



# What would it take to re-engage young people in education? YANQ Forum

## Flexi school research in Australia

Marnee Shay PhD

Senior Lecturer, School of Education

Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Policy Futures

[m.shay@uq.edu.au](mailto:m.shay@uq.edu.au)

# Acknowledgement of country



*A Guidance in Time* created by  
Quandamooka artists  
Casey Coolwell and Kyra  
Mancktelow.

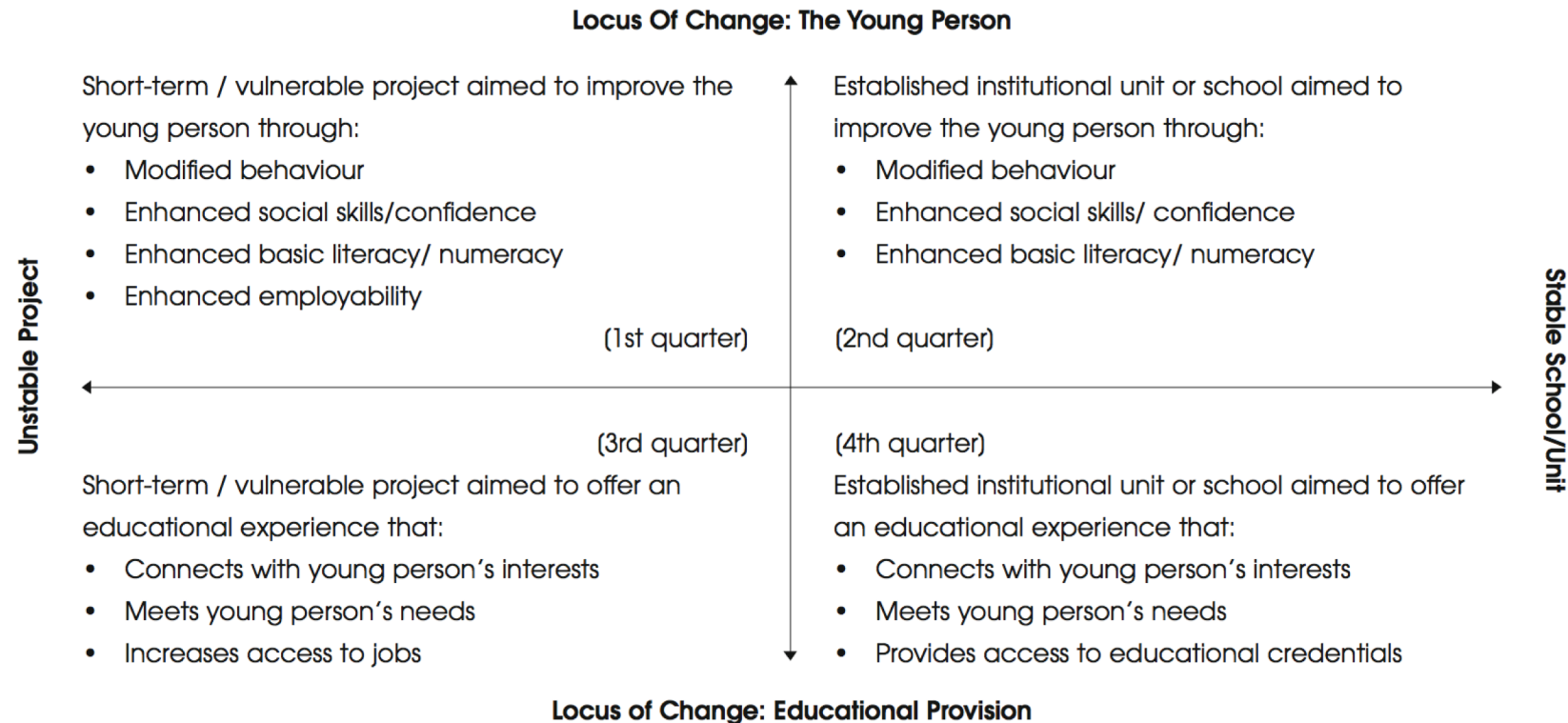
The artwork recognises all three major campuses and other UQ sites and champions a strong sense of belonging and truth-telling about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories as well as ongoing connections with Country, culture and kin.

# What can flexi school research tell us about how to support young people to re-engage in education?

- The short answer – a lot!
- My research has focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in flexi schools.
- Overall, there are limited studies on flexi schools – conversely there is an enormous amount of research on mainstream school engagement/re-engagement of young people.



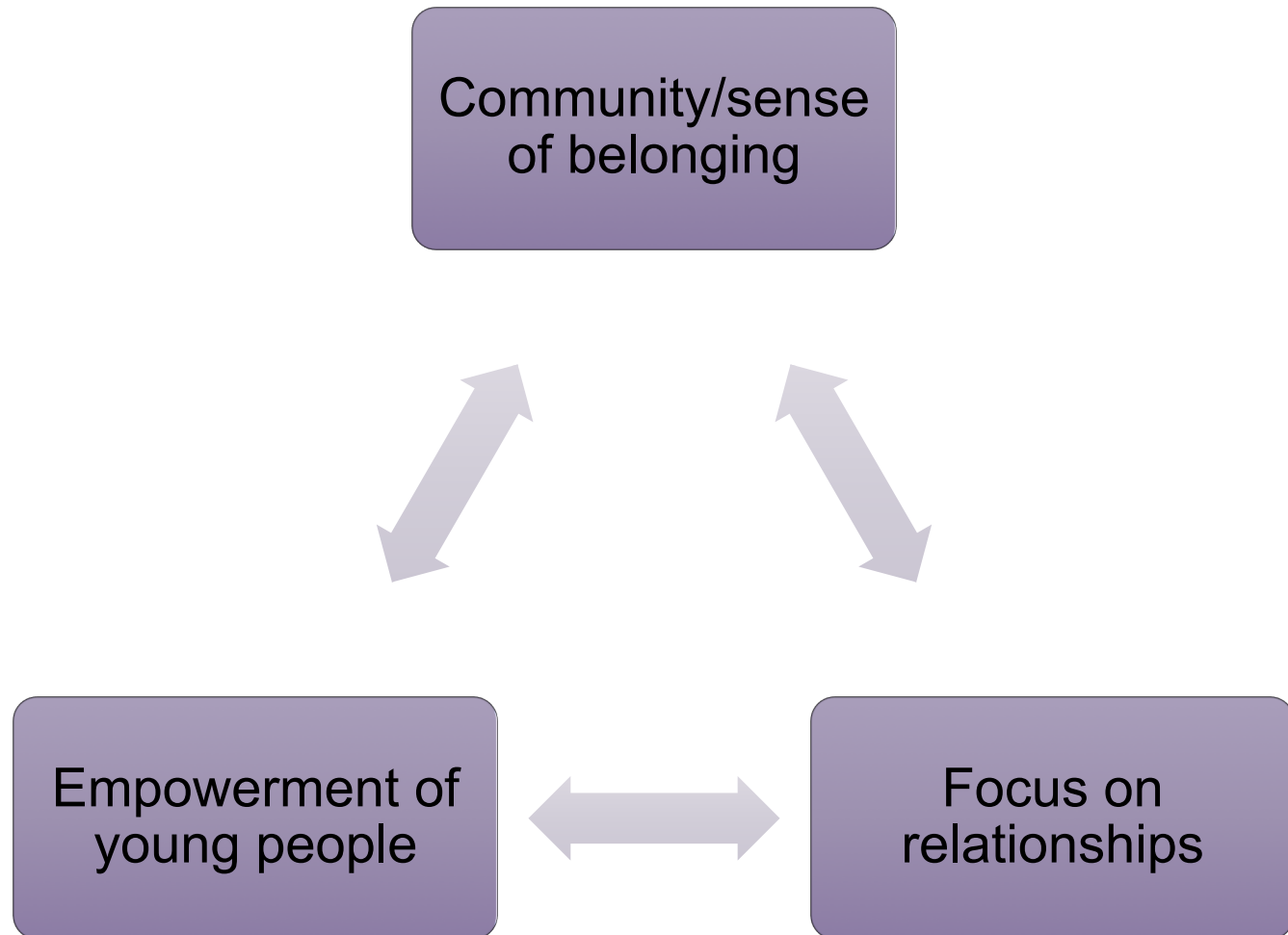
# How have flexi schools been defined in the literature?



**Figure 1: Map of educational alternatives for marginalised youth**

(te Riele, 2007)

# Key themes from flexi school research:



(Shay & Heck, 2015)



# YANQ Report – Engaging Students in Engaging Schools: Learning from Queensland’s alternative education sector (Mills & McGregor 2016)

- Focus on meeting ‘material supports’ (food, shelter, clothing, legal representation, childcare)
  - School environment – young person centered, flexible and relational
  - Adjustment of pedagogical practices
  - Strong community connections with local organisations, grassroots and local businesses
  - Evidence of growing demand
- \* Recognition of a gap in research about outcomes for young people who attend. We know there are some tangible short term outcomes but there is much more that we don’t know know

# Some of the key findings from my Master's and doctoral studies include:

How leaders in flexi schools are doing Indigenous education (Master's study):

Demographic data showed that the average Indigenous enrolment across nine flexi schools was 31%, with 30% of the staff in flexi schools also Indigenous. Whilst small scale, this finding showed that disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous people are engaged in flexi schools as a school provider and employer (Shay & Heck 2015).

There was a reported strong willingness from school leaders to engage in self-directed learning in relation to Indigenous cultures; however, there was also limited evidence of how these understandings were implemented with relation to Indigenous education in their flexi school (Shay 2018).

The voices of Indigenous peoples undertaking educative roles in flexi schools (PhD study):

Indigenous staff are undertaking complex and important roles in flexi schools and through the employment of Indigenous staff, flexi schools acquire much needed local cultural knowledge and capital to support the high numbers of Indigenous students.

There were issues of race and racism present in flexi schools, although participants in this study reported lower incidents in comparison with studies of Indigenous staff in mainstream settings.

The biggest concern expressed by Indigenous flexi school staff is that there is an over-reliance on cultural activities or celebrations in embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives across all areas of the school including the curriculum.





## How flexischools could help close the gap in Indigenous education

June 14, 2018 6.35am AEST

All Australian schools should provide high-quality education to all Australian students, including Indigenous ones. Shutterstock

Email

Twitter 37

Facebook 464

LinkedIn

Print

This year marked the tenth year of the Australian government reporting on targets made to close the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian students. The report card showed some slow gains, but overall it was another national wake-up call. New policy approaches are needed to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples.

One aspect of education that has been overlooked in Indigenous

### Authors



**Marnee Shay**  
Senior Lecturer and Senior  
Research Fellow, School of  
Education and Centre for Policy  
Futures, The University of  
Queensland



**Jo Lampert**  
Professor, School of Education,  
La Trobe University

(Shay & Lampert 2019)

## Key points:

- There is increasing evidence of high numbers of Indigenous young people enrolling in flexi schools
- There appears to be high numbers of Indigenous staff engaged in various educative roles in flexi schools
- The youth centered approach and inquiry led curriculum appears to be engaging high numbers of Indigenous young people – but there are no studies that examine short term or long term outcomes for Indigenous young people engaged in flexi school settings
- Indigenous education policy has overlooked the role of flexi schools in addressing Close the Gap policy imperatives to date

## Big questions:

Can we take the learnings from flexi school approaches to continue to improve provision of education in mainstream settings?

What is the role of flexi schools longer term?



## Free access articles:

[International Journal of Child, Youth & Family Studies - special issue: Alternative pathways in education for disenfranchised children and young people in the Australian context](#)

Marnee Shay & Jo Lampert, 2018 – [How flexi schools could help close the gap in education](#) The Conversation

Marnee Shay, 2020 - [Learning from Indigenous education successes in flexi schools](#) Independent Education

Marnee Shay, Grace Sarra & Annette Woods, 2019 – [The Imagination Declaration: young Indigenous Australians want to be heard but will we listen?](#) The Conversation

# References

- Mills, M. & McGregor, G. (2016). Engaging students in engaging schools: lessons from Queensland's alternative education sector. Brisbane: YANQ.
- Shay, M. & Lampert, J. (2019) How flexi schools can help close the gap in education. The Conversation.
- Shay, M. (2018) Leadership in Flexi schools: issues of race and racism in Australia. International perspectives on alternative education. (pp.131-142). In M. Mills & McCluskey. G (Eds). London: Trentham Books.
- Shay, M. & Heck, D. (2015). *Alternative education engaging Indigenous young people: flexi schooling in Queensland*. Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 44 (1), 37-47. doi: 10.1017/jie.2015.8
- Shay, M. (2017). Emerging ideas for innovation in Indigenous education: a research synthesis of Indigenous educative roles in mainstream and flexi schools. *Teaching Education (Columbia, S.C.)*, 28(1), 12–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2016.1210594>
- Te Riele, K. (2007). Educational alternatives for marginalised youth. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 34(3), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216865>