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Culture and education with Alice Rigney (1942–2017), Australia's first Aboriginal woman school principal

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the childhood, professional life and social activism of Alice Rigney (1942–2017) who became Australia's first Aboriginal woman principal in 1986.

Design/methodology/approach – The article draws on interviews with Alice Rigney along with newspapers, education department correspondence and reports of relevant organisations which are read against the grain to elevate Aboriginal people's self-determination and agency.

Findings – The article illuminates Alice/Alitya Rigney's engagement with education and culture from her childhood to her work as an Aboriginal teacher aide, teacher, inaugural principal of Kaurna Plains Aboriginal school in Adelaide, South Australia; and her activism as a Narungga and Kaurna Elder. Furthermore, the article highlights her challenges to racial and gender discrimination in the state school system.

Originality/value – While there is an expanding body of historical research on Aboriginal students, this article focuses on the experiences of an Aboriginal educator which are also essential to deconstructing histories of Australian education.

Keywords Aboriginal education, Women teachers, Aboriginal teachers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Born in South Australia during the assimilation era, Alice Rigney (1942–2017) first encountered the state school system as a student in a segregated school in her community of Point Pearce. She re-joined a reforming system as one of the first cohort of "Aboriginal teacher aides" in the 1970s. Successfully negotiating the complex interactions of race and gender, and unwavering in her belief in the potential of education to empower Aboriginal people, she worked at the cutting-edge of policy and practice throughout her varied career. Maintaining her activism as a Narungga and Kaurna Elder during retirement, she reflected:

> In leadership you have to walk hand in hand with people and all work together for the future. It's important that this happens because I had a vision that incorporated culture and education, people and respect (Rigney, 2008, p. 83).

This article explicates Alice Rigney's commitment to entwining Aboriginal culture with education and honours her distinct status as Australia's first Aboriginal woman principal.

Alice Rigney's life began in a period when "education for Indigenous people was deliberately positioned at the periphery of all educational provision" in Australia (Herbert, 2012, p. 95). While much research in the history of education followed suit, the emergence of new critical research into education policies and administration, curriculum and practices, along with the experiences of Aboriginal families and children across overlapping eras of segregation and protection (Povey and Trudgett, 2019), assimilation (Marsden, 2018) and self-determination (Thomas, 2021) is deconstructing histories of education in Australia. For example, Povey and Trudgett and Marsden focus on the agency of Aboriginal families and students regarding state schooling and the inherently racist curriculum in remote Western Australia and rural Victoria. In both cases, families made the most of the limited and poor

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choices available to them. Likewise, this article will highlight the centrality of Alice Rigney's family and community in supporting her acquisition of cultural knowledge and engagement with state schooling. While these critical histories "reframe previous deficit representations of Indigeneity into strength-based narratives" (Povey and Trudgett, 2019, p. 77), it is also necessary to draw on scholarship into histories of women educators in order to address Alice Rigney's professional life and activism. Historical research into women educators in Australian state schools and kindergartens has focused mostly on white teachers (Whitehead, 2019) but a handful of Aboriginal women qualified as teachers in the 1950s, including May O'Brien (Hunt and Trotman, 2002), Nancy Barnes (Whitehead *et al.*, 2021a) and Amy Levai (Whitehead *et al.*, 2021b). It was not until the 1970s, however, that governments began to systematically recruit Aboriginal people as educators in Australian state school systems, initially as paraprofessional teacher aides; and establish specific pathways to full qualification as teachers (Reid and Santoro, 2006; MacGill, 2017; Thomas, 2021). Although there is considerable contemporary research stemming from these initiatives, this article draws judiciously on studies that included Alice Rigney's contemporaries who had much more restricted access to secondary and tertiary education than recent generations of Aboriginal educators (e.g., Reid and Santoro, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2010; MacGill, 2017; Kamara, 2017; Thomas, 2021). Several common themes from these studies will be applied to our account of Alice Rigney's life and work. Firstly, the central premise of Aboriginal agency and critical engagement with education as empowerment features in all studies. Secondly, responsibility and accountability to family and community is at the core of Aboriginal women educators' decision-making about their careers and activism. Indeed, their identities and leadership are "inextricably connected with who one is and where she is from" (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 98; Hunt and Trotman, 2002; Kamara, 2017; MacGill, 2017). Thirdly, working in state school systems where leadership has historically been constructed as a male prerogative (Miller, 1986; Whitehead, 2019), Aboriginal women educators' first-hand experiences of entrenched institutional and individual racial and gender discrimination is a common theme across the generations. Lastly, Aboriginal women educators' pedagogical skills and knowledge are frequently marginalised but they are expected to take responsibility for "Indigenous" matters without reciprocity on the part of white colleagues (Reid and Santoro, 2006; MacGill, 2017; Thomas, 2021; Whitehead *et al.*, 2021a). Nevertheless, there is significant diversity among Aboriginal women educators' lives and work. For example, May O'Brien, Nancy Barnes and Amy Levai, who qualified in the 1950s, were members of the Stolen Generations and thus denied access to their families. The principals in Kamara's (2017) study belong to remote, multilingual Aboriginal communities and they negotiate additional geographic and language barriers in their work compared with educators in English-speaking situations. As Kamara (2017, p. 128) states, "research must include localised cultural [and educational] contexts". Our study of Alice Rigney's distinctive life and work speaks to the diversity among Aboriginal women educators and contributes to critical histories of education.

Co-author Rigney's (1999) Indigenist research methodology, which is informed by feminist theorising, forms the framework for this article. In keeping with the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist and feminist research, Aboriginal people's "lived experiences, histories, cultures and values" are prioritised along with their "story of survival and resistance to racist oppression" (Rigney, 1999, pp. 114, 116). Our research is informed by Alice's autobiography (Rigney, 2008), and insights and publications by the Rigney family including her son Lester who co-authored this article (Wanganeen, 1987; Rigney and Rigney, 2017). Co-author Belinda MacGill also interviewed Alice in 2006. Hereafter, we use Alitya, being Alice's Aboriginal name. Additionally, several interviews with Alitya Rigney have been posted on the Internet. We analysed these texts for Alitya's perspectives of her childhood and professional and social activism on behalf of Aboriginal people. Public sources such as newspapers, correspondence

and reports of the education department and relevant organisations were mostly constructed by white Australians. We read these texts critically against the grain to elevate Aboriginal people's self-determination and agency in relation to dominant white institutions and their practices of erasure (Rigney, 1999).

We posit that Alitya's early life experiences were inseparable from her career choices and activism so the article begins with her childhood and schooling in the assimilation era of the 1940s and 1950s, firstly on the Narungga Nation at Point Pearce on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula, followed by secondary schooling in the capital city of Adelaide in the late 1950s. Returning to Point Pearce, marriage and family in the early 1960s, the second section explores Alitya's work in Point Pearce kindergarten and then as an Aboriginal teacher aide in the state school system. This period has been nominated as a "watershed era" when South Australian and then federal politics reoriented to self-determination for Aboriginal people, with concomitant reforms in education flowing from the Karmel reports in the early 1970s (Woollacott, 2019, p. ix; Miller, 1986). Determined to qualify as a teacher and effect reform within the state school system, Alitya relocated her family to Adelaide in the mid-1970s. The third section discusses her training and career from the early 1980s, claimed by one Aboriginal educator as the "halcyon days" for Aboriginal involvement in educational decision-making (Hughes, 1994, p. 22). In 1986, Alitya was selected as foundation principal of South Australia's first metropolitan Aboriginal school in Adelaide. The remaining sections highlight her professional and social activism as principal of Kaurna Plains Aboriginal school until 1997 and then as a highly respected Narungga and Kaurna Elder during her retirement.

"A magic time growing up" with uncles, aunties and cousins

Alitya Rigney (nee Richards) has a genealogical connection to old Narungga law man Harry Richards, who was born in 1842 and led the northern Narungga Wallaroo group on Yorke Peninsula (Black, 1920). Anthropologist Howitt (1996, p. 259) nominates Harry, "King" Tom, Wortu and "Corporal" Joe to be the oldest living Narungga in the 1880s. Black (1920) documented the Narungga language by interviewing Harry Richards and Sarah Newchurch on the Point Pearce mission in 1919. Alitya would make it her life's ambition to build and teach from her great-great-grandfather's Narungga word list to all Narungga children.

Strong eldership was paramount in a dynamic First Nations community with a long history of war, resistance and strategic collaboration with white people. In the 1860s, the Narungga people had campaigned with white supporters for the establishment of Point Pearce mission on land containing "numerous sacred sites, permanent water, good soil for cultivation, scrub for timber" and access to the sea (Krichauff, 2017, p. 185). Descendants of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains joined Point Pearce when Poonindie mission closed in the 1890s; and the government assumed control of the mission in 1915. From the outset, Narungga people resisted orthodox assimilation and blended their cultural and social structures with elements of white society which they deemed beneficial (Krichauff, 2017; Amery, 2016). For example, facility with the English language enhanced communication and Point Pearce residents were "well versed in the public topics of the day" by the 1930s (*Advertiser*, 14 December 1933, p. 5). The mission farm was productive, and men accessed the local economy as shearers and seasonal workers in orchards further afield (Graham and Graham, 1987; Krichauff, 2017). Residents bargained for more arable land and public facilities for their community which numbered about 400 at the time of Alitya's birth in November 1942. She was the eldest of Nellie Richards/Wanganeen's (nee Milera) fifteen children (Rigney, 2008).

Indicative of continuing racism, however, Alitya was born in Wallaroo hospital because the local hospital at Maitland denied treatment to Aboriginal people (Rigney and Rigney, 2017). She recalled "a magic time growing up because you had all your aunties, uncles and

cousins around and people looked after you" (Rigney and Rigney, 2017, p. 193). Although few residents were bilingual (*Advertiser*, 16 August 1932, p. 11; Amery, 2016, p. 5), cultural knowledge was passed from generation to generation. Alitya learnt about Narungga family structures, cultural places and the Dreaming from her elders [1]. These included Gladys Elphick, Ivy Karpany, Febie Wanganeen and Doris and Cecil Graham (Graham and Graham, 1987). Picnics, sports days, dances and movie nights in the community hall added to community cohesion and positive identities. There was also much deprivation: Houses were far too small, roofs leaked and the domestic water supply was inadequate. In the absence of seasonal work, families relied on bush tucker to supplement their diet and all Aboriginal people were hamstrung by racist government policies (Graham and Graham, 1987; Woollacott, 2019). With the support of her family and community, however, Alitya "refused to be defined by hate or racial inequality" throughout her life (Rigney and Rigney, 2017, p. 193).

From the earliest days, Narungga people wanted their children to learn English and a school was established by missionary Julius Kuhn. Named after their traditional lands, "Boorkooyanna" was a government school from 1868 until the government slashed the education budget and closed fifty-six schools in 1870 [2]. Following legislation for compulsory schooling in 1875, "Point Pearce" became the first Aboriginal school in the state school system in 1881. It was designated as a "provisional" school but these one-teacher schools were never adequately funded (*Kapunda Herald*, 10 November 1882, p. 3; Miller, 1986). In 1908, the director of education reduced the hours of attendance at Point Pearce and restricted the curriculum rather than repairing the substandard building. With teacher Lavinia Francis' support, Point Pearce parents protested that an "invidious distinction is being made through the full curriculum being extended to white children, while the same opportunities are denied to Aboriginal children", but to no avail [3]. Amidst ongoing institutional and individual racism which was typical across Australia, students at Point Pearce were not expected to progress beyond grade five and thus not prepared for the qualifying examinations that led to secondary schooling [4].

Growing up strong in her Aboriginal identity enabled Alitya to make the most of the state school system in which gender and racial inequalities were writ large. White men's leadership was entrenched so Point Pearce was staffed by a headmaster who taught the older children and younger students were assigned to women teachers (*Education Gazette*, 14 August 1953, p. 173; Miller, 1986). This was the case throughout Alitya's primary schooling at Point Pearce where nothing in the restricted curriculum complemented her cultural education at home. A new "Boomerang" series of readers purported to have "Australian" content, but there was no space for contemporary Aboriginal cultures (*Education Gazette*, 16 February 1953, pp. 73–74). Instead, Aboriginal people and cultures were consigned to the history curriculum (Marsden, 2018). Alitya overcame this discrimination with family and community support, suspending her schooling for a year to learn from her aunties [5]. Two teachers' beliefs also disrupted deficit conceptions of Aboriginal students. The first was "progressive teacher" Frances Lea in 1951–52. Besides teaching grades three and four, Lea held dance classes and organised fundraising concerts to purchase basketball uniforms so that the girls could compete in the local association [6]. Furthermore, she canvassed the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL), Aborigines Protection Board and education department, arguing for "a better and wider education" for Point Pearce children [7]. In so doing, she was supporting Point Pearce's leaders (some of whom were AAL activists) who were advocating for post-compulsory education [8]. Transferred to Point Pearce in February 1956, Ron Neilson was the headmaster for two years and Alitya's grade seven teacher (*Education Gazette*, 16 April 1956, p. 141). Ron adopted the same strategy as Lea regarding the children's education and worked with the community to establish a co-operative store [9]. And so it was that Alitya cited Ron Neilson as a seminal figure who enabled her to access secondary schooling in Adelaide [10].

AAL fundraising culminated in October 1956 with the purchase of a suburban property (later named Wiltja) to serve as a hostel for Aboriginal schoolgirls. The AAL paid the Aboriginal matron's salary and the Aborigines Protection Board paid the boarding fees. In 1957, Alitya and her friend boarded at Wiltja and enrolled at Unley Girls Technical High School [11]. The girls "supported each other" and were "looked after well" at Wiltja as they experienced secondary schooling and likely exposure to racism from white students for the first time [12]. Alitya "took a leadership role" and "loved" school (Rigney, 2008, p. 72). After three successful years at Wiltja and Unley, however, Alitya was subject to both gender and racial discrimination when the careers adviser dismissed her ambition to be a doctor because she was "a black female" and counselled her into nursing (Rigney, 2008, p. 73).

By the time Alitya left school, her upbringing, her Aboriginality, her community and her education were shaping her identity. She was proud of her culture and opposed assimilation. As with many Aboriginal women of her generation (Fitzgerald, 2010; Kamara, 2017; MacGill, 2017), she embraced community and kinship obligations, and would continue learning about her heritage. She had experienced success in the dominant white education system despite its deficit positioning of Aboriginal people. Alitya acted on the career advice but quickly realised that "nursing wasn't what I really wanted" (Rigney, 2008, p. 73). She returned to Point Pearce, married Lester Rigney in 1961 and had three children. Sustained by her family and community, Alitya navigated educational, political and social changes in the 1960s.

The responsibility of giving back to my community

In 1962, South Australia's Aboriginal Affairs Act repealed the pernicious restrictions of the 1939 legislation and the government committed to reforming education and essential services for Aboriginal people. The education department took over mission schools from 1963 (*Education Gazette*, 15 August 1962, p. 202). Writing in the school magazine, a Point Pearce student registered changes in her community including "new houses, fencing paddocks and yards, new roads" [13]. Closely connected to Point Pearce, Labor attorney-general and minister for Aboriginal affairs, and subsequently premier, Don Dunstan, "sought integration of Aboriginal people into white society on their own terms and recognised that Indigenous people needed the protection of the law, access to their own land and to be conferred the right to self-determination if they were to prosper" (Sendziuk and Foster, 2018, p. 171; Woollacott, 2019). In 1966, South Australia took the lead in land rights with the Aboriginal Lands Trust Act which returned Point Pearce land to Aboriginal hands (Wanganeen, 1987; Woollacott, 2019).

At the national level, Aboriginal people won the right to vote in federal elections in 1962, and the 1967 referendum finally enabled federal legislation and their inclusion in the census. With the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972, federal assimilation policy was replaced by self-determination (Miller, 1986; Woollacott, 2019). In 1972, two Point Pearce students stated that "people's wishes were mostly forgotten" in previous times and enthused, "Point Pearce land will belong to the Aboriginal people, the money made from Point Pearce will go into developing the town and farm" [14]. As far as education reform was concerned, continuities were evident in the South Australian Karmel Report in 1971 and its federal counterpart in 1973 (Miller, 1986). Briefly, the Karmel reports identified Aboriginal children as a "disadvantaged" group and recommended extra resources and compensatory measures to address educational inequalities. With a combination of state and federal funding, the Disadvantaged Schools Programme (DSP) was established to allocate resources and facilitate innovation in schools (Miller, 1986; Collins and Yates, 2009). Neither state nor federal legislation resolved the institutional and individual racism Aboriginal people encountered in their education and everyday lives and work (Herbert, 2012).

With three young children, Alitya Rigney turned her attention to Point Pearce kindergarten which had been the first Aboriginal kindergarten to affiliate with the Kindergarten Union of South Australia (KUSA) in 1959 (Whitehead *et al.*, 2021a). Alitya was elected president of the Point Pearce kindergarten committee in 1965 and then secretary for three years [15]. Notwithstanding the appointment of Aboriginal educator Nancy Barnes as its regional director, KUSA reinforced deficit views of Aboriginal children, parents and communities (Whitehead *et al.*, 2021a; Palmer and Ebbeck, 1990). Although KUSA's annual reports focused on the "difficulties" of staffing and teaching "these children", Alitya and the committee were raising funds with toffee apple and cake stalls and afternoon teas at football matches, thereby supporting their kindergarten wholeheartedly [16]. Following a twelve-month training course, Elizabeth Sansbury from Point Pearce was appointed as kindergarten director in 1969 with Alitya as her assistant and then co-director in 1970. Alitya honed her pedagogical skills and recalled, "we had a ball because we loved teaching" [17]. She maintained her commitments to early childhood education and the importance of parents' involvement throughout her life.

Besides staffing former mission schools with qualified teachers, the education department commenced pre-school education for Aboriginal children and began employing "Aboriginal teacher aides" (MacGill, 2017). In July 1970, the education department relieved KUSA of Point Pearce kindergarten (Palmer and Ebbeck, 1990). A lifetime of cultural knowledge, several years of administrative and pedagogical experience, and ongoing commitment to education were overlooked when Alitya was "relegated" to the position of Aboriginal teacher aide at Point Pearce Aboriginal school. This kind of discrimination was all too common across Australia (MacGill, 2017; Kamara, 2017). Although "angry" and disempowered, Alitya embraced her new role [18]. Supported by principal Murray Willis, teachers and a "very strong" parent committee "mainly made up of mums", "everyone was involved in encouraging the kids to come to school". Of equal importance, Alitya was able to introduce Aboriginal culture into their schooling.

> Well, you talked about the Dreaming of Narungga and then you took them out and showed them where the spots were. So they were actually living history in relation to culture and to see how the language and the Dreaming tied up with what they were doing in school. [19]

None of this had been possible in Alitya's primary schooling at Point Pearce and it represents her first foray into reforming the education system.

Amidst enthusiastic discussions about self-determination, Alitya left the school and was employed as the "permanent secretary" of the Point Pearce Aboriginal Community Council in April 1973 [20]. She recalled, "I was very fortunate that I had Elders who guided and taught me the responsibility of giving back to my community and a sense of importance about what was owed" (Rigney, 2008, p. 71). As an Aboriginal woman in a male-dominated council, Alitya managed gender issues and the cultural respect due to Elders: "I used to do all the business for the council and organise my two old Uncles who used to work for them". She "stayed for a couple of years" before returning to education [21].

Alitya was re-employed as an Aboriginal teacher aide at nearby Maitland area school which enrolled Point Pearce students from grade five to secondary school. Aboriginal children comprised less than ten per cent of the students in this "very racist town" [22]. Their voices were barely registering in the school magazine in the 1970s and there is little evidence of a flow-on effect from the Karmel reports [23]. In contrast to her comprehensive role at Point Pearce school, Alitya's cultural knowledge and pedagogy were not utilised. She supported academic work in classrooms dominated by white students, and dealt with individual racism: "I was involved with a classroom teacher and supporting the Aboriginal kids because they needed a lot of support" [24]. Like many Aboriginal educators, she was expected to take responsibility for addressing racism and cultural issues, thereby "absolving white teachers

from the responsibility to be part of the solution to the problems of Aboriginal education" (Reid and Santoro, 2006, p. 151; MacGill, 2017).

Although Maitland area school did not make the most of Alitya's knowledge, skills and experience, the superintendent of Aboriginal and isolated education, John Coker, recognised her potential and asked her to return to her community: "So I went back to Point Pearce and became the kindergarten teacher again. The Teacher Registration Board gave me teacher status, but only to work on the mission, not in mainstream schools. That wasn't good enough for me" (Rigney, 2008, p. 75). Alitya loved teaching and reciprocating the community's belief in the value of her work: "But then I thought – no I can't stay in this position for ever, because I would not be able to teach anywhere else – I had to go and get a 'proper qualification'" [25]. Alitya was acutely aware of the hierarchies of power in the state school system and the limitations of her previous work, but also the necessity of incorporating Aboriginal culture in mainstream schools. Setting her sights on being able to influence the state school system on behalf of Aboriginal people, Alitya talked to her husband about "moving the whole family off the mission" to Adelaide so that she could access teacher education [26].

My own classroom … was like a United Nations!

The Rigneys had family in Adelaide, but Lester Rigney senior had to find work. They moved in with Alitya's sister and "lived in one room" (Rigney, 2008, p. 76). Alitya became an Aboriginal teacher aide at Ridley Grove primary school and experienced tensions with another teacher aide. She also joined a network of Aboriginal women activists who continued to identify strongly with their rural communities. Led by Narungga elder Gladys Elphick, who founded the Council of Aboriginal Women in the 1960s, they were skilled in working with and within government departments (including the education department) to effect social justice for Aboriginal people. Among them were some Aboriginal teacher aides and "Aboriginal home school visitors" (Amery, 2016; Sendziuk and Foster, 2018). Alitya rejected one male's advice to complete her secondary schooling and applied for entry to both the Aboriginal Task Force as a pathway to tertiary qualifications, and Kingston College of Advanced Education (CAE) to train as a teacher. She was accepted by both institutions and chose the latter (Rigney, 2008, p. 76; Hughes, 1994).

Formerly the Kindergarten Training College, Kingston CAE was an overwhelmingly white institution when Alitya enrolled as the only Aboriginal person among 440 students in 1977 [27]. Mature age white students became life-long friends and a "support mechanism", but she "missed the intrinsic cultural support" of Aboriginal people (Rigney, 2008, p. 76). Designed with white students in mind, there is little evidence that Kingston CAE's curriculum was abreast of the reforms advocated by the Karmel reports. There were ninety-seven DSP schools in South Australia by 1978 (Miller, 1986, p. 309). Nevertheless, Kingston CAE maintained its commitments to psychology and the universalising principles of child development which had underpinned the programme in the 1950s when the first generation of Aboriginal women qualified as teachers (Whitehead *et al.*, 2021b). There was an "optional course" on structural inequalities but no reference to Aboriginal culture or education, and thus nothing to support Alitya's Aboriginality [28]. Her visits to the adjacent Aboriginal Community College filled that void (Rigney, 2008, p. 76).

Graduating with a Diploma of Teaching, Alitya re-entered the state school system in which the gendered division of labour had barely altered since her schooldays. Seventy-eight percent of the teachers but only eighteen per cent of the principals were women (Miller, 1986, p. 280). However, an expanding infrastructure supporting Aboriginal education included the Aboriginal Education Unit and an Aboriginal curriculum studies committee (Craig, 1978). Established in 1977, the South Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee (SAAECC) was influencing policy and there was "a host of advisory groups" (Hughes, 1994,

pp. 22, 27; Herbert, 2012). More Aboriginal women than Aboriginal men were qualifying as teachers and more than two-thirds of Aboriginal teacher aides were women; but gender inequalities were also evident in the composition of the SAAECC in that Aboriginal men far outnumbered women. Alitya was appointed as a teacher at suburban Taperoo primary school in February 1980, gleefully anticipating that her former principal, Ron Neilson, would be principal. Sadly, he died before the school year commenced (Rigney, 2008, p. 77).

Taperoo was "a very disadvantaged school" in a "very tough area", but Alitya enthused, "I had my own classroom and it was like a United Nations! I had all these kids from many different backgrounds" (Rigney, 2008, p. 77). Alitya rejected prevailing deficit conceptions of disadvantaged students (Herbert, 2012; Marsden, 2018). She believed that "the poor do not lack intelligence whether they are black or white – they lack opportunity and all children regardless of background deserve a quality education" [29]. There were "Vietnamese, Italian and Aboriginals" in Alitya's classroom "and I absolutely loved it. I taught my culture . . . with face painting, art works that related to culture and the kids loved it. They used to take home stories to the parents and the parents would come in and talk to me about it" [30]. She added that "the beauty of my job as a teacher was that I could actually incorporate the curriculum into the culture and Aboriginal education workers [formerly Aboriginal teacher aides] do not have that opportunity" [31]. Alitya's work exemplified curriculum innovations and effective use of DSP resources at the school level in the 1980s (Miller, 1986; Collins and Yates, 2009). She had initially worried about potential discrimination from parents on account of her Aboriginality, but it was "staff members" who "really upset" her by avoiding her in the street. Throughout her life, Alitya never succumbed to racism, but chose to befriend like-minded Aboriginal and white people to effect educational and social reform. Strong in her cultural identity and with plenty of other support at Taperoo, "I never told those staff members how disappointing it was. It was something for them to deal with in their own way!" (Rigney, 2008, p. 77).

In 1983, the superintendent of Aboriginal and isolated education, John Coker, approached Alitya again and asked her to join the Aboriginal Education Unit. Although she worried that "I would not be able to survive on my own", she became the state coordinator of Aboriginal education workers (AEW).

> I was the only woman with five or six [white] men but they were lovely and they were there because they were committed to Aboriginal education. I was the only Aboriginal person in the whole department and the leadership role was good because I was able to demonstrate leadership at a different level for Aboriginal people (Rigney, 2008, p. 78).

Between 1984 and 1986, Alitya travelled around South Australia supporting AEWs and recruiting Aboriginal people to train as teachers. She worked closely with the Aboriginal teacher education programmes and with the SAAECC and teachers union to improve AEW's working conditions. Racism and deficit conceptions of Aboriginal students were common; and too few schools were providing an education that supported the specific language and cultural needs of Aboriginal children [32]. Her findings resonated with the experiences of Aboriginal educators across Australia (Reid and Santoro, 2006; Kamara, 2017; MacGill, 2017).

We now have to do the leading

In Adelaide, Aboriginal students were dispersed across approximately 140 metropolitan primary schools, but only seventeen schools had more than ten Aboriginal enrolments in the mid-1980s. A survey of well-educated urban Aboriginal parents, mostly mothers, showed that they had "high aspirations for their children. They wanted to see them developing both as Aboriginals and as skilled members of the mainstream society" (Groome, 1990, p. 47). Furthermore, they "saw the need to maintain identity as a positive and pro-active sense of

belonging and pride" (Groome, 1990, p. 48). With the assistance of genealogical research, Aboriginal people were also reclaiming their specific cultural and linguistic heritages (Amery, 2016). Raised on Narungga lands, Alitya Rigney discovered her Kaurna heritage "from my mother's side . . . it's a part of me I never knew existed" (quoted in Amery, 2016, p. 252). Like Alitya, these Aboriginal parents were concerned about deficit conceptions, racism and the lack of teaching about Aboriginal languages and cultures.

The "instigator" of a metropolitan Aboriginal school was Pat Buckskin, an Aboriginal home school visitor who had an intimate knowledge of parents' and students' concerns in the Elizabeth area [33]. Alitya "went out to help because I was really interested", and activists were supported by the Aboriginal Education Unit, SAAECC, teachers union and other groups [34]. Together, they proposed "a school in which Aboriginal culture and history is taught, using Aboriginal learning styles, mostly filled with Aboriginal children, taught by qualified Aboriginal teachers and can be said to be an Aboriginal school" (*Tribune*, 23 October 1985, p. 4). They encountered vicious opposition in open forums, including from the local Liberal member of parliament (*Tribune*, 23 October 1985, p. 4; *Advertiser*, 28 January 1986, p. 17); and Alitya was "amazed at the racism" (Rigney, 2008, p. 78). The Labor minister of education, Lynn Arnold, was a passionate advocate and the government ratified the proposal to build an Aboriginal school beside Elizabeth high school in March 1985 (*Tribune*, 23 October 1985, p. 4).

Named after the traditional owners of the Adelaide region, Kaurna Plains Aboriginal school opened in February 1986 with George Small as the interim principal, three white teachers and three Aboriginal teachers, the latter being Alitya Rigney, Nita McAdam and Amy Levai (*Advertiser*, 28 January 1986, p. 17). Nita was a relatively recent graduate compared with Amy who was South Australia's first qualified infant teacher in 1958 and had decades of teaching experience (Whitehead *et al.*, 2021b). When the principal's position was advertised, Alitya "talked to people about applying and some told me that I wasn't ready, because I was a woman and I would not be able to do the job" (Rigney, 2008, pp. 79–80). In common with Aboriginal women facing similar career decisions, she considered her responsibility to family and community (Fitzgerald, 2010; Kamara, 2017). She recalled "the advice of an old Uncle who said if we do not do it – who's going to do it and we've been led by the hand for so long – we now have to do the leading" [35]. Challenging the gender and racial division of labour, Alitya applied and won the position, becoming Australia's first Aboriginal woman principal.

It was important that Alitya and her colleagues "had one vision . . . to get the best outcome for the kids and the community" (Rigney, 2008, p. 80). Both Nita and Amy's pedagogical approaches aligned with Alitya's and they drew on their collective histories and experiences as Aboriginal students and teachers in state schools [36]. The three educators were dedicated to parents' active participation so "the school was built on family lines because we discipline the kids on family lines" [37]. Regarding curriculum, "we had to ensure that the culture was in the curriculum so that the students had a two way education – education of the system and education of the culture" (Rigney, 2008, p. 80). To these ends, the curriculum "complied with education department guidelines" and supported "Aboriginal identities, values, lifestyles and learning" [38]. A former student recalled that "all staff were culturally aware, dealt with racism appropriately and took an interest in him as an individual, helping him plot a future for himself" (Agius and Russell, 2016, p. 234).

Overcoming community resistance, moving into new buildings, collaborating with the local high school; Alitya represented the mid-1980s as an exciting time and hard work, but worth the effort. Furthermore, her leadership extended well beyond the school: "I was the only Aboriginal principal in the state – every time I went out, it was me doing reconciliation with the rest of the principals groups. We were also part of the Aboriginal schools principals network so we would have meetings together" [39]. She strengthened teacher education by ensuring that some students completed their practicums at Kaurna Plains. She worked with the teachers union and SAAECC to embed professional support for Aboriginal teachers and

AEWs, rejoicing in the new classification structure for the latter in 1996 (Rigney, 2008; MacGill, 2017). She analysed and advised on the impact of education policies and practices in Aboriginal communities. In essence, she used her leadership (Hughes, 1994) to break down barriers to Aboriginal people's engagement with the state education system.

As principal, however, Alitya was also the mediator of government policy and there were many changes during her eleven-year tenure. Funds dwindled in the 1990s and much of the infrastructure of the 1970s and 1980s was withdrawn in the name of efficiency and accountability (Hughes, 1994; Collins and Yates, 2009; Herbert, 2012). The traditional subject-based curriculum was reinvigorated with centrally specified lists of outcomes. Mandated basic skills testing denied children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds, reinforcing deficit conceptions of Aboriginal students (Collins and Yates, 2009). Typical of Aboriginal principals in other state school systems (Kamara, 2017), Alitya recalled "sometimes being the meat in the sandwich between the Department and the community, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal" (Rigney, 2008, p. 82). In 1991, her successful leadership was acknowledged with a Public Service Medal in the Australia Day Honours List (Rigney and Rigney, 2017). By then, she was in the midst of introducing the Kaurna language at the school.

The Kaurna language had not been spoken fluently since 1929 so it had to be released from "hibernation" using records made by German missionaries in the 1830s [40]. Alitya's institutional position, skilled leadership, and professional and community networks were seminal to this complex project. In 1986, the government mandated that all students learn a second language so Languages Other Than English (LOTE) became a school subject. Alitya strategised to revive the Kaurna language as a LOTE programme. In 1988, she met with the Aboriginal Education Unit; and the South Australian Aboriginal Languages Policy was drafted in 1989. She collaborated with linguist Rob Amery and Kaurna activists to learn the language, conduct workshops and create resources. Their work was assisted by federal funding for the revival of the Kaurna, Narungga and Ngarrindjeri languages in 1989–90. A Kaurna song book was produced and the language was introduced in the Kaurna Plains Early Childhood Centre in 1990. Kaurna became the school's LOTE programme in 1992 (Amery, 2016).

Alitya recalled the excitement and challenges of learning the Kaurna language "the night before we taught it" [41]. The community's enthusiasm was reiterated in an official school review: "For parents, students and staff the highlight of the school was the focus on Aboriginal cultures and languages. This was seen as developing pride, self-esteem and a sense of identity in students" (quoted in Amery, 2016, p. 188). Alitya and her colleagues were using the language as "a key to understanding the history, the environment, the Kaurna culture and the Kaurna people" but the increasing centralisation of curriculum decision-making challenged their pedagogy (Amery, 2016, p. 188; Collins and Yates, 2009). In 1995, "Indigenous languages were very visible" in an external review of LOTE "but they were worryingly absent from most of the core visions for the future" [42]. Alitya responded by joining the management group of the education department's "Revival (Renewal and Reclamation) project" to influence policy and curriculum decision-making to do with LOTE [43]. Once again, she was heeding her Uncle's advice about leadership. She would continue to do so throughout her life.

In reality she was more active than ever

Alitya retired in 1997, thereby relinquishing her institutional leadership in the state school system. Celebrating her service to Aboriginal people, she was South Australia's NAIDOC Elder of the Year in 1997. In 1998, being approximately fifty years after student-Alitya had been summarily marginalised in the state school system by virtue of her Aboriginality, the University of South Australia awarded Alitya an honorary doctorate for her work in Aboriginal education (Rigney and Rigney, 2017). This article has demonstrated that Alitya

challenged that deficit narrative throughout her life and work. Her Aboriginal identity was grounded in a sense of belonging and pride in her birth community of Point Pearce, her Narungga and later Kaurna heritages. The silences about Aboriginal culture in her primary and secondary schooling became key to her vision for a state school system that enabled all students' academic success and positive cultural identities. From the mid-1960s, Alitya worked hand in hand with Aboriginal and white people to improve Aboriginal students' educational experiences at Point Pearce kindergarten, then as an Aboriginal teacher aide, qualified teacher and inaugural principal at Kaurna Plains. She reasoned that "you have to survive in this system for all your life and if you can't read it properly you're in trouble" [44]. Alitya not only read the system superbly but also challenged the institutionalisation of leadership as men's prerogative. Strong in her Aboriginal identity and ever optimistic, Alitya persisted with her goal of influencing policy and practice in relation to Aboriginal education. Her leadership of Kaurna Plains showed how Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies can underpin education in the state school system. She created space for Aboriginal languages and culture along with professional support networks for Aboriginal teachers and AEWs in schools. As a highly respected Elder of the Kaurna and Narungga nations, Alitya set about expanding her activism during her retirement.

For Alitya, it was imperative to "work in partnership with governments" to influence Aboriginal people's education, well-being and life chances [45]. "In reality she was more active than ever" as a member of South Australia's Guardianship Board and the Aboriginal Education, Training and Advisory Committee [46]. At the federal level, she was an "Ambassador for Dare to Lead and the Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations" in 2000 (Rigney, 2008, p. 68). In 2007, she became an Ambassador for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training's National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. Anticipating her role, Alitya stated "what I want for Aboriginal kids is what most of their parents want, I think, and that is for them to be academically successful and strong in their Aboriginal identity". She was also "proud to be rubbing shoulders with the likes of May O'Brien", Western Australia's first qualified Aboriginal woman teacher [47]. Besides being instrumental in the establishment of Aboriginal languages in schools, Alitya oversaw the return of Kaurna language to Kaurna country, being the location of Adelaide (Amery, 2016). In 1991, the first Kaurna Welcome to Country was held in Adelaide, and knowledge and use of Kaurna in the public domain blossomed. In 2002, Alitya, Rob Amery and Uncle Lewis O'Brien formed Kaurna Warra Pintyanthi, a committee that met monthly to deal with requests for Kaurna names, translations and information about the Kaurna language. Alitya travelled with a delegation of Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri people to Germany in 2011 to research the German missionaries who first recorded the Kaurna language, and attend anniversary celebrations of the Dresden Mission Society. Connecting her profession and her heritage, Alitya "was overwhelmed with emotion" when she saw Kaurna children's handwritten letters from the 1830s (*Advertiser*, 9 September 2014, p. 6). In a subsequent interview, she stated proudly, "language is power . . . it tells you about yourself and your country", and reiterated how learning the Kaurna language had "instilled pride and self-confidence" in students at Kaurna Plains [48]. Alitya was convinced that the Kaurna language empowered Kaurna people, facilitated reconciliation between Aboriginal and white Australians, and "helped to overcome racism" by providing insights into Kaurna people's history, environment and culture (quoted in Amery, 2016, p. 272). She played her part to embed the Kaurna Welcome to Country at public events and there has been a tremendous increase in the use of Kaurna place names in the 2000s. For Alitya, working with Aboriginal and white people had always been crucial to her vision "to make it a good world to live in for the next generation" (quoted in Amery, 2016, p. 269).

Alitya Rigney died suddenly on 13 May 2017 and was buried at her beloved Point Pearce on Narungga land. Her life and work were celebrated by 1,000 people at a state memorial service

in Adelaide University's Bonython Hall (*Advertiser*, 8 June 2017, p. 21). Alitya was posthumously honoured in 2018 with an Order of Australia "for distinguished service to education, particularly through providing opportunities for youth, and to the promotion of Indigenous language, culture and heritage" (*Advertiser*, 11 June 2018, p. 16). Alitya Rigney was one of many Aboriginal women who became teachers and leaders when policies and practices which open up institutions were enacted, but for too long their work has been invisible. Alitya Rigney's story and those of her colleagues are integral in reframing deficit representations of Aboriginal people and constructing critical histories of education in Australia.

Notes

1. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill, 26 September 2006 (hereafter, Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill).
2. Minute no. 946, 1869, Central Board of Education, GRG 50/1, State Records of South Australia (hereafter SRSA); *Observer*, 12 September 1868, p. 10.
3. Lavinia Francis to Director, June 1908, Education Department correspondence files, GRG 18/2/1908/978, SRSA.
4. Bertram Grewar to Director, 20 April 1940, Education Department correspondence files GRG 18/2/1940/709, SRSA; see also Marsden (2018), Povey and Trudgett (2019).
5. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
6. Recruitment of Primary Teachers, 1947, Education Department correspondence files, GRG 18/2/1947/661, SRSA; *Pioneer,* 7 September 1951, p. 1.
7. Meeting 16 November 1951, 6 December 1951, 4 June 1952, Minutes of the Aborigines Advancement League 1950–2008, SRG 250/3, State Library of South Australia (hereafter SLSA).
8. Meeting 21 September 1951, 21 February 1952, Minutes of the Aborigines Advancement League 1950–2008, SRG 250/3, SLSA; *Advertiser*, 15 December 1933, p. 28; *Recorder*, 13 October 1954, p. 6.
9. Meeting 25 March 1957, 24 February 1958, 6 May 1968; 28 July 1958, Minutes of the Aborigines Advancement League 1950–2008, SRG 250/3, SLSA; Graham and Graham (1987).
10. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill; Rigney (2008).
11. Meeting 25 March 1957, 22 July 1957, Minutes of the Aborigines Advancement League 1950–2008, SRG 250/3, SLSA; *Northern Suburbs Weekly*, 21 March 1957, p. 4.
12. Interview with Ngarpadla Alitya (Alice) Rigney by Katrina Power, 15 March 2017, youtube.com/watch?v=XYCnOYoaZok.
13. Maitland Area School Magazine, 1968, p. 15, SLSA.
14. Maitland Area School Magazine, 1972, p. 27, SLSA.
15. Kindergarten Union of South Australia annual report 1965, p. 31 (hereafter KUSA).
16. KUSA annual report 1962–63, pp. 16–17; KUSA annual report 1965, p. 18.
17. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill; *The Farmer*, 27 October 1966, p. 6; KUSA annual report 1969, p. 29; KUSA annual report 1970, pp. 14–16.
18. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
19. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
20. Narungga News, 6 April 1973, p. 5, SLSA; Wanganeen (1987, p. 75).
21. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
22. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
23. See Maitland Area School magazine, 1971–1975, SLSA.

24. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
25. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
26. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
27. Kingston College of Advanced Education Handbook 1977, p. 6 (Kingston College of Advanced Education, Adelaide).
28. Kingston College of Advanced Education Handbook 1977, p. 24; Whitehead *et al.* (2021a).
29. Quoted by Professor Rigney, abc.net.au/news/2017–05–18/aboriginal-elder-alice-rigney-remembered-as-pioneering-educator/8534892.
30. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
31. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill. The nomenclature changed in 1981 (MacGill, 2017).
32. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill; Palmer and Ebbeck (1990).
33. Aboriginal Education Newsletter, no. 1, 1997, p. 4, SLSA.
34. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill; P. Warrior (n.d.). Northern Area Aboriginal School at Elizabeth. SRG 102/4 Aboriginal Education Foundation of South Australia correspondence, SLSA.
35. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
36. McAdam (1988). "The Nunga code: Aboriginal children, language and learning". Adelaide: Department of Education Participation and Equity Program, SLSA; Whitehead *et al.* (2021b).
37. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
38. P. Warrior (n.d.). Northern Area Aboriginal School at Elizabeth, 5, SRG 102/4 Aboriginal Education Foundation of South Australia correspondence, SLSA.
39. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
40. Professor Ghil'had Zuckermann in discussion with Dr Alitya Rigney, 31 August 2011, barngarla.com/video.
41. Professor Ghil'had Zuckermann in discussion with Dr Alitya Rigney, 31 August 2011, barngarla.com/video.
42. Aboriginal Education Newsletter, no. 1, 1996, p. 9, SLSA.
43. Aboriginal Education Newsletter, no. 2, 1996, p. 7, SLSA.
44. Interview with Alitya Rigney by Belinda MacGill.
45. Interview with Ngarpadla Alitya (Alice) Rigney by Katrina Power, 15 March 2017, youtube.com/watch?v=XYCnOYoaZok.
46. All About Aunty Alice – Deadly Vibe deadlyvibe.com.au/2007/11/all-about-auntie-alice/.
47. All About Aunty Alice – Deadly Vibe deadlyvibe.com.au/2007/11/all-about-auntie-alice/. Hunt and Trotman (2002).
48. Professor Ghil'had Zuckermann in discussion with Dr Alitya Rigney, 31 August 2011, barngarla.com/video.

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