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‘Giving Back to Our Community’: The Retention of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disability Workforce in New South Wales, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia require culturally responsive services. The Australian government has committed to establishing strategies to increase the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disability workforce; however, there is scant research on the factors influencing retention. This study aimed to examine the factors that influence the retention of non-university qualified Aboriginal health, ageing and disability workers in New South Wales, and is a mixed-methods qualitative study. The Grounded Theory approach and an Indigenous decolonising methodological framework were applied along with the COREQ standards and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Quality Appraisal tool. Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines and principles for Indigenous research were addressed. Fifteen managers ($n = 6$) and employees ($n = 9$) working in the disability sector were interviewed, and 11 were Aboriginal. Five themes emerged from the data: commitment to client care; job and role conditions; support and respect; a culturally safe workplace; and organisation policy and strategic directions. Aboriginal employees clearly state that giving back to communities and families is a driving factor in their commitment to their role. We recommend that employers consider flexible work arrangements to support employees in delivering on this commitment.

1 | Introduction

Census data reports that one quarter of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia has a disability. Of this group, three-quarters have either a profound or moderate core activity limitation requiring assistance (ABS 2021a, 2021b), considerably higher than for the non-Indigenous population at 5.7% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2023). The main disability types reported by Aboriginal people are

physical, psychosocial and intellectual. In 2021, Indigenous people represented around 6.8% of people accessing the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS 2021), being overrepresented in the NDIS at nearly double that of the population proportion of non-Indigenous people (3.8%) (AIHW 2024). According to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (ABS 2016), Aboriginal people with disabilities reported significantly higher rates of disadvantage and inequality than non-Aboriginal people. In this article, we will use the term

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Aboriginal (unless otherwise stated in government documents or a quote, and when discussing the international context) as commonly preferred by the Indigenous people of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, where this study was conducted.

In 2013, Australia introduced the NDIS, a major national strategy to support Australians with a disability. Workforce retention remains a challenging issue in the NDIS, with turnover rates in the disability workforce increasing since its introduction, and between 17% and 25% of NDIS workers leaving their job annually (NDIS 2023, p193). In 2021, the Australian Government estimated that the total disability workforce would consist of over 350,000 people by 2024, 88% of whom would be disability support workers (Department of Social Services (DSS) 2021).

In response to the high prevalence of disability in the Aboriginal population, advocates have campaigned for increases in the Aboriginal disability workforce since the mid-1990s (Smeaton 1998; Gilroy et al. 2017). Aboriginal people experience 'racial-ableism', where disability is conflated with racism, thus 'pathologising' race and resulting in the deepening of oppression (Gilroy et al. 2023). This experience further underscores the imperative for a strong and proportionate Aboriginal disability workforce. However, identifying the proportion of Aboriginal people employed in the disability sector is problematic as the classifications used for Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) labour force surveys do not distinguish the disability sector as a separate occupational context. This sector is likely included in broader workforce categories such as 'Community and Personal Service Workers' (ABS 2022), a popular field of employment for Aboriginal people. This category accounts for 17.4% of total employment for this population in 2021 (ABS 2022) and includes workers in health and welfare support, hospitality and protective services.

Australian Aboriginal NDIS participants require access to services and support that are culturally responsive (NDIS 2021). Many Aboriginal scholars (for example: Gilroy et al. 2023; Avery 2018; Jones et al. 2023) have identified that an Aboriginal workforce is essential for culturally safe and equitable support for Aboriginal people with disability. The NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021–2025 (Department of Social Services (DSS) 2021) specifically identifies the need for the development of the Indigenous disability workforce to adequately support Aboriginal NDIS participants. The Australian government has committed to establishing Aboriginal workforce strategies to increase the size and proportion of this disability workforce (Department of Social Services (DSS) 2021). The largest of these include increasing the proportion of employment positions identified for Aboriginal people, career development pathways within the department and Aboriginal staff networks.

There is scant qualitative research on patterns of retention of the Aboriginal disability workforce. At the time that this study was undertaken, the Australian Government undertook the Royal Commission into the Violence, Abuse, and Neglect of People with Disability (Commonwealth of Australia 2023b). As part of this inquiry, a study was commissioned into the experiences of domestic violence of Aboriginal people with disability (Jones et al. 2023). The commissioned study report noted that Aboriginal workers and community-controlled organisations

are essential to provide culturally safe services for Aboriginal people with a disability. Two studies (Deroy and Schütze 2019; Bailey et al. 2021) conducted in other sectors provide some relevant insights. A study of the Aboriginal community-controlled health organisation (ACCHO) sector undertaken in the Northern Territory (NT) and NSW found that those who did enter the workforce experienced several barriers to retention and career advancement, such as: racism and discrimination; a lack of mentors and role models; isolation; a lack of education and training opportunities in remote parts of Australia; insufficient funding to support career development; a preponderance of short-term contracts; and inadequate remuneration (Bailey et al. 2020). This study also proposed several 'pillars of action' to improve recruitment and retention. These pillars include creating culturally safe, non-racist and respectful workplaces and organisations; investing in local people; and increasing effort in career development. The second study (Deroy and Schütze 2019) found the following five factors were most frequently cited as important in encouraging retention: cultural safety; teamwork and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health professionals; quality supervision; professional development; and recognition of skills and strengths that staff bring to their role. A similar study by the same authors (Deroy and Schütze 2021) emphasised social accountability, which occurs when an organisation ensures that its work is guided by community needs through '...open communication between decision makers, staff and community members...' (Deroy and Schütze 2021, p4), and is embedded in their governance processes.

Despite significant funding into programs designed to improve Aboriginal employment rates in general, it is recognised that little has changed since the introduction of Australia's 'Closing the Gap' (CTG) strategy in 2009 (Leroy-Dyer et al. 2022), a strategy which aims to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal people. Although the Government's Disability Sector Strengthening Plan has been in effect for a few years under the CTG strategy, there has been limited reported impact on the workforce (Closing the Gap, 2022). Since the development of the NDIS in 2013, there has also been government investment in supporting the Aboriginal disability workforce. In 2021, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) released their updated Aboriginal Engagement strategy (National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) 2021) to guide how the NDIA works with ACCHO's to build an Aboriginal workforce and an Indigenous community-driven disability service sector. The more recent NDIA First Nations Employment and Inclusion Plan 2022–2025 (National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) 2022) articulated an approach to expanding the Indigenous workforce to build a culturally safe NDIS service environment. Under these strategies, the Australian Government and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) partnered to create the Aboriginal Disability Liaison Program to resource ACCHO's to support Indigenous people to engage with the NDIS and to grow the Aboriginal disability workforce (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) 2023; National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) 2023). The Workforce Plan commits to 'help build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector to enhance culturally safe NDIS services', encouraging such services to register for the Scheme (Department

of Social Services (DSS) 2021, 30) and grow their Aboriginal disability workforce.

A comprehensive Federal government review of the NDIS was undertaken in 2023 to 'reset' the scheme to promote sustainability and acknowledge areas of underperformance (Commonwealth of Australia 2023a). Aboriginal NDIS participants often must make the choice between accessing culturally inappropriate services or not getting any services at all due to shortages of Aboriginal services in the disability sector. Previous studies have also identified this issue (Gilroy, Dew, et al. 2018; Ryall et al. 2019) The review reinforces the need for development of the Aboriginal workforce to provide culturally responsive disability services for Indigenous NDIS participants, exploring a range of options to address this long-standing issue.

A recent review and a report (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) 2024; National Disability Services (NDS) 2023) have both identified significant gaps in the current evidence base in the disability services sector. This is due to the historically strong focus on the health and community services sector under the CTG strategy, with the disability sector only considered a few years after the CTG strategy launch, to the frustration of advocates for Aboriginal people with disability (First Peoples Disability Network Australia 2011).

This study will explore the factors that contribute to retention of the Aboriginal disability workforce in front-line service delivery roles. Understanding retention factors is critical to building the Aboriginal disability workforce who are support workers working in homes, centres and in the community mostly. The study aimed to examine the factors that influence the retention of non-university qualified Aboriginal health, ageing and disability workers in NSW – the state in Australia with the largest population overall and the highest proportion of Aboriginal Australians according to the 2021 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2022). Here we report on the results of yarns with Aboriginal disability support workers and agency managers who work in the disability sector with Aboriginal people. For the purposes of this study, a disability support worker is defined as a person who is paid to provide support or services for a person with a disability (and from here on referred to as an Employee). An agency manager is defined as a person who was in a paid role to manage a disability service team. The culturally appropriate, culturally safe Indigenous method of 'yarning' was used in this study (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010), along with some interviews. In our experience, a mix of yarns and interviews is common in studies such as this with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. Participants' choice of approach is influenced by cultural context and the topic.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC) of NSW (1505/19) and the NSW Ministry of Health (2019/ETH08775).

Three of the authors, JGil, BR, and FT, are Aboriginal scholars with experience in health workforce research (all identify as male; one academic, one community elder, director of a university centre at the time of this study and one project manager). The other authors are non-Aboriginal scholars (all identify as female; three academics, one student and one in

private practice), and all but the student have long-standing engagement in Aboriginal health workforce research (Veli-Gold et al. 2023). JGilroy, Cda, KB, BR and FT all had established relationships with the participants' communities and manager organisations.

2 | Materials and Methods

This qualitative study is a sub-study of a larger mixed-methods study (Gilroy et al. 2021) which included an online self-report survey and yarning (Cooms et al. 2024). The manuscript on the quantitative self-report survey is currently being written and will be published separately.

2.1 | Indigenous Governance of the Research

This study was conceived by CIA JGilroy (Aboriginal scholar) and emerged from his extensive research and advocacy in the Aboriginal disability sector (Gilroy 2010, 2012; Gilroy et al. 2013, Gilroy and Smith-Merry 2019, Gilroy 2020, Gilroy et al. 2020). The research team also included those with long-standing experience in community-led and governed research (Gwynn et al. 2015; Gilroy, Lincoln, et al. 2018; Gwynne 2017). Key stakeholder organisations such as Indigenous Allied Health Australia and the AHMRC of NSW were partner organisations in the writing of the grant application supporting this work, and key members of the Indigenous community-led governance structure that was established and has been described in detail previously (Gilroy et al. 2021). This structure embedded community engagement and voice throughout the study. Community engagement protocols were drafted by the Aboriginal researchers on the study and reviewed by the Aboriginal Advisory committee. Capacity building of Aboriginal project staff occurred throughout the study in the processes of writing the ethics application, developing and implementing the online survey and yarns/interviews, and the data analysis and interpretation of results.

2.2 | Study Design

This mixed methods qualitative study applied a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2005, 2014; Thurston et al. 2015) and an Indigenous decolonising methodological framework that applies 'Indigenous knowledges, values and social practices' (Puszka et al. 2022) to research methods in order to disrupt non-Indigenous ways of doing and transform the research environment such that Indigenous experiences can be clearly heard (Tuhwai-Smith 1999; Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010; Gilroy, Dew, et al. 2018; Finlay and Kidd 2021; Gilroy et al. 2021).

This paper addressed the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines and principles for Indigenous research (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2018), and was guided by the COREQ standards (Dossett et al. 2021) for reporting on qualitative research and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Quality Appraisal Tool for appraising the quality of research conducted with this population (Harfield et al. 2018).

2.3 | Participants and Recruitment

The team initially sought to recruit participants from those who had previously completed our online survey (Gilroy et al. 2021). This survey explored factors that are enablers or barriers to the workforce retention of Aboriginal people in the NSW aged care, health and/or disability workforce. We identified those participants who had indicated in their survey responses that they either worked as a 'disability worker' or managed those working in the disability sector. We then asked those participants if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up in-depth interview/yarn. However, only two survey participants identified as disability workers, and one volunteered to be interviewed. To allow us to better explore retention issues with this group, we then widened our scope beyond those who had completed the survey and sought consent from other disability service employees and agency managers. We utilised a convenience and snowballing approach to recruitment, common approaches for qualitative disability research involving Aboriginal peoples (Gilroy, Dew, et al. 2018; Trounson et al. 2020).

This project was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Australia, the Government enforced regional and local 'lockdowns' which prohibited interstate and inter-regional travel, required physical distancing and restricted visitations and events. These requirements created many challenges for the research team and health and disability workers, such as mental stress, social isolation, loneliness and psychosocial traumas (Jones et al. 2020; Morgan and Boxall 2020; Van Rheenen et al. 2020). During this time, ACCHO's, Aboriginal Medical Services (AMSs), aged and disability services, and the health service system struggled with the demand for community support and acute COVID-19 care. The research team was mindful of this complex community context during recruitment and data collection, which only took place as advised by communities and organisations. We aimed to ensure that an already challenging situation was not exacerbated for these front-line workers. This limited the available pool of participants.

2.4 | Procedure

All yarns/interviews were conducted by Zoom or phone due to travel restrictions during the COVID epidemic. The majority of participants were Aboriginal and adopted a yarning approach (four non-Aboriginal participants). Yarning is a traditional Aboriginal practice of informal discussion, which may include shared matters such as country and community, and in research is distinct from the non-Aboriginal methods of interview and focus groups. Online yarning is an emerging form of yarning (Cooms et al. 2024). Yarning centres on relationship building (including with the researcher), and only when a relationship is tacitly established does research-related information gathering proceed (Cooms et al. 2024; Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). In building relationships, yarning rejects the power imbalances of colonial research practices (Cooms et al. 2024;), establishing mutual respect and an equitable basis for information sharing. Some have described Indigenous research, including yarning, as 'a political act of resistance' (Cooms et al. 2024, 169).

The participants who consented to a yarn/interview were contacted by email and phone by the study's Aboriginal project manager (FT) or the Indigenous CIA (Gilroy) to arrange a time to meet. Initially, the Aboriginal project manager (FT) and a non-Aboriginal CI (JGwynn) with experience in qualitative methods conducted the yarns/interviews together. However, once FT gained experience in the methods, he conducted the remainder himself or with the Indigenous CIA (JGilroy). All yarns/interviews were audio-recorded and were between 30 and 60 min.

The development of the yarning/interview guide and prompts was led by the two Aboriginal researchers (FT and JGilroy) and informed by themes derived from responses to the online survey (Gilroy et al. 2021; methods paper under review). The research team considered the survey data and relevant literature, workshopped key questions and prompts, and then submitted these to the study reference group (Birt et al. 2016) for feedback and approval. A bespoke Indigenous art piece was developed by an Aboriginal allied health worker to help promote the project (Gilroy et al. 2021).

Yarns/interviews were transcribed verbatim by a trained transcriber who is an Aboriginal person familiar with Aboriginal English, and all data were stored according to ethical requirements.

2.5 | Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was applied. All transcripts were read, cross-checked with participant codes to confirm correct participant gender and age, and had identifying information removed to maintain confidentiality. De-identified transcripts were then imported into NVivo 12 (Lumivero 2023) software. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases to guide thematic analysis were applied: data familiarisation, generation of codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting on findings.

2.6 | Employee Data

Two Aboriginal (FT and JGilroy) and two non-Aboriginal members of the research team (SP and JGwynn) initially read and discussed three employee transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data and take field notes. The two non-Aboriginal researchers then conducted line-by-line inductive coding to determine initial codes that were then merged into initial thematic areas and provisionally named based on the cluster of codes. All four team members then engaged in a reflexive dialogue to confirm the themes. Remaining transcripts were coded deductively, and themes evolved as new codes were created. These team members led an iterative process with the remaining team members, and interpretations and understandings of the data were discussed. Consensus regarding the names and content of employee themes was reached.

2.7 | Agency Manager Data

Once the employee data analysis was completed, the team then considered the managers' data separately. Five members of the

TABLE 1 | Summary of participant details.

Demographics		Employee (<i>n</i> = 9)	Manager (<i>n</i> = 6)
Geographical location of organisation ^a	Remote/Very remote		0
	Inner regional		4
	Outer regional		0
	Major city		2 ^b
Sex ^c	Male	4	1
	Female	5	5
Organisation sector	Disability (general)	5	1
	Aged care and disability	3	0
	Child/Adolescent and disability	0	3
	Medical service (Indigenous)	1	2
Organisational type	Non-government organisation (NGO)	5	4
	ACCHS	1	2
	Local government	3	0
Indigenous status ^d	Non-Aboriginal	0	4
	Aboriginal	9	2

^aABS. 1270.0.55.005 Australian statistical geography standard (ASGS): volume 5—remoteness structure. 2016. Canberra ACT.

^bServicing inner and/or outer, remote, very remote NSW.

^cPreferred pronoun not requested.

^dThis study uses the term Aboriginal as commonly preferred by the Indigenous people of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, where this study was conducted. There were no Torres Strait Islander participants in this study.

team (FT, JGilroy, JG, KB, and CD) conducted an initial reading of the transcripts, then met to discuss and code the interviews, with initial themes emerging from this iterative process. The two Aboriginal team members, FT and JGilroy, then met with the Elder (BR) on the research team to further interrogate the data and consider the emerging themes. JGwynn and JGilroy reviewed the transcripts, discussed and agreed on final themes. Field notes were kept throughout to assist in the construction of themes.

The triangulation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers' engagement in the data analysis process ensured the validity and rigour of the data in capturing cultural nuances (Gilroy, Dew, et al. 2018; Fitts et al. 2019). Researchers used ongoing reflexive dialogue throughout the analysis process to ensure perceptions and background did not influence the interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3 | Results

A total of 15 people agreed to participate in this study (Table 1). Of these, nine were Aboriginal disability employees [4 individual interviews and 2 focus groups (*n* = 5)] and six were managers of disability service providers [4 individual interviews, 1 focus group (*n* = 2)]. Two managers were Aboriginal. One employee was also interviewed as a manager for the same organisation. Three disability employees worked in home-care services caring for those who were frail aged or had a disability, the remainder in services that received NDIS funding. All the managers

worked in services with NDIS funding, and 2 in services that also provided child and adolescent services.

Five themes influencing the retention of employees in the disability services sector emerged: commitment to client care; job and role conditions; support and respect; a culturally safe workplace; organisation policy and strategic directions. Within each of these five themes, we categorised codes as 'push' or 'pull' to capture retention factors discussed by participants.

Themes emerging from the 'Managers' data, whilst similar, also included a range of workplace 'contextual' factors, as would be expected given the different nature of their roles, for example, protocols and Human Resource policies. As the themes from both groups were related and informed one another, these were grouped to provide further insight into retention factors.

3.1 | THEME 1: Commitment to Client Care

This theme emerged largely from the analysis of the 'Employees' data (all Aboriginal participants) with all yarns, including a strong focus on client care.

Employees were uniformly committed to quality client care. A striking feature of these yarns was that most struggled to reflect on their own experience of work and continuously pulled the yarn back to focus on issues of client needs and experience. Employees stated that they stay with agencies if they feel they have sufficient autonomy to provide flexible, quality care for

people with disabilities. A number described the challenge of staying within the ‘rules’:

most people [employees] feel like they’re doing the right thing, but they know... the rules are there for a reason but sometimes the rules make ... it hard to just tell [a client] that’s you know is falling apart in front of you some pre-rehearsed line that has no response.
(E1)

I feel we will go outside the box for our people more. Um, cause I guess we see... more of a community driven role so going outside the box just sort of comes with the territory.
(EFG2)

Rigid guidelines and policies were described as restricting the quality of cultural care for Indigenous people with disability, with employees identifying the need for manager guidelines that support them to ‘take more of a holistic approach’:

I found that if you just let them know and I always say to [Manager], I feel um disrespectful when I have to go in there and tell an elder or somebody like an aunt or an uncle and be like this is what we have to do.
(E8)

Others expressed a preference:

...to work for an Indigenous organisation purely because our mob are more disadvantaged, I feel and I prefer to um help focus on the issues that are in my community before looking outwards.
(EFG2)

One employee (E2) described a disability support accommodation facility (not participating in this study) as one that:

... couldn’t care as much for the client” and described the agency’s structure in supporting Indigenous people as a “...very white man’s way” speaking to the culturally inappropriate way in which the agency controlled and regulated the lives of the residents.

3.2 | THEME 2: Job and Role Conditions

Participants described a range of employment conditions, roles and responsibilities impacting workforce retention and reported that having a work-life balance is important. The provision of leave entitlements or allowances to attend local Indigenous community events was identified as a key factor in retention. These events include National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC), when Australia celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Sorry Business (the period from when a community member dies up to and sometimes following their

funeral). These events are important in enabling Indigenous employees to engage with their community. One manager stated that they found:

... that the lack of cultural understanding be a part of a lack of retention [of Indigenous employees]. Um I find that, you know, like little things that mean big things for us such as Sorry Business. Workplaces not allowing our people to go out and have extra time off for Sorry Business, um and to give consideration, the high death rates that we have in our communities ...
(M4)

The participants also described income and workload as important factors. Both managers and employees reported that Aboriginal employees often do tasks outside their position description.

Yes all the time, all the time. I find myself going above and beyond because I know how hard it is for a child in particular to get onto the NDIS... and hav(ing) the families feel comfortable.
(M7)

As also discussed in the previous theme on ‘Commitment to Client Care’, Aboriginal employees expressed a desire for managers to be supportive of their role flexibility to meet client needs.

the only thing that would make me leave is um you know if management got a little bit tougher and said that we can’t go outside the box and do stuff for these kids.
(EFG2)

Participants reported that Aboriginal employees and managers work longer hours than non-Indigenous employees. The key reasons given were that Aboriginal families often had complex needs and that community members approached them through informal channels outside of work hours (e.g., messaging on Facebook or calling around to their house). There was an obvious commitment to supporting community members and recognition that informal channels were an important avenue of contact.

Employees reported that, despite some believing that salaries did not reflect the workforce conditions, Aboriginal staff felt rewarded for giving back to the community, teaching non-Indigenous staff about Aboriginal culture and helping participants and their families. One employee described the importance of giving back to the community as a key factor in keeping employees in the disability services sector:

... it’s more of the satisfaction knowing that you’re able to help and participate and become a part of that community. As I say I haven’t been here for

very long so being welcomed into Wiradjuri ... it's been good to be able to be welcome and accepted.

(E8)

Similarly, two employees (P1 and P2) yarning together (EFG1) explained the importance of working with and giving to the community and mentoring young generations of Indigenous people:

P1: Well giving back you're giving, by giving, I think by giving back you're up skilling you know our juniors to get into the workforce, up skilling them to get jobs where they're giving back to the community as well.

P2: Creating, creating independence.

P1: Yeah.

P2: Like [P1] was saying passing knowledge down to our next generation, teaching them what they're required to for their upcoming journey into the workforce.

3.3 | THEME 3: Support and Respect

Participants reported that they enjoy working in a supportive team environment that is culturally diverse, safe and respectful.

...you can ask questions and you're not going to get ... told I'm busy I'm doing this and you know ask someone else... [they] easily take two seconds out of their day to just tell you what you need to know.

(E1)

Employees reported on the importance of feeling supported and respected in the workplace. Employee One summarised this point by saying:

...it all comes down to your management, staff, and your bosses and who you have around you. If they're not going to take what you or your clients and that seriously and do put things into place then there's no point in dealing with them, you might as well just go on your way...

(E6)

The managers described the importance of team building and communication to building a respectful workforce.

(we) run training every second year in regard to team building a communication-based skill building to say that everybody communicates differently.

(M1)

Respect was seen as an important aspect of a positive workplace and reflective of good relationships and communication in the team.

I think just um everybody understanding, has an understanding of each other. Um I think the best workplace conditions comes from the individuals not the actual workplace itself into understanding that everybody has um their own, their barriers and their own history and their own experience, everybody's an individual and you don't hire a team visualising everyone is the same.

(M1)

'Managers' observed that respect was an important component of a positive workplace and included a close relationship with the employee, a very accessible and involved manager, and good support for the employee through routine mentoring (not ad-hoc) and supervision. Strategies such as a 'buddy' system, team-building exercises, a daily debrief, good communication and manager accessibility and involvement were described as effective.

Providing individual-level support was seen by managers as important, with one saying:

...if there's a complex client I will get my staff members to actually call me, even if I'm busy I'll always stop what I'm doing, drop everything that I'm doing just to have a debrief For example I had a client yesterday, very complex needs, she's 18 years old and she ... was going to Court for assault and she's been avoiding going to Court for three months and so I was teaching all day yesterday as well and I said to my staff member, take her to Court and call me as soon as she's finished so that we can have a quick debrief.

(M4)

The participants discussed the importance of supportive colleagues and the challenges that occur when this does not exist.

I've seen other workplaces where, you know, there's some people that are trying their best to do everything whereas there's other people that are just there for their nine to five and don't really care and often times the people that do get stuck with the most workload...

(E1)

One employee described their frustration with their management and that they are:

even at the part now where I'm even contemplating about leaving this job because they don't care.

(E6)

3.4 | THEME 4: A Culturally Safe and Diverse Workplace

Cultural safety at work was described by managers as including Aboriginal managers/leaders, involving Elders as important connectors with the community, the responsibility of the entire workplace and as important for clients, with one manager saying:

They (clients) feel uncomfortable in their own homes but when they had the Aboriginal employees they don't have to be somebody that they're not and they don't have to pretend.

(M4)

The existence of a Reconciliation Action Plan and the presence of 'signals' such as the Indigenous flag were also seen to represent cultural safety in the workplace.

Racism was a factor discussed by all managers. Whilst responses to incidents of racism varied to some degree, most organisations had strategies in place that ensured that incidents were escalated to the manager, who then followed up quickly and ensured performance management was put in place. Managers reported that staff had become more confident to call out racism and believed that their organisations had good processes in place to report incidents.

A number of employees confirmed that they were gaining confidence to call out racism in the workplace:

... racism still exists ... we're all aware of it, it can be a bit of a hard road sometimes because sometimes you're battling something that you know you can't win and yes it is more common for people to speak up about racism now. Um I guess it's always been in the community but for people to speak up and say, "you know that's wrong, that's not right.

(EFG2)

Some managers also reported on experiences of racism in the community, with one noting that a few employees had experienced community pushback on wearing their t-shirts with an Aboriginal logo (M3).

Employees reported on their experiences of racism in previous workplaces as a factor that could lead to them leaving their position, citing personal comments such as 'you don't look Aboriginal' (E6) and getting their job because of 'quotas on employing Aboriginal (people)' (E1). Participants reported that they like working in a culturally diverse workplace. A workplace that respects cultural diversity was discussed in the context of cultural safety, but the two features were not sharply demarcated. One employee explained this meant they:

...treat you with kindness and respect and that's what I expect ... [and] don't make fun of someone because they have a certain belief or a certain culture.

(E6)

Reference to 'diversity' was largely around cultural diversity, including Aboriginal culture; however, one manager noted that their organisation 'have a very strong commitment to diversity in all our job advertisements ... [and] promote employment of people with disability... [and] diverse cultural groups' (M3).

The participants reported that respect for Aboriginal cultures and protocols is essential to respecting cultural diversity. An employee gave an account of why they see cultural awareness as broader than just Aboriginal people:

When they ask questions about why we don't celebrate Australia Day, why, you know, why, why do we celebrate NADIOC week? Why, you know like when they want an understanding of our culture and then you know you can sit, because I work with a multicultural group now so I want to know why the Nepalis ... you know I want to know about their culture too to get an understanding.

(E2)

3.5 | THEME 5: Organisation Policy and Strategic Directions

This theme was largely derived from the managers' yarns as they discussed policy and strategic directions more than employees, as might be expected. They raised the importance of flexible policy arrangements that enable Indigenous employees to undertake their roles. One manager reported that their organisation has HR policies for Indigenous staff:

...they're very supportive because there's a few that have had to take urgent leave ... The logistics of HR side [for Aboriginal staff to take] extended leave due to personal issues with family and yeah Sorry business so yeah. And I think because we've got um a District Manager who is Aboriginal and is, yeah well aware of what's happening on community as well.

(M7)

Managers discussed the importance of the Code of Conduct for all staff.

[staff are] respectful in everything [they] do is really important and treating people with dignity; so dignity, respect, open communication, making sure that people have a fair go, that people may need to learn some additional skills, making sure they get access to that learning.

(M3)

Managers expressed the importance of organisational policies to respect and respond to cultural diversity in the community and the workforce. They also reported that a commitment to learning and career development, as well as good WHS measures, was part of a positive workplace culture.

3.6 | Community Feedback and Policy Impact

Learning from the experiences of past health and disability research projects, we adopted a community-focused approach to providing feedback on our results. The Aboriginal scholar who was CIA in the study held art shows in Aboriginal communities across NSW to discuss study results in a community accessible format. These events were attended by local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and NSW ACCHOs. In addition, research findings were presented to key stakeholders and peak organisations such as the NACCHO, the NDIA (the government organisation that manages the NDIS) via their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory committee, the NSW Local Health District Advisory committee and NSW Health Aboriginal staff. The team partnered with NACCHO to deliver an Aboriginal workforce conference and submit policy recommendations on this workforce to Australian Federal Government agencies.

4 | Discussion

Undertaken during the COVID lockdown period in NSW, workers in the disability services sector generously voiced their experiences of the factors that influence the retention of the Aboriginal disability workforce. Our research, although limited to a small sample, offers rich insights into retention factors that benefit disability service provider practice and government policy.

Our study supports the findings of Deroy and Schütze (2019) concept of 'social accountability,' which is directly relevant to our study. Participants reported that Aboriginal workers felt that their roles in disability services enabled them to give back to their communities and families (Theme 1). Giving back to community is an essential part of Aboriginal culture and 'Lore' (complex traditional system of Aboriginal law that existed prior to colonisation) (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2018). The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council reported that many local Aboriginal people work with non-Aboriginal practitioners, such as Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists, to ensure the knowledge of allied health is properly blended with traditional culture and lore (Gilroy, Dew, et al. 2018; Ryall et al. 2019). As skilled and respected community-centric people in their communities, Aboriginal employees have a very strong commitment to providing flexible, culturally appropriate care for people with disability. This requires a high degree of employee autonomy in how they manage their time, provide support to their clientele and how they work within their cultural obligations. Employees value managers who demonstrate compassion for clients and community connection by giving back to community and families. A concerning reason why Aboriginal employees 'contemplate leaving' is the perception that their managers 'just do not care' about them and/or the agency's clientele and/or about Indigenous people with disability in the local community (Theme 3).

Both employees and managers raised their concerns that organisations require policies and codes of conduct that respond to the cultural diversity of the community and the workforce (Theme 5). Similar to other studies (Humphreys et al. 2009; Gilroy

et al. 2023), Aboriginal people in this study find racism and discrimination important factors to both workplace dissatisfaction and intention to leave their employer (Theme 4). Although managers discuss agency and government policies and procedures more than employees, it is these foundations that enable workplaces to prevent and respond to racism and provide learning and development and career paths for Aboriginal workers (Theme 5). Initiatives such as cultural competence training and mentoring for managers and workers have helped reduce racism in the disability workplace, having a positive impact on the workplace satisfaction of Indigenous workers (Larson et al. 2007; Australian Human Rights Commission 2024) (Theme 4). This supports Aboriginal employees in providing quality care for people with disability and reducing intention to leave the workforce.

Aboriginal employees in this study valued workplace culture and job conditions more than the 'type' of organisation they work for (Theme 2). Reflecting on the existing research around the Aboriginal workforce, it is apparent that job role, workplace conditions and salaries are considered important (Deroy and Schütze 2019; Bailey et al. 2021). However, these conditions must be blended and considered together with the employees' culture and 'Lore' obligations in serving the local Aboriginal communities (Theme 4).

Our study supports the conclusions of Bailey et al. (2020) and Deroy and Schütze (2021) that Aboriginal workers need appropriate workplace conditions that create a work-life balance (Theme 2). The participants in this study reported that Aboriginal workers do more work hours outside of their allocated work schedule than non-Indigenous workers. Often these tasks form part of family obligations and business, such as helping an Elder or young parents of children with disability. Thus, managers must closely consider the potential for workplace and personal burn-out of Aboriginal employees (Theme 3). We recommend that this workplace factor be included in employment conditions and contracts for Aboriginal employees (Theme 2). The participants in our study confirmed that allowances for leave to attend cultural events are essential components of work-life balance HR policies for Aboriginal workers. The absence of these cultural components led to workplace dissatisfaction (Theme 4). These workplace features require further study to understand what is in place and what needs to be developed to support Aboriginal disability workers in their role (Theme 3).

In this context, the Australian Government's NDIS Workforce Plan seems a meagre response to address workforce retention. Many employees might agree with the NDIA that Aboriginal-run services are better at recognising and facilitating high-quality care for participants and giving Indigenous staff good working conditions. However, simply registering more ACCHOs to the NDIS will not address the unmet needs of Aboriginal people with disabilities. Similar to the Disability Royal Commission report findings, we suggest that Aboriginal employees and people with disabilities should have a wider choice of service providers than is currently available. Choice of providers and workers is essential to a culturally safe service environment.

We also suggest that ACCHOs and disability service providers could be funded to work with the main providers in regions

with a high proportion of Aboriginal people to help develop an organisational culture that addresses the issues raised by employees in our research. Employees in the study reported that cultural diversity is highly important in the disability sector. Creating Aboriginal-led learning partnerships under the banner of respect for multi-culturalism could bring more Aboriginal people into the sector, encourage those there to stay and model the respect and inclusion that the Aboriginal workforce is saying should be more common than it is today (Gilroy et al. 2017).

5 | Conclusions

This Aboriginal-led study reports on factors that influence the retention of the non-university-educated Aboriginal disability workforce in Australia. We identified five themes influencing the retention of employees in the disability services sector: commitment to client care; job and role conditions; support and respect; a culturally safe work environment; organisation policy and strategic directions. Our results support findings from previous studies on factors that attract and retain Aboriginal employees. These include: the need for organisations and managers to create inclusive, culturally safe workplaces with a zero-tolerance approach to racism; explicit welcome of Aboriginal people; proactive engagement with Aboriginal leaders and organisations; respect for cultural obligations; and work-life balance.

Our findings particularly highlight the need for organisations to build in flexible work arrangements in order to support Aboriginal disability workers to meet client needs and cultural obligations. All Aboriginal employees in this study emphatically placed a high value on giving back to their community. Implementation of flexible work arrangements addresses these important findings. These arrangements are largely influenced by employment contracts designed within state/national workplace agreements and policy, and by organisational mission. Study participants called for greater flexibility within these constraints, particularly regarding when and where leave can be taken and when their services are needed. Participants also identified that they were often called to see clients or discuss issues related to clients 'after hours' or outside of the home or clinic, and that this was outside the scope of their job description. Flexible work arrangements can demonstrate trust and value in the employee, protect the employee's workplace rights and may address the belief held by some employees that their managers did not 'care about them' or their clients. Addressing these factors has the potential to improve organisational capacity to retain Aboriginal disability workers, thus building an experienced and skilled workforce able to provide tailored, culturally responsive support to Aboriginal people with a disability.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization and funding acquisition: JGIL, ML, KB, JG, CA, KG, BR; Indigenous methodology: JGIL, FT, BR; Design of study and data collection tools: JGIL, FT, KB, JG, CA, KG, BR; data analysis and interpretation: JGIL, JG, FT, KB, SP, BR; Writing, review and editing: JGIL, JG, FT, KB, SP, CA, KG, AH, BR, ML.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data used to support the findings of this study are restricted by the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW Ethics Committee in order to protect participant privacy. Data are available from Josephine Gwynn (josephine.gwynn@sydney.edu.au) for researchers who meet the criteria for access to confidential data.

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