



# FAMILIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION NEWSLETTER

Families for Inclusive Education is a project of  
the Community Resource Unit Ltd.

## **Acknowledgement of Country:**

**CRU respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's first peoples and the traditional owners/custodians of the land on which we work and live. We pay respect to Elders, past and present, recognise the significant contributions of our First Nations people, and seek relationships based on recognition, reconciliation and justice.**

## **Welcome**




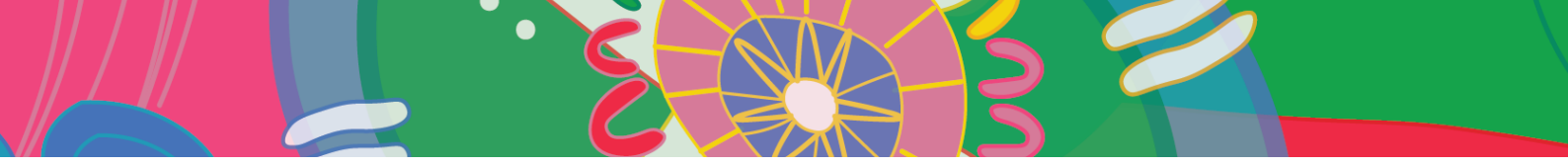
This special edition of our Families for Inclusive Education newsletter focuses on intersections between successful inclusion for students with disability and inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

We are excited to share a family story of a young North Queensland student, Cassidy, who became the Indigenous captain of her primary school, and who also happens to have Down syndrome. As a proud ambassador for her Torres Strait Islander culture, Cassidy has had many opportunities to contribute to her school community, and develop her own leadership skills.

Kassidy's story exemplifies the truth that we all have multiple identities, and that school inclusion can provide ways for those identities and strengths to be valued.

We also share reflections from our CRU team about two powerful learning experiences. The first was CRU's collaboration with Central Queensland colleagues from the Dept of Education, Cindy Willett and Barb Carroll, who helped to bring together a Yarning Circle in Mackay, attended by many of the Community Education Counsellors (CECs) and others working with First Nations families and students. The second was a powerful session at CRU's Peer Support training event where well-respected facilitator/educator Fiona Bobongie led a facilitated conversation for volunteer Peer Support contacts to expand cultural awareness and be sensitised to experiences, challenges and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.





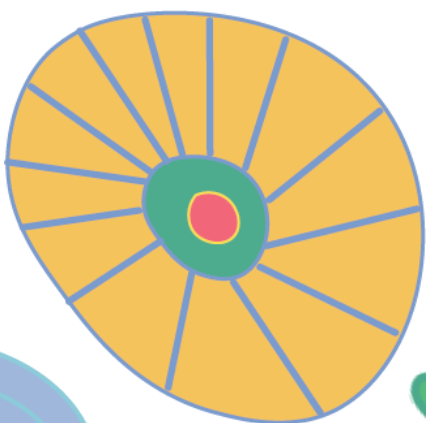
Inclusion is not only a “disability” issue.

Indeed, the DoE inclusive education policy is clear that the scope of the policy applies to many other learners. Both gatherings helped us to identify common barriers and challenges in our education system, and also to borrow positive strategies. For example, an insight shared in the Mackay Yarning Circle included the effectiveness of asking kids “What’s Up?” rather than directing them to “Shape Up” (which could be equally potent for students with disability). Just as everyone benefits in inclusive classrooms incorporating Universal Design for Learning, integrating different ways of Learning (as articulated in the Eight Ways of Learning - see pages 6 & 7) can be potent beyond a cohort of indigenous students.

Across both these events, CRU has reflected on the critical importance of “deep listening” so we can bridge gaps in our understanding, and appreciate the different life experiences, histories, cultures and contexts - so all can be valued, belong, and learn from each other.

For more information on Dept of Education approaches to improving education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, see

[education.qld.gov.au/initiativesstrategies/Documents/atsie-student-succeeding-strategy.pdf](http://education.qld.gov.au/initiativesstrategies/Documents/atsie-student-succeeding-strategy.pdf)



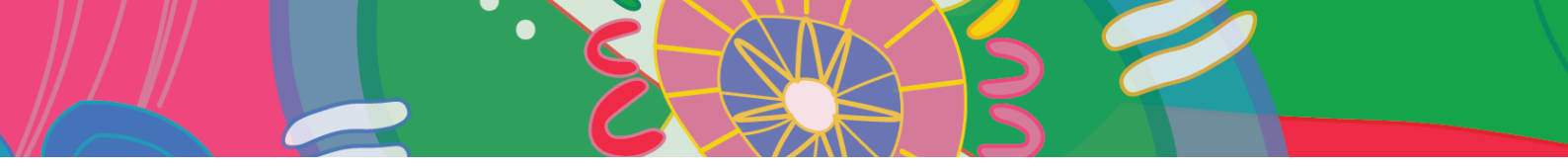
## Kassidy Shines in Grade 6

The last year of primary school. How did that happen? Soon I will have a new school to share my daughter’s vision with and convince them that inclusion is the best policy. Over the past few years, we have been fortunate enough to be attending a school that values my daughter Kassidy, the same as they would any other student at the school. As Kassidy has Down syndrome, I have not always been optimistic on how she would be accepted, and had my share of fears about that. However, as we have progressed through her primary school years, I would be more than happy if her life mirrored her school in acceptance of her - as she is.

At the end of last year, students were invited to nominate for a position on the school leadership team. As Kassidy’s cultural background includes Torres Strait Islander, she was nominated for the role of Indigenous Captain. She feels very connected to her



Kassidy and her fellow captains



Torres Strait Islander culture and family and was very proud of the nomination. Together we wrote a speech, which included some traditional language, and she stood in front of her peers and teachers and read it out. At the end she had the entire audience chanting **“Vote for Me! Kassidy!”**. She won in a landslide victory, because she qualified for the position, loves her culture and did what was required to be elected. The leadership role is a significant achievement – but it is also a testament to how clearly she belongs in the school, and the respect in which she is held by her peers in that school.

The role of the Indigenous Captain varies. Kassidy is responsible for doing the Acknowledgement of Country at each school assembly. She stands up at the podium in front of the entire school every Monday morning and does her best. It is not always perfect, and she may need a bit of help from her School Captains standing behind her, but she has surpassed all expectations. She is a part of the school leadership team, which is made up of her peers that she started prep with six years ago. The same peers that included her in their birthday invitations, their playground games and in their classroom.

My vision for Kassidy that may have seemed a tad far-fetched back on the first day of prep is becoming a reality. It is so important not to place limits on our expectations because given the proper support, anything can be achieved. I cannot wait to see what Kassidy can achieve in high school and beyond!

Nicole Fehr

Here is Kassidy’s speech when she nominated for Indigenous Captain:

“Hi Mr Tillack, teachers and students.  
My name is Kassidy Pitt and I am running for Indigenous Captain.  
I am a Torres Strait Islander and am very proud of my culture.  
I would love to share my culture with you. We could do some Island dancing, shake a leg, or just have some yarns.  
Whichway, you subbay? Big esso.  
Vote for me! Kassidy! Vote for me! Kassidy!  
Vote for me! Kassidy!”

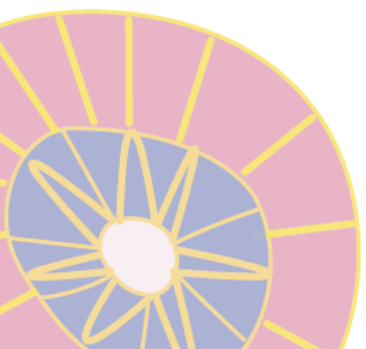


## Yarning Circle Mackay

In February, CRU was privileged to work with two Department of Education staff members from Central Queensland Regional, Cindy Willett and Barb Carroll, to plan an Inclusive Community Yarning Circle in Mackay.

The Yarning Circle of about 20 participants explored understandings of the barriers that prevent authentic school and community inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (including students with disability) and their families. We are grateful to the participants, mostly Community Education Counsellors (CECs) in Mackay region state schools for generously sharing their insights, and most importantly articulating the strengths of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

We heard that barriers preventing indigenous families from being full partners in their children’s education included school priorities not always matching family priorities,



and second, school processes being inaccessible or uncomfortable for families.

Circle members shared that families are acutely aware of the imbalance of power between themselves and schools, with historical experiences with school and feeling “shame” impacting. Other barriers noted were:

- schools having preconceived ideas about families
- schools and families having different views on success and high expectations
- school systems often appearing to be focusing on diagnoses and data, when families need a focus on relationships and developing trust by feeling valued
- the school environment not appearing welcoming of them or their culture
- for some, practical barriers such as transport and communication (no access to private transport, no phone credit or no or limited internet/computer access).

In the Yarning Circle, positive proposals were shared, including potential for progress when connections are made between families and schools, before their children are even at school age. It was noted that just as disability inclusion can't be the sole responsibility of specialist inclusion or special education

staff, students and families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds are more likely to feel comfortable and trusting when they perceive genuine efforts by all school staff (and not just indigenous/CEC staff) from the school leadership down – so every child feels actively welcomed and valued by everyone. Being more flexible and reducing the ‘bureaucracy’ (especially paperwork!) would also help children access the supports they need earlier.

Other valuable discussions included:

- rethinking “parent engagement” challenges and instead regularly checking in with students, families, and community: exploring reasons behind students not wanting to come to school, or families not wanting to come onto school grounds, or talk with school (“asking why?, what’s up?”)
- trusting relationships needing to start with a commitment to families and student rights
- a strength in community wrapping around children who are more vulnerable (including with disability), and accepting all children in community in the same school as their siblings and cousins





- knowledge that change happens through tolerance and flexibility, and sharing the success stories (“tell the good news”)
- leadership: clear goals and accountability, with more indigenous inclusive leaders in schools at all levels.

In the words of a yarnning circle member: “[we] need to get people excited and see the change we want to see in society starts in our small places”.

CRU thanks everyone involved, especially Cindy and Barb!

*Lindie Brengman*

## Circle Work Learnings and Reflections

CRU recently hosted a two day event **Standing Strong, Standing Together: Building Peer Networks** event for family members who are committed to building peer networks in their local communities. One of our presenter/facilitators was Fiona Bobongie who calls Mackay home.

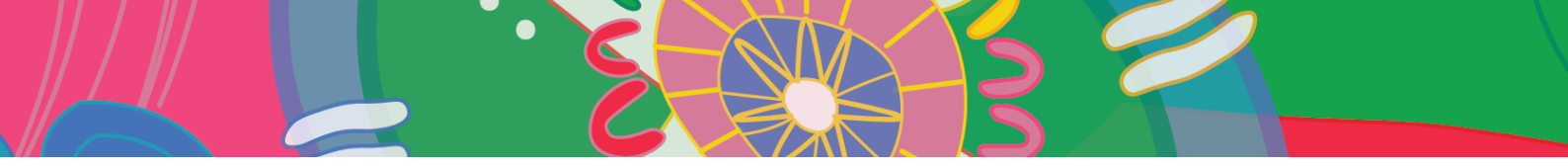
Fiona Bobongie is a Darumbal and Australian South Sea Islander woman who has family ties to Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Fiona has worked in Education for 35 plus years.

She has worked regionally, nationally and internationally as a facilitator of Professional Development, and currently manages her own consultancy business called Cyclic Konnectionz. Fiona’s passion for helping people make richer and deeper connections and for making positive change happen for her people was evident throughout her two days with us.

On the second day of the event Fiona lead our group of 40+ parents in a Yarning Circle.

Fiona’s circle work highlighted just how vital it is to our own wellbeing and that of our communities that we take the time to connect, to sit, and to just ‘be’ with others in a spirit of deep listening.

Embedded in the deep learning of the yarnning circle were the 8 Aboriginal ways of learning. This meant that the group experienced firsthand what quality connection and powerful conversations look, sound and feel like. Trust and honesty were put to the forefront. What was shared during the circle time was not to leave the circle so that the circle could be an inclusive and non-judgmental space. All were invited to express their thoughts freely and via modes they felt most comfortable with. We experienced how very effective and compelling it is to interact with others who have slowed down their pace, who take the time to ensure



all are welcomed and heard, who check in with how you feeling. We also learnt how natural, not forced conversation progressions are not only very possible but also quite captivating.

The circle work also demonstrated to us that hours of talking isn't required in order to have a powerful conversation with others and to bring about deep contemplation on a topic. Fiona requested that participants express their responses to some challenging statements relating to school and community understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures by ositioning themselves along a continuum of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Very few words were exchanged during this activity. This led to participants reflecting on the statements, their own positioning and the positioning of others – with each statement eliciting an examination of our first reactions and assumptions, inviting a deeper conversation both within ourselves and within the group. A conversation that is likely to continue in the minds and hearts of all who participated in the circle for a long time to come. Many mentioned at the end of the circle time that we have much yet to learn from the 60, 000+ years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander knowledge, and our curiosity and commitment to learn more were sparked.

In the summing up, Fiona helped us to reflect upon the different modes of expression we had engaged in - 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning [www.8ways.online/](http://www.8ways.online/)

At a time when Universal Design for Learning is being embraced by more educators, our workshop participants could see the value of embracing and valuing First Nations perspectives and approaches, in order



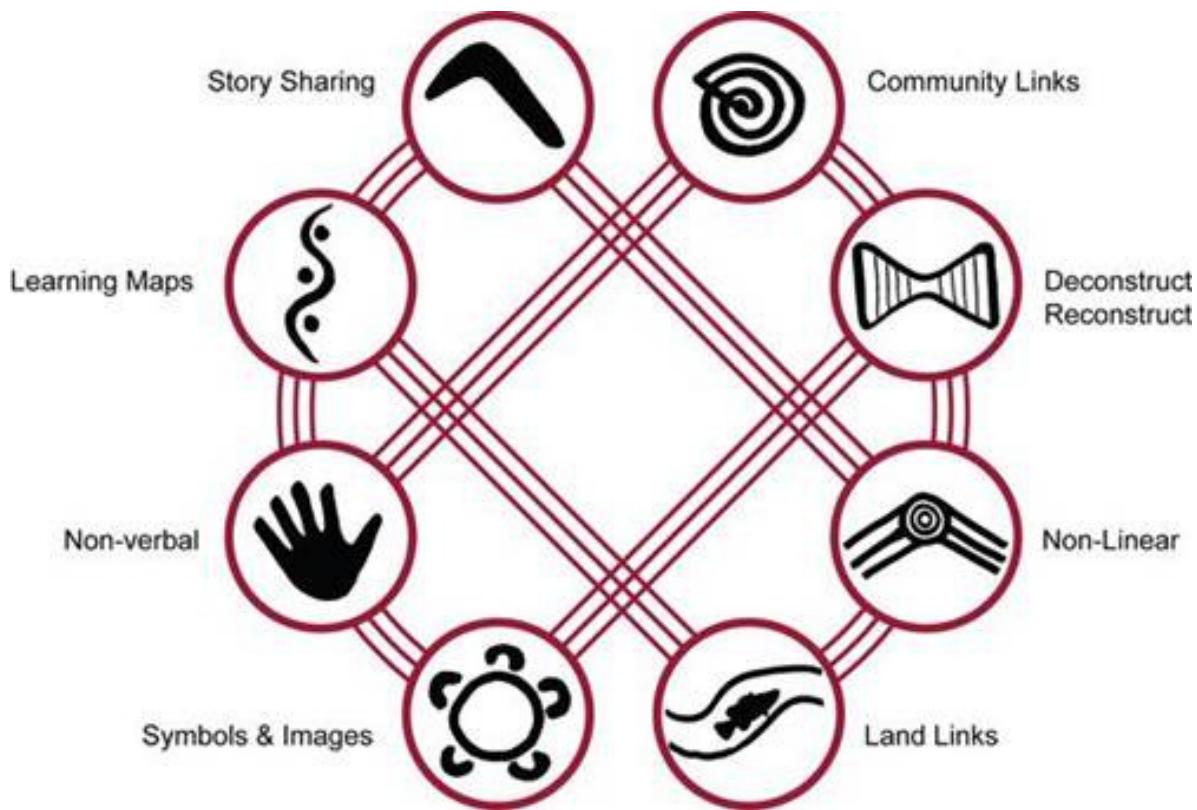
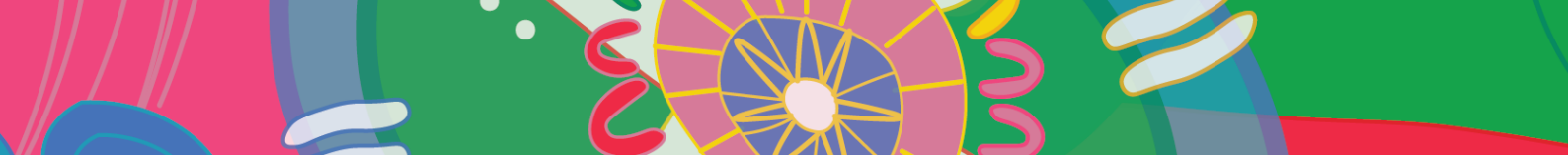
to value and provide culturally appropriate education to our First Nations students but also to enrich whole school communities.

It is no doubt that Fiona's circle work with us at the Peer Support event will have a real and lasting impact on all who attended and will flow through to creating many positives for the broader communities of those who attended. We are most grateful to Fiona Bobongie for sharing her time, experience and passion with us.

*Ainsley Robertson*

**Acknowledgement:** The 8ways or Aboriginal Pedagogy, belongs to a place, not a person or organisation. They came from country in Western New South Wales. Baakindji, Ngiyampaa, Yuwaalaraay, Gamilaraay, Wiradjuri, Wangkumarra and other nations own the knowledge's this framework came down from. So we acknowledge the Elders and Peoples from these nations.





Fiona Bobongie (right) and participants

### Term 3 Date Claimer

**TUES 3 August** - "Building Friendships and School Belonging" (*evening workshop*)- CRU Office **BRISBANE**

**FRI 13 August** - "From Vision to Inclusion" **ROCKHAMPTON**

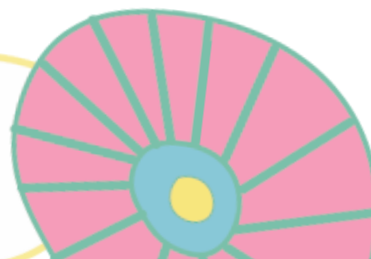
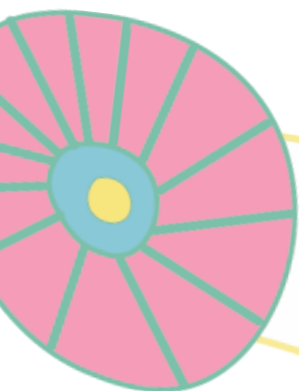
**THUR 19 August** - "From Vision to Inclusion" **CARINDALE**

**WED 25 August** - "From Vision to Inclusion" **TOOWOOMBA**

**TUES 31 August** - "Inclusive Education: What is it and why it matters?" - **ONLINE**



For all CRU events go to...  
[cru.org.au/events/](http://cru.org.au/events/)





## Find Us



<https://cru.org.au/families-for-inclusive-education/>



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