring program. For example, a nutritionist attending camps and talking about healthy living enables youth to learn more about strong thinking. When youth's mindsets shift to culturally strong identities, then the mentoring program can incorporate healthy eating, self-care, and Aboriginal ways of healing into program design. This requires adequate funding for fresh food and healthy food preparation.

06

There is a considerable benefit for non-Aboriginal people participating in On Country training. Aldara Yenara is the keeper of significant cultural knowledge, a fee-for-service initiative could see local agencies, such as child protection and youth justice attending Aldara Yenara camps when appropriate, to gain a better understanding of the local Aboriginal history, Ancestors, and current initiatives regarding Aboriginal leadership.

07

Aboriginal men's and women's business in program design is important; however, deeper thinking and Aboriginal-led community conversations are required to be inclusive towards young LGBTQIA+Aboriginal young people. The general understanding that not all activities or initiatives of a program will be unisex needs to be captured in design or structure. Gender is personal and for some non-binary. Funders or program designers need to enable co-design with community members, so engagement is not lost due to the community deciding a program is not culturally safe.

08

An Aboriginal leadership component within Aboriginal youth mentoring programs enables a cyclical process. As youth transition towards leadership, they in turn provide mentoring to younger participants of the program. From this youth should be actively involved in program design, and programs need to be funded to include specific leadership training. Either as part of the mentoring program or as a next level.

"I was at a point in my Year 12 where I was not motivated. I was mucking around. I wasn't going to finish school. It wasn't until I had a conversation with my Uncles - and they said, statistically speaking, Aboriginal youth don't finish school. Isn't it about time that we change that and change the reputation of Indigenous people not having an education? **You are the narrator of your own storyline. That really just clicked with me. I was like, if I graduate, that's just one more Indigenous youth that has graduated. Mentoring these young people, I'm doing that for my family."**

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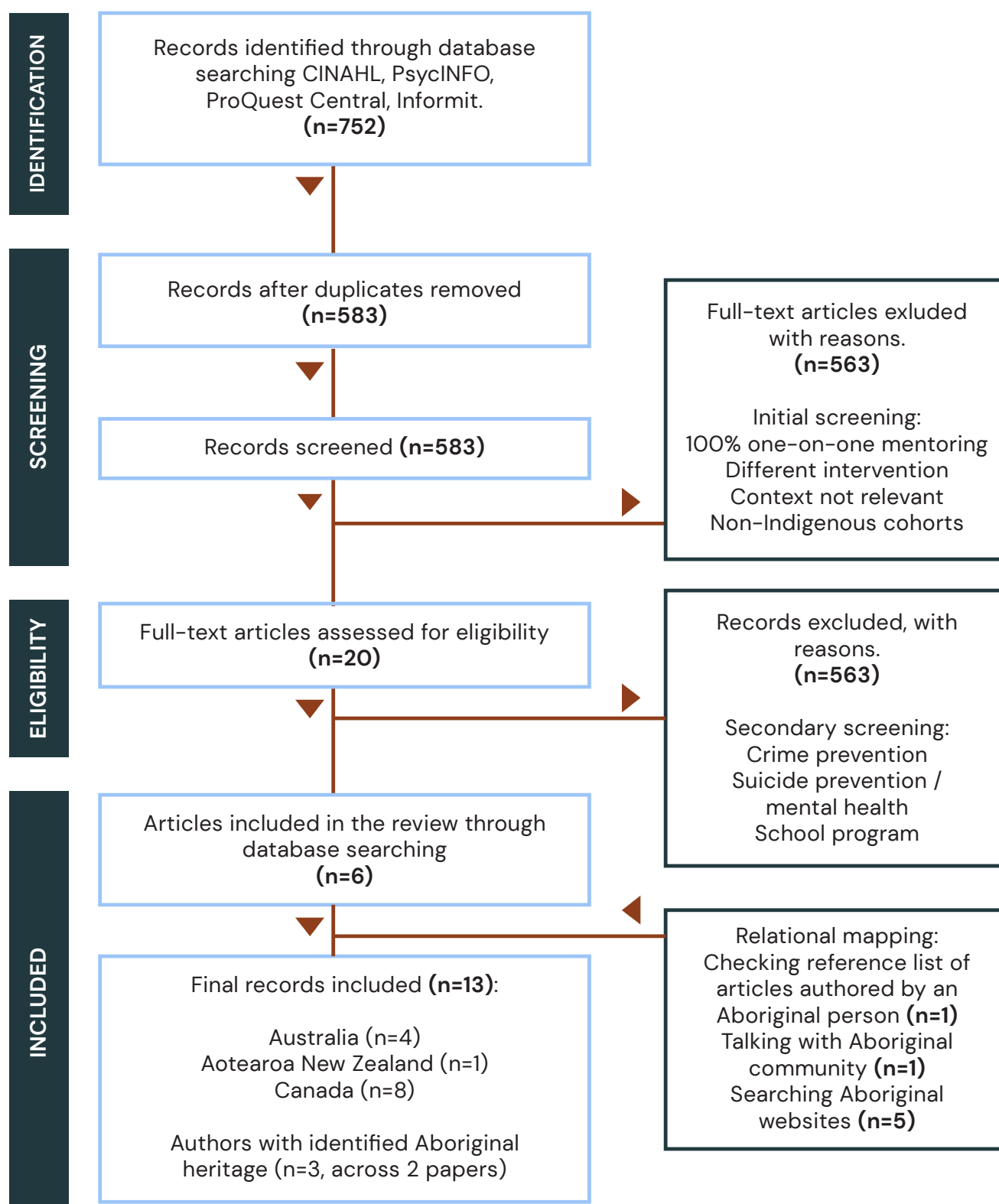
APPENDIX ONE // INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

CRITERIA	INCLUSION	EXCLUSION
Language	English language	Non-English
Time frame	2011–2021	Before 2011, After 2021
Article Type	Peer-reviewed Non-peer-reviewed Report	Abstract Poster Editorial Letter Chapter
Article Focus	Studies focussing on group mentoring experiences for Aboriginal youth.	Studies not focussed on mentoring. Studies focussing on one-on-one mentoring. Studies focussing on crime prevention. Studies focussing on suicide prevention. Studies focussing on school programs.
Participants	First Nations youth, aged 8 – 18 years old.	First Nations youth under 8 years. Non-First Nations participants. First Nation adults.
Type of studies	Intervention studies Quantitative and qualitative studies Randomised control studies	

Waratah



APPENDIX TWO // SEARCH STRATEGY





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**ALDARA
YENARA**
LEADING THE WAY