



Gayaa Dhuwi
(Proud Spirit)
Australia

**NATIONAL
IMPACT
PLATFORM
2025-2028**



**Gayaa Dhuwi
(Proud Spirit)
Australia**

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Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we live, work, and play, and pay respect to Elders past and present.

Artist acknowledgement: Aunty Roma Winmar created our visual identity in 2015. The artist explains the work as three tiers (starting from the bottom right hand corner) representing different people talking with each other, at various stages and on state, regional, national levels, about health, wellbeing, empowerment, and leadership. From there, it shows alliances and conversations with international community. It is about people coming together to find ways of understanding and acknowledging problems, and developing pathways and responses that lead to action that is practical, progressive, needs based, relevant to current situations, and that strengthens resilience and builds capacity in the collective: within the structure of the community.

OUR MEMBERS



Australian Indigenous
Psychologists Association



Recognition statement

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and water on which we live, work, and learn. We recognise and respect the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, communities, and cultures.

We celebrate over 65,000 years of continuing connection to Country and culture, acknowledging the profound strength, resilience, and creativity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, who have thrived despite the ongoing effects of colonisation, systemic discrimination, and intergenerational trauma (Dudgeon, Milroy and Walker, 2014; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014).

As a member-based organisation, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia deeply values the input and guidance of its members. Their lived experiences, leadership, and advocacy are central to shaping our vision and advancing our collective mission to achieve transformative change in social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention for our Peoples (Milroy et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021).

We are committed to listening, learning, and walking alongside our members and communities in the pursuit of culturally safe, equitable, and effective mental health systems. Together, we can create a future where our communities not only survive but thrive, where suicide rates are drastically reduced, mental health is prioritised, and the resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are celebrated (National Mental Health Commission, 2024; Lowitja Institute, 2023).

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Established in late March 2020, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (Gayaa Dhuwi) is the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention leadership body. It is governed and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak bodies working in these areas, promoting collective excellence in mental health care across the country.

Foreword



Gayaa Dhuwi is proud to present its National Impact Platform for 2025-28. This platform outlines our strategic approach to advocating for systemic reform, guided by the cultural strengths, lived experiences, and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention, our role is to ensure that every aspect of the Australian mental health system is culturally safe, equitable, and reflective of the needs of our communities. This platform serves as both a vision and a roadmap to achieving these goals by 2028.



Through collaboration with our members, advisory councils and collaborative networks, and broader networks, we will work tirelessly to advocate for meaningful change. This platform represents our commitment to achieving a 'best of both worlds approach' of combining cultural and clinical practices, strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across all levels of the Australian mental health system, and prioritising the voices of those with lived experience.

We recognise that transforming systems is not a task we undertake alone. The National Impact Platform is grounded in partnership, because real and lasting reform is only possible when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are not just heard, but lead the way. Our collective strength lies in a shared commitment to self-determination, cultural integrity, and accountability to the communities we serve.

As we look to the future, we remain committed to creating environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples enjoy happy, healthy lives, with high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "H. Milroy".

Professor Helen Milroy AM

Chair, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

(Pictured, top)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel Fishlock".

Rachel Fishlock

CEO, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

(Pictured, bottom)

Executive summary

The Gayaa Dhuwi National Impact Platform 2024-28 sets a bold agenda for achieving transformative change in social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Guided by the principles of the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration, this platform outlines strategic priorities and actionable policy reforms to ensure culturally safe, equitable, and effective mental health systems across Australia (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2015).

As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention, Gayaa Dhuwi is committed to embedding the voices, leadership, and cultural strengths of our Peoples at every level of decision-making and service delivery. This platform builds on a “best of both worlds” approach, combining cultural and clinical care models to achieve the highest attainable mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The platform is structured around four strategic priorities:

- **Lead:** Gayaa Dhuwi is the nationally inclusive and representative voice, leader, and advocate for systemic change.
- **Connect:** Gayaa Dhuwi is people centred and has developed co-design methods that ensure community perspectives are included in system decisions.
- **Influence:** Gayaa Dhuwi develops and promotes evidence that supports systemic change towards integrated cultural and clinical care to achieve a best of both worlds approach.
- **Transform:** Gayaa Dhuwi influences the transformation of the Australian mental health system through policy, partnerships, and advocacy.

The platform incorporates a robust consultation framework, which engages Gayaa Dhuwi's members, councils, and collaborative networks to ensure diverse perspectives inform advocacy and policy development. Broader public engagement provides additional inclusivity, ensuring the platform reflects the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Progress on these priorities will be measured and reported through the Annual Impact Report, informed by a monitoring and evaluation framework and aligned with national agreements, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks, 2020). This ensures transparency, continuous improvement, and alignment with community aspirations.

This impact platform represents a critical step in addressing systemic inequities, promoting cultural safety, and achieving sustainable mental health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It calls for collective action and commitment from governments, organisations, and communities to build a future where our people thrive.

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Introduction

Gayaa Dhuwi is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. Our role is to lead and advocate for systemic change that places the voices, strengths, and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples at the centre of national policies and reforms.

This National Impact Platform 2024-2028 is a key document that defines our strategic vision, priorities, and actions to transform the Australian mental health system. It is underpinned by the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2015; Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks, 2020; Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2022).

Through this platform, we aim to ensure the mental health system is culturally safe, equitable, and effective in achieving the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2015).

Our National Impact Platform

Our National Impact Platform 2024-2028 (the platform) represents the cornerstone of Gayaa Dhuwi's strategic approach to systemic reform and advocacy. This platform outlines the key national, strategic, and systemic priorities that guide our efforts to transform mental health and suicide prevention systems to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

At its core, the platform embodies the principles of social and emotional wellbeing, cultural and clinical approaches, self-determination, and thriving communities (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2015).

It serves as a roadmap for advocating for policies that promote equity, cultural safety, and leadership at every level of the mental health system. This approach ensures that policy reforms are guided by evidence, cultural strengths, and the lived experiences of our people.

How it works

The platform is built on the four foundational pillars of our strategic priorities:

- 1. Lead:** We are the nationally inclusive and representative voice advocating for systemic reform. We champion Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, ensuring our voices are central to decisions impacting social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention.
- 2. Connect:** Community is at the heart of all we do. Through robust co-design methods, we bring together members, advisory councils, and collaborative networks to inform and shape our policy positions.
- 3. Influence:** Evidence underpins our advocacy. By developing and promoting compelling research and data, we drive systemic change toward a best of both worlds approach that combines cultural and clinical care models.
- 4. Transform:** We work to influence and shape the Australian mental health system through partnerships, advocacy, and collaboration. Our efforts aim to create lasting change, embedding cultural safety and reducing disparities in social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention outcomes.

What It Includes

The platform provides the overarching framework for our policy positions, submissions, and advocacy initiatives. It is supported by co-design processes with our members, policy and subcommittees, and public stakeholders, ensuring our priorities reflect the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Within this framework, specific targeted responses address priority cohorts and issues, guided by evidence-based recommendations.

Our work aligns with national agreements and frameworks, including the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration, National Agreement on Closing the Gap, National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2015; Australian Government & Coalition of Peaks, 2020; Australian Government, 2022). This ensures that our platform not only drives systemic reform but also contributes to achieving shared national objectives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention.



Figure 1: National Impact Platform

Our vision is the highest attainable standard of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.			
Our values are cultural protocols and respect, community empowerment, leadership and excellence.			
Our National Impact Platform defines the key strategic, systemic and national priorities that guide our policy and advocacy agenda.			
Lead: Gayaa Dhuwi is the nationally inclusive and representative voice, leader, and advocate for systemic change.	Connect: Gayaa Dhuwi is people centred and has developed co-design methods that ensure community perspectives are included in system decisions.	Influence: Gayaa Dhuwi develops and promotes evidence that supports systemic change toward integrated cultural and clinical care to achieve a best of both worlds approach.	Transform: Gayaa Dhuwi influences the transformation of the Australian mental health system through policy partnerships, and advocacy.
<p>Our ways of working are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We take time to listen to communities, Elders, and people with lived experience who give us guidance for our work. We support those who have come before us. • Co-design comes in many forms and is facilitated to meet the individual needs of each community, to ensure sustainable outcomes. • We draw on our unique cultural ways of knowing, being, and doing. Through these protocols we ensure the evidence tells the complex stories of our people and supports changes to Australia's mental health system. • We seek leadership, we watch, and we listen, before doing. We connect community and stakeholders through in-depth engagement with appropriate cultural groups with diverse knowledge. 			
Our consultation framework ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, cultural strengths, and lived experiences are central to shaping the National Impact Platform, guiding our advocacy and reform efforts through inclusive and transparent engagement processes.			
Our policy positions, submissions, and reports advocate for targeted policy reforms that address the unique needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, ensuring systemic change aligns with cultural, community, and evidence-based insights.			
Our members are central to everything we do and guide our national policy priorities, policy positions, submissions, and reports.			

Priority One: Lead

This priority emphasises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in driving systemic change across the mental health and suicide prevention sectors.

Case for change

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is essential for creating a culturally safe and responsive mental health system. Despite progress, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices remain underrepresented in key decision-making roles, limiting the effectiveness and cultural integrity of reforms (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2024). Self-determination must be central to governance and service delivery to ensure meaningful outcomes (Lowitja Institute, 2023). Current governance structures often fail to reflect the knowledge, lived experiences, and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). This can change by adopting and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander models that recognise knowledge and cultural authority, not just institutional power (Bauman et al., 2015).

Policy priorities

- 1. National leadership roles:** Advocate for the establishment of dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership positions in all national and state-level mental health governance structures to drive culturally informed decision-making
- 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership development programs:** Advocate for and facilitate access to leadership pathways, including mentoring and training programs, to support the growth of emerging and established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders in mental health and suicide prevention.
- 3. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance models:** Promote the adoption of governance structures that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing, ensuring that cultural values are embedded at every level of decision-making.
- 4. Cultural integrity:** uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of validating knowledge, recognising authority, and obligation by maintaining spaces and platforms for the voices of those with knowledge and authority but not necessarily positions of non-Indigenous institutional or societal power (e.g. frontline workers, young people, Elders).

Priority Two: Connect

This priority focuses on fostering strong partnerships and ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are central to decision-making in mental health and suicide prevention.

Case for change

Connection to family, community, and culture is a cornerstone of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing (Gee et al., 2014; Dudgeon, Milroy and Walker, 2014). However, systemic barriers often exclude communities from shaping the policies and services that affect them (Calma, Dudgeon and Bray, 2017). Strengthening connections between governments, community-controlled organisations, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is vital to achieving culturally safe, effective outcomes (Wright et al., 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of identities, such as gender, disability, or geographic location (rurality/remoteness), significantly impacts connection, requiring tailored and inclusive approaches to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples receive appropriate support (Smith and Lloyd, 2020; Lowitja Institute, 2023).

Policy priorities

- 1. Formal Recognition of the social and emotional wellbeing workforce:** Advocate for the development of a national certification, accreditation, and recognition framework for all workers in the social and emotional wellbeing sector, ensuring their critical role is integrated into mental health systems. This would include formal funding pathways for social and emotional wellbeing services and clear career progression opportunities to address workforce shortages and inequities.
- 2. National Co-Design Framework for Mental Health Services:** Push for the establishment of a national co-design framework that mandates co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in mental health policy, program development, and service delivery. This framework should be supported by funding and accountability measures to ensure genuine engagement.
- 3. Increased investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations:** Promote targeted funding to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations, enabling them to deliver culturally safe and locally tailored mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, and suicide prevention services.
- 4. Relational approach to sector coordination:** making change through relationship-building and cultural safety rather than competition.

Priority Three: Influence

This priority focuses on advancing evidence-based policy and data sovereignty to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Case for change

Evidence is critical to shaping effective mental health policies, yet data often fails to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and lived experiences (Walter et al., 2021; Gee et al., 2014). Current evaluation methods are largely Westernised, limiting their relevance and applicability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts and often omitting the effects of racism and colonisation from the scope of inquiry (Wright et al., 2021; Dudgeon, Milroy and Walker, 2014). Enabling communities to lead research and data collection is essential for meaningful and culturally informed decision-making (Lowitja Institute, 2023).

Policy priorities

- 1. Data Sovereignty Framework:** Promote national data sovereignty frameworks that ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities control the collection, storage, and use of their data, supporting self-determination in research and policy.
- 2. Expand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research capacity:** Advocate for funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research institutions and projects, ensuring cultural relevance and community ownership of findings.
- 3. Mandatory cultural safety reporting:** Push for mandatory inclusion of cultural safety indicators in all national mental health and suicide prevention reporting systems.
- 4. Shift values and motivations:** Push back on discourse that assumes benevolence and deficit, and instead model values of decolonisation, anti-racism, cultural safety, self-determination, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty.

Priority Four: Transform

This priority emphasises systemic reforms to create an integrated, culturally safe mental health system that reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values.

Case for change

Transforming the mental health system requires embedding cultural safety and social and emotional wellbeing frameworks at its core (Calma, Dudgeon and Bray, 2017; Dudgeon, Milroy and Walker, 2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples face unique systemic barriers to accessing care, particularly in rural and remote areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). Addressing these disparities and fostering culturally informed service delivery is critical to achieving equitable mental health outcomes (Wright et al., 2021). Cultural safety is not only important for those accessing care but is also a critical factor for the wellbeing and retention of those working within the social and emotional wellbeing workforce (Milroy et al., 2022).

Policy priorities

- 1. Adoption of social and emotional wellbeing models of care:** Advocate for the nationwide adoption of holistic care models that integrate cultural and clinical practices, ensuring social and emotional wellbeing is central to all mental health services. This includes strategic and transformational change of systems and structures that exclude or devalue Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.
- 2. Mandatory cultural safety training standards across the mental health system:** Call for mandatory cultural safety training and accreditation for all mental health professionals, supported by ongoing professional development requirements. These standards should include rigorous accreditation processes and ongoing cultural safety training for health professionals to ensure compliance and accountability.
- 3. Expand crisis response services:** Promote the expansion of culturally safe crisis response services, including the growth of 13YARN and community-controlled initiatives tailored to immediate mental health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Consultation Framework

Our consultation framework ensures that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are central to social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention reforms. This framework integrates structured consultation processes across three key levels: our members, our councils and collaborative networks, and broader public engagement when required, including the expertise and lived experience of Gayaa Dhuwi staff and Board members. It is designed to foster inclusivity, transparency, and cultural integrity while enabling meaningful input into policies and systemic reforms.

Members

Our members are community-controlled peak bodies who form the foundation of our consultation framework. They provide insights into community needs, strengths, and aspirations, shaping our national policy priorities. Through structured mechanisms such as the Policy Subcommittee and Members Forum, we ensure members' voices guide decision-making and advocacy efforts.

Mechanisms for engagement:

- Regular member meetings and forums
- Surveys and structured feedback processes
- Representation on Policy Subcommittee

Councils and Collaborative Networks

Gayaa Dhuwi's Councils and Collaborative Networks play a pivotal role in shaping our policies, advocacy, and systemic reform efforts. Each council and collaborative network is purpose-built to provide expert advice, foster collaboration, and promote collective excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. These groups ensure that diverse perspectives and lived experiences are central to the organisation's work.

Cultural and Clinical Councils

The Cultural Council and Clinical Council are at the heart of Gayaa Dhuwi's commitment to a "best of both worlds" approach, combining cultural and clinical care. The Cultural Council ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge and practices inform decision-making, while the Clinical Council provides expertise on integrating clinical approaches within culturally safe frameworks. Both councils uphold the principles of the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration, ensuring that cultural and clinical perspectives work together to achieve the highest mental health outcomes (Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, 2015).

Collaborative Networks

Our five Collaborative Networks address specific areas of need and expertise, fostering dialogue and advising on policy and advocacy:

- Children Collaborative Network
- Lived Experience Collaborative Network

- LGBTIQ+SB Collaborative Network
- Workforce Collaborative Network
- Youth Collaborative Network

Mechanisms for Engagement:

- Annual forum
- Virtual meetings as required
- Invitation to provide written input

Public engagement

Broader public is conducted as needed to gather perspectives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities who may not be directly connected to our member organisations or councils. This ensures inclusivity and transparency in addressing diverse community needs.

Mechanisms for engagement:

- Roundtables and community forums
- Online surveys and virtual consultation sessions
- Partnerships and collaborations

Integration into Policy and Advocacy

Feedback and insights gathered through the framework are synthesised into policy positions, submissions, and reports. This ensures all advocacy efforts are informed by the voices of those we represent.

Figure 2: Consultation Framework



Reporting and accountability

Gayaa Dhuwi is committed to transparent and accountable reporting to ensure the progress and impact of our National Impact Platform (2024–28) is measurable, reflective of community needs, and aligned with national priorities. Central to this commitment is the Annual Impact Report, which will provide a comprehensive account of achievements, challenges, and future directions. The report will consolidate insights from advocacy efforts, community engagement, and strategic initiatives while integrating data from the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly all the Priority Reforms and Target 14 (Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

The Annual Impact Report will be guided by a monitoring and evaluation framework, ensuring the systematic tracking of policy implementation and its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. This framework will include meaningful metrics to measure progress in expanding culturally safe services, strengthening community-controlled organisations, and strengthening leadership in mental health governance. By integrating independent evaluations and ongoing data analysis, the report will reflect both outcomes and areas for improvement.

Community feedback will be central to the report's development, with perspectives gathered through mechanisms such as annual forums, surveys, and consultations with members, and our councils and collaborative networks. This approach ensures that diverse voices, including lived experiences, inform the reporting process, making it inclusive and representative of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In addition to measuring the effectiveness of the platform's priorities, the Annual Impact Report will contribute to transparency by highlighting progress in addressing systemic barriers and advancing cultural safety within mental health and suicide prevention systems. By focusing on outcomes and continuous improvement, the report will serve as a tool to guide and strengthen Gayaa Dhuwi's policy setting advice and reform efforts, ensuring meaningful and sustained impact.

Glossary

Social and emotional wellbeing	A holistic concept of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples that encompasses mental health and physical, cultural, and spiritual health. Land and sea are central to wellbeing. It recognises the interconnectedness of individual, family, kin, community, Country, culture, spirituality, and ancestry.
Co-design	A collaborative approach where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, communities, and organisations are equal partners with governments and other stakeholders in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of policies, programs, and services that affect them.
Data sovereignty	The right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of their own data. It ensures that data is used in a way that benefits communities, respects cultural protocols, and supports self-determination in research and policy.
Cultural and clinical care (best of both worlds approach)	An approach that integrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and healing with clinical perspectives to achieve the highest attainable standard of mental health and suicide prevention outcomes.
Systemic change	Fundamental shifts in policies, practices, power dynamics, and resource distribution within the Australian mental health system to ensure it is culturally safe, equitable, and effectively meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Glossary terms adapted from Gee et al. (2014), Walter et al. (2021), and the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015).



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