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Building effective school–community partnerships in Aboriginal remote school settings

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Research Article

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Abstract

The benefits of school and community partnerships are well documented in government reports and the academic literature. A number of government initiatives have been introduced to actively involve parents and the community in school matters. In addition, various agencies have produced resource kits and guidelines to assist schools and communities to develop and foster partnerships, and partnership agreements. Much of this study has focused on working with Aboriginal peoples. The use of the term, 'Aboriginal' in this paper refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Initiatives such as 'What Works' have had some success in building strong Aboriginal community and school partnerships, however, the literature also reveals that despite such initiatives, the levels of success vary from school to school, with some partnerships unable to develop or be sustained. In responding to a gap in the current knowledge, the authors examine the value of school–community partnerships in a rural and remote school where the percentage of Aboriginal Australian students is high. A brief summary of the outcomes of some of the major initiatives with aims to build effective school and community partnerships is provided. This is followed by the findings from a small pilot research study on the implementation of initiatives to build strong school–community relationships in rural and remote Indigenous school settings in Western Australia. The challenges that may inhibit the establishment of successful school–community relationships/collaboration are discussed and suggestions provided on how these challenges can be addressed.

Benefits of school and community partnerships

School–community partnerships which include the active involvement of parents in the education of their children have been associated with increased quality of educational experiences and positive student outcomes occur (Jennings and Bosch, 2011; Hunt, 2013; Lowe, 2016). Indeed, it is well accepted that '[h]ighly effective schools have high levels of parent and community engagement' (Lonsdale and Anderson, 2012, p. 1).

Process for achieving the benefits of school–community partnership

The inaugural National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy was launched in 1989, and since then much has been learned about community involvement in schools. Successful programmes 'have grown out of partnerships between communities and schools. Successful partnerships are initiated by either a member of the school community or of the local community' (Wildy and Clarke, 2012, p. 3). Successful programmes require interest, communication and support from both the school and the community (Wildy and Clarke, 2012; Guenther *et al.*, 2016). Both these researchers specifically examined partnerships in remote contexts. Guenther *et al.* (2016) investigated opportunities to improve student outcomes in remote school settings across South Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, News South Wales and Western Australia. The research involved principals, teachers, community members/leaders, bureaucrats and academics. The clear message coming from community members/leaders was twofold: they wanted language and culture taught in schools and secondly, they wanted to be involved in the education of their children (Guenther *et al.*, 2016).

It is significant to note that in the studies referred to above, the researchers highlight a strong correlation between parental involvement in school and student success. Four major themes emerge from the school–community partnership research: engagement; development/practice of appropriate teaching pedagogy; improvement in student outcomes and building parental support networks (Guenther *et al.*, 2016; Lowe, 2016). Active engagement in the education of their children can occur through parental and community involvement with the school. Such engagement enables teaching staff to become aware of both Aboriginal parents' and the community's aspirations for their youth.

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Engagement may include being actively involved in the delivery of cultural programmes and participating in cultural events throughout the school year (Lowe, 2010, 2016; SAAETCB, 2011; Burgess and Evans, 2017). Working with parents and community members enables teachers to examine and reflect upon pedagogic practices that may impinge upon Aboriginal identity, self-esteem and engagement in learning (Lowe, 2016).

Importantly, improvements are being achieved in academic performance and attendance by Aboriginal students as a result of parent and/or community involvement in school (Guenther *et al.*, 2016; Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017). Furthermore, school–community partnerships can foster a range of supportive relationships within the community. Specifically, community members can support one another in sharing concerns; gain confidence in becoming involved in school activities and make new friendships (Schwab and Sutherland, 2001; Burgess and Evans, 2017).

Despite increasing knowledge about school–community partnerships and their benefits, there is still 'little guidance on how partnerships form and function' (Clifford *et al.*, 2008, p. 14) to achieve improved educational outcomes. For example, the Commonwealth-sponsored project, What Works agenda (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), has been operating for some 20 years with no evidence of any substantive empirical work demonstrating why things work or do not work (Lowe, 2010). In short, although growing research knowledge supports the beneficial elements of partnership models there is no clear evidence that efforts have been made towards establishing an empirical basis to verify the processes of models that lead to and sustain educational positive outcomes (Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017).

Major national initiatives

A series of national initiatives have been implemented over the years to help drive school–community partnerships to effect educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) programme, operated between 1991 and 2004, provided funds to schools that were managed by a parent committee. The ASSPA programme was replaced by the Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI) in 2005. The PSPI was itself incorporated into a much larger strategy, the Commonwealth's Whole of School Intervention Strategy (WoSI) that sought to break down barriers to educational success. This Strategy however ceased in 2009 when the Council of Australian Government (COAG) ramped up its agenda to effect more strategic outcomes through a National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010–2014, to 'Close the Gap' in educational outcomes for Indigenous students (MCEECDYA, 2010). Engaging with parents and community through school–community partnerships is one of six key principles outlined in the plan for education providers to incorporate in the design and delivery of educational programmes for Indigenous students (MCEECDYA, 2010). Despite the effort, over the past three decades, to implement a shared-responsibility agenda, Indigenous students still lag behind the rest of the country on all educational indicators. Closing the educational gap by half as a national target is clear evidence that there is still a long way to achieving parity with other Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

School outcomes for Indigenous students in remote areas are the worst in Australia with attendance, retention and achievement rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014; Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). In semester 1, 2015, only 22.8% of very remote Indigenous students in years 1–10 attended school 90% or more of the time compared with 70.1% of very remote non- Indigenous students. Also, only 26% of very remote Year 5 Indigenous students achieved the NAPLAN benchmark for minimum reading standards in 2016. Furthermore, NAPLAN results for the general population of Indigenous students also reveal performances below the minimum national standards in literacy and numeracy across all age groups (Ockenden, 2014; ACARA, 2016).

As evident in other Western education systems, Australia has established professional standards for teachers. 'The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers are a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. They define the work of teachers and make explicit elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools that aim to improve educational outcomes for students' (AITSL, 2011, p. 3).

These standards require registered teachers to provide evidence of proficiency in relation to each of the standards. These are first, Standard 1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; second, Standard 2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians; third, Standard 3.7 Engage parents/carers in the educative process and fourth, Standard 7.3 Engage with the parents/carers. The standards clearly indicate required actions in relation to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their culture. The Standards 3.7 and 7.3 clearly indicate the expected involvement of parents and carers and relate directly in the Aboriginal context of community involvement.

In summary, recent research, government initiatives and teacher registration requirements combine to demonstrate the importance of improving the outcomes of Aboriginal students.

Challenges for the development and maintenance of school–community partnerships

Despite a number of national projects and policy statements regarding school–community partnerships being introduced across the school sector, research findings in general continue to identify a disjuncture between school and Indigenous communities regarding effective communication, partnerships and collaboration (Luke *et al.*, 2013; Guenther *et al.*, 2016; Lowe, 2016). There are many reasons for this: cultural and language differences make it difficult for shared understandings; priorities differ so that the goals of the two groups cannot be reconciled; interests differ so that the issues one group considers important are not valued by the other and economic circumstances (Guenther *et al.*, 2016; Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017). Many of these issues are invisible to the people in both groups so that reaching consensus can be a challenge and the development of strong relationships is difficult.

Research by Guenther *et al.* (2016) and Luke *et al.* (2013) reinforce community aspirations for the teaching of Aboriginal languages and culture, and for teachers to make appropriate adjustments to the curriculum and their pedagogy to meet the learning needs and experiences of Aboriginal students. It is therefore important for school leaders and teachers to strike a balance between adhering to system requirements, and meeting community priorities.

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A number of factors can impact upon the forming of strong school–community partnerships. Bureaucratic pressure on principals may result in them following departmental procedures and operations rather than fully implementing the aspirations of the community; additionally, community members may find themselves caught in the middle of competing priorities of school systems and those of the community (Guenther *et al*., 2016). Guenther et al.'s (2016) study also highlights the vital need for school leaders to ensure that appropriate levels of consultation with family, community and language groups occur. Representation across the community is pivotal in developing trust and respect within the community. Understanding local community and family dynamics is critical in informing this process (Guenther *et al*., 2016). 'Collaborative partnerships' require the sharing of power, responsibilities and active involvement in decision-making (Guenther *et al*., 2016). The processes for engagement in school operations also need to be addressed. Often parents and community members are asked to participate in school systems and processes with which they are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable (Lowe, 2016; SAAETCB, 2011). Furthermore, many Aboriginal parents may not have the same levels of capital knowledge of schooling and education as a result of exclusion and marginalised practices of the past (Lowe, 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2014; Burgess and Evans, 2017). Community members' capacity to participate effectively in partnership arrangements needs to be positively addressed (Burgess and Evans, 2017). Equally important is for teachers to confidently engage with parents and community members. Participation of teachers in cultural competence programmes should be a focus for appointees to a rural or remote school. The fear of making mistakes and/or offending Aboriginal people should be overcome by measures of support from community members and school leaders (Burgess and Evans, 2017).

High turnover rates of teachers and principals in remote schools can further inhibit the process of establishing relationships that are built on trust, respect and integrity. Such relationships take time and consistent effort to develop. Teachers who are open to cross-cultural collaboration with the Indigenous teachers and their communities have been reported as more likely to remain and support student learning more effectively (Hall, 2012; Mason and Poyatos Matas, 2015; Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

For remote school principals, the capacity to lead such change is hampered by the many pressures on them, their limited experience in the role, and an absence of support (Jorgensen and Niesche, 2011). The complexities involved in securing functional school–community collaboration are likely to inhibit a successful outcome.

Unfortunately, many attempts by schools at developing school–community partnerships are short lived and tokenistic, leaving members of the school and Aboriginal community believing that such arrangements are not possible and/or are not of any value (Lowe, 2010; Burgess and Evans, 2017). Lowe (2010) contends that there will always be some resistance by Aboriginal groups in choosing to integrate with western culture because of historical colonial experiences, denial of rights and dispossession of their lands. This outcome is indicative of those Aboriginal parents who feel alienated or uncomfortable when asked to come to school because of personal negative experiences.

Additionally, there is little evidence of Aboriginal parents or community members becoming involved in central and/or core activities of the school, despite the acknowledged benefits of school and community partnerships (Lowe, 2010; Burgess and Evans, 2017). In many instances, parental and community involvement is limited to participation in special events such as NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and islander Day Observance Committee) week and Sorry Day. These individual events do not provide evidence of school–community integrated relationships that need to be ongoing and continually supported to ensure success.

The above examples stress the importance of understanding differences in world views and aspirations and the need to use of a variety of flexible strategies to engage parents and other community members, including those that are non-traditional and those that may fall outside western ways of doing things (Department of Education and Training, 2008; SAAETCB, 2011). This scenario typifies the 'contested space' that is experienced at the 'cultural interface' where western and Aboriginal knowledge systems and discourses compete against one another in everyday life situations. 'It is a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses' (Nakata, 2007, p. 199). In the school and community context, this relates to the requirement for parents and community members to negotiate their priorities and aspirations for the education of their children. However, what is left unexplained is, 'how these negotiations occur and what Aboriginal families are willing or able to bring to the table, given their experience of the history of underachievement, expulsion and exclusion' (Lowe, 2016, p. 18).

Nakata's theorising (2007) of the intersection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous domains questions the usefulness of interpreting the Indigenous position in the structuralist terms of dominant–subordinate relations between the Australian nation-state and Indigenous people or on the terms of cultural difference theory. Nakata draws attention to the discursive complexity at the interface of what are fundamentally two different knowledge and cultural systems but emphasises the long experience and agentive capabilities of Indigenous people in managing and adapting/resisting the contradictions of being positioned at this interface (Nakata, 2007).

Managing the expectations of school systems and those made by the community at the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007) requires a high level of cultural understanding and empathy by school leaders when working through the dynamics of Western and Indigenous realities in framing agreements that support mutually exclusive priorities, the sharing of power and decision making in school matters (Guenther *et al*., 2016; Lowe, 2016). Issues of power and epistemology and how they frame points of view and/or interpretations of Aboriginal aspirations must also be understood and considered by school leaders as Western values and perspectives together with allegiances to bureaucratic regulations dominate and stifle Aboriginal community voices and participation (Guenther *et al*., 2016).

Although the literature and research have clearly outlined the value and importance of school–community partnerships, the process of implementing and achieving successful and sustainable collaborative outcomes depends on a significant shift in the mindset of principals, teachers, parents and other community members, and a change in school culture (Lowe, 2016). The ability of principals to successfully lead and communicate with community; the pressure by schools to implement curriculum changes and the way these changes are communicated to parents can also influence the effectiveness of community partnerships

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(Mutch and Collins, 2012). In seeking to respond, school leaders and teachers must openly embrace a commitment to develop a partnership with the Aboriginal community that is genuine, equal and reciprocal in all aspects.

Importance of leadership in partnerships

A range of factors are important in forming partnerships with Indigenous communities including community-school relations, leadership, good understanding of community, active presence and connectedness with the community, establishment of common goals, inclusivity, effective communication, development of agreed action plans, capacity building and partnership agreements (National Curriculum Services, 2013; Lovett *et al*., 2014; Lowe, 2016). It is vital that school leaders establish a school culture and a set of core values that are aimed at engaging staff and community members in collaborative and meaningful partnerships and this may include providing information and training for community members to facilitate participation in school matters (Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017). It has been noted that external factors such as social and political contexts can prevent school–community partnerships from succeeding (Power, 2013).

One of the authors of this paper has been involved in the development of two school community partnerships in remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. In both instances, the partnerships or accords were driven by the community. The community had previously felt they had no opportunity to have input into the school and that the school leadership was responsible for that lack of opportunity. The communities sought the author's (SF) assistance to work with the school; it was a cry out from the communities for the schools to listen to them. The main outcome on both occasions was significant improvement in community engagement. One major drawback over time was the lack of continuity of the Accords. New and changing school leadership did not support the Accord model and decided on different models of community engagement.

Strategies to develop strong school–community partnerships

An overarching strategy in building and sustaining relationships is establishing effective communication between the school and community. This includes meeting places, whether they be inside or outside the school grounds, making the school welcoming, and finding suitable ways of communication with the community. In making schools welcoming, some school leaders have made available a designated room for parents and community members to meet for both informal and formal occasions (Lowe, 2016). Building and sustaining of relationships can also be enhanced through the provision of cultural competence training by local community members to the teachers at the school (Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017).

The development and/or review of policy on school and community partnerships should reflect the views of both teachers and community members, incorporate the identified needs and priorities and reflect mutual contribution in establishing a partnership agreement (Guenther *et al*., 2016; Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017). Additionally, action plans should be developed and clearly outline the roles and responsibilities for participants together with the resources required to achieve positive outcomes within certain timeframes. The plan should include training and other support measures to build and sustain effective partnerships.

In building relationships between the school and community, school leaders can provide an important link by appointing an Elder or Elders who can act as spokesperson for the school and community.

Although no specific strategy has been identified as providing a sound opportunity for success, what is evident in the literature is the identification of contributing elements that help improve Indigenous student learning outcomes. These are: school leadership, school culture, quality teachers, school curriculum, and family and community involvement (Ockenden, 2014). School systems in Australia have focused their attention on strengthening these elements in a variety of ways to develop culturally responsive schools (Department of Education WA, 2015).

Developing culturally responsive schools

In 2016, the Western Australian Department of Education established guidelines for all schools to implement the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework with the aim of developing culturally responsive schools. The Framework identifies five major themes, two of which relate to 'Building Relationships' with the Aboriginal community and 'Leadership' qualities that support school–community partnerships (Department of Education WA, 2015). A similar document has been produced in Queensland (Department of Education, Department of Education and Training, 2011). Programmes that employ both Indigenous community collaboration and culturally competent service delivery are more likely to be effective than programmes that lack these characteristics (Lohoar, 2012).

A key to the desirable outcome of school–community collaboration is the development of a relationship that encompasses the traditional function of the school in presenting the curriculum to school age students with a broader role in meeting the needs of the wider community (Burgess and Evans, 2017). Schwab and Sutherland (2001) through their examination of school–community partnership models from both Australia and overseas have identified a range of possible opportunities. Indigenous learning communities hold the potential to embody in symbol and practice, the meaningful relationships, networks and trust that enable community development and capacity building.

Dismantling boundaries between the school and the home, two-way skills transfer between the school and the home, cultural sensitivity in interactions, local consultation to develop programmes derived from local needs were some of the elements identified by Schwab and Sutherland (2001). Recent government policy pronouncements provide support for Schwab and Sutherland: as one of the four pillars of the Australian Government's Students First approach, increased parental engagement for all Australian students is recommended (https://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/engaging-parents-education).

The current research sought to explore the current state of school–community relations in a rural school and a remote school, through the eyes of staff at the school. The participating schools were located in communities where there were high numbers of Indigenous students.

The current research—a pilot study project

Prior to the development of a larger project, a small pilot study was designed to gain an understanding of the existing nature of school–community relationships and to consider strategies to strengthen these relationships and partnerships. The focus of

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this research was to specifically consider school–community relationships and communications in schools with a high percentage of students of Aboriginal heritage.

Participants

The pilot study involved a rural and remote school with 13 participants from the former location and three from the latter. The participants included two principals, seven Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers, and seven Aboriginal Classroom Assistants (ACAs) who had agreed to participate in the study and signed a consent form after reading the Information letter. The research had the approval of the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. There were differing terms of employment at each site. The staff at the rural school had been employed there for a number years, whereas the staff at the remote school had lived in the community for only short periods of time. No other demographic data were noted as it was not considered relevant to the research.

Procedure

An interview schedule was prepared for each participant group to gather information regarding current relationships with community. The interview questions sought information on a range of aspects that support good school–community relationships and included questions about communication with community, teacher induction, cultural competence training for teaching staff and principals, cultural programmes operating at the school, involvement of ACAs and community members in curriculum development and teaching programmes, community knowledge of school programmes, Aboriginal involvement in school decision making, e.g., school board, strategies to increase community participation, training programmes that are made available to community members, and the importance of establishing strong relationships with community/teaching staff.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis which was conducted using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) who describe thematic analysis as providing 'a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data' (p. 78). Thematic analysis involves the researcher in searching for themes or patterns of meaning across the data set (Braun & Clarke).

Following the process of Braun and Clarke, the researchers firstly familiarised themselves with the data by reading and re-reading, making notes of initial ideas of the content. This was followed by the generation of initial codes across all the interviews. In the third stage of the process, themes were developed from the codes. Fourthly, the themes were reviewed both in relation to the extracts from the individual interviews and across the entire data set. In the fifth stage of this process, each theme was named to provide a description of the nature of the data that it represented. In the final stage, the themes were linked to the research questions and are represented in the findings of this paper.

Findings

Despite some similarities in the themes extracted from the transcripts, there were clear contextual differences evident in the responses provided by the participants at the rural and remote schools. This was most likely a function of the length of time that the participants had spent in the community. Staff at the rural school could reflect on changes over time, whereas those at the remote school could only focus on the current situation as they had only been there for a short time prior to being interviewed.

Additionally, the populations served by each school differed. The rural school had a culturally diverse student population whereas the remote school was almost completely attended by Aboriginal children. These contextual aspects resulted in a difference in the themes that emerged from the data. Therefore, to provide context, the findings from each school are presented individually. It should also be noted that due to the small numbers of participants in each group, confidentiality and the identification of respondents needed to be considered. For this reason, the supporting quotes have been carefully edited and attributed in a general manner.

Findings from the rural school

The interviews were analysed from the perspective of Indigenous issues rather than the overall issues within the school. This school has a student population with considerable diversity. In relation to Indigenous aspects, three themes emerged from the analysis of interview data from the rural school: a sense of loss or reduction of cultural programmes, poor community–school relationships and communications, and a sense of hope for the future. Each of these themes is presented in the following paragraphs.

The sense of loss or reduction of cultural programmes

This matter was particularly highlighted by all ACAs and two Aboriginal teaching staff members at the school, whereas a non-Aboriginal teacher indicated that the school should do more cultural activities.

There was some cultural competence training provided at this location for teaching staff, but on a personal level, some of the non-Aboriginal staff who had been at the school for some years indicated that they got involved with the community through sport and/or volunteering. 'So, I joined the S….. Football Club.' (Teacher, Rural) and '… things like getting involved with driving the ambulance'. (Teacher, Rural)

Parental and community involvement in learning programmes were reduced to NAIDOC week activities and two other gender based programmes. The closure of some cultural programmes was due to decreases in community participation and the small pool of qualified persons that were available to teach language activities. Activities also seemed to be reduced to within school hours, which may have impacted upon parental participation.

Poor community–school relationships and communication

The second theme was related to poor community–school relationships and communication and all participants highlighted these issues.

Indigenous parental involvement with the school is not strong. 'I've found over the years that really, there's not a lot of involvement with the parents in the school. And that's a bit of a shame' (Teacher, Rural).

Lack of Indigenous parental involvement may be the result of the school's student population being partly in a boarding school situation with parents/carers not living local to the school and the challenges of transport and other inhibiting factors. Teachers spoke about the challenges of locating some parents and

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establishing communication with them due to lack of access to telephone when parents lived in remote communities.

Additionally, there were suggestions that overall communication trends have changed with the use of technology 'People tend to communicate in short little sentences, and they're too busy' (Teacher, Rural).

Activities such as NAIDOC week, film nights and sausage sizzles were and still are generally well attended by parents and community members. However, in activities such as Open Days, school board meetings and the voluntary participation in learning programmes, parental and community engagement was reported as non-existent or very low. The reasons for this were not known or not revealed by the participants.

The school has also entered into a school–community partnership agreement between the school, parents and students. In brief, the agreement outlined the ethos, educational programmes and services and learning environment that was to be provided by the school. For parents the agreement outlined their expectations of the school, ways to support their child's education and their involvement and participation in school administrative and learning programmes. For students the agreement encouraged them to be responsible for their learning, attend school, complete their homework and to respect others. However, this arrangement has not been successful in increasing participation or engagement levels. Some participants felt that the community has become disconnected with the school and therefore, signalled the need to become more strategic in adopting measures to strengthen relationships with parents and attract participation and engagement in school activities.

Participants identified the need to improve communication between the school and parents/community. The use of newsletters is not always reliable and therefore, other forms of communication need to be explored. Some participants also stated the need for ACAs to be given designated time to connect with community to build relationships and provide a means of effective communication.

Strategies to improve school–community relationships and increase cultural understanding

All participants indicated that they were willing to employ new strategies to improve school–community relationships and communication and to increase cultural understanding.

These suggestions included the involvement of Aboriginal staff in planning lessons and/or inclusion of appropriate cultural content in learning programmes. Currently, much of this work with teachers occurred informally and varied across the school. In some instances, Aboriginal staff were encouraged to be involved in this process, whereas in others, their contributions were limited to special events such as NAIDOC week and/or when an Aboriginal perspective was requested within a particular subject area. For example, when asked about the inclusion of Indigenous staff in planning, one teacher responded

> 'Not usually. Probably I should, but like I've done things like (the six) Seasons here [Language group excluded]. And I always have the ATA [Aboriginal Teaching you Assistant] with me then and they can go around and, know, we go all over …'

The same teacher however also spoke highly of a particular ATA 'he had the kids spellbound, and he was talking about the influence of people in his life, at [Location] and especially one uncle that he had, and how he respected him' (Teacher, Rural).

Participants indicated that despite a number of efforts by the school to engage parents and the general community in school activities, there still remained poor levels of Indigenous parental involvement and participation, especially in committees.

> 'But I think it would be nice to see more Aboriginal community members on those committees, would be one thing' (Teacher, Rural).

A major priority that was suggested by many participants was the need to increase opportunities for the Indigenous community to become involved in educational programmes, particularly those relating to culture, language, dance, painting and bush foods. This is important as the school and the teachers endeavour to meet the standards set by AITSL in relation to teaching Indigenous students and including appropriate content for all students to learn about Indigenous cultures.

In addition, it was felt that ACAs could be engaged more actively in lesson planning with classroom teachers rather than on an ad hoc basis. Participants also felt strongly about the need to provide a physical space for parents and community members to meet for formal and informal occasions. At an administrative level, some participants indicated the need to make school meetings involving community members less formal and for the school to consider appointing an Elder in residence for at least one day a week. Furthermore, it was also suggested that regular 'think tank' forums be arranged with parents and community members on ways to strengthen participation and partnerships.

Although there appeared to be a willingness to support change across all participants, the reality is that previous efforts have failed to effect change and willingness on its own does not enact change.

Findings from the remote school

Three major themes also emerged from the analysis of interview data from the participants from the remote Aboriginal Community School. Two of these were the same as those identified from the data of participants from the rural school. To ensure confidentiality of participants, specific quotes from their interviews have been limited.

The main issue for this school was the lack of cultural awareness/competency induction programmes for new staff. The other themes were, poor community-school relationships and communication and thirdly, opportunities and a willingness to improve the school–community relationship and increase cultural understanding.

Lack of cultural awareness/competency induction programmes

A *key* finding from the participants at this school was the lack of current provision of cultural awareness/competency training for new or existing staff members who are employed at the school. The current level of induction into the community is loosely arranged and relates only to areas that you can and cannot visit. All three participants indicated that cultural staff inductions should be provided as staff are likely to have no previous experience in teaching in remote communities or in schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students. Additionally, each community has its own culture and different ways of being. Provision of cultural awareness training would also help reduce unintentional

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errors or misunderstandings in observing local cultural protocols and ways of interacting with students and community members.

The provision of cultural competence training by community members also enhances the potential for better communication, stronger relationships and greater understanding of the roles of different people within the community.

The participants also disclosed that, despite some efforts by staff to engage parents and the general community in school activities, there still remained poor levels of involvement and participation. However, in describing the need for good relationships, a staff member indicated that 'Community is not by business, school is my business' (Staff, Remote). This suggests a divide between school and community and is also supported by the comments made by another staff member who indicated, 'So, like, they [the community] want to tell the school how they want it run, which is fine. But then if we suggest anything, it's shut down, if you know what I mean. So, it's a hard balancing act' (Staff, Remote). These comments suggest that the school staff do not understand the community's needs and that there is an urgent need for cultural competence training and the recruitment of personnel who are willing and able to establish good relationships within the community. Additionally, the failure of relationships may also be affecting the understanding of community members in relation to the obligations of the school staff beyond the community, that is to the education department in the State. The time that staff at this school had been in the community was short and the implications were that there was high staff turnover in the school, an issue that is well documented (Cuervo and Acquaro, 2018).

However, as in the rural school, all participants indicated a willingness to work towards an improvement in school–community relationships and increase cultural understanding. In doing so, the strategies that were suggested were identical to those that were recommended by participants at the rural school. This remote school however was planning to work with the community in the development of a community garden which should theoretically help to bring the school and community together.

Limitations of the research

The pilot study involved two schools, one in rural location and the other in a remote location. The purpose of this small pilot study was to ascertain if strong and effective partnerships were evident at these two locations and what school staff wanted and expected in relation to a good school–community relationship. School leadership is acknowledged as an important aspect in developing school culture and supporting school–community interactions, however this was not the focus of the study. Furthermore, the participants who took part in the study were staff members from each school only, hence the voice of community members is not included.

Discussion

This research was designed to examine school–community relationships in the context of Indigenous communities, from the perspective of staff, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

There is overwhelming evidence in both the academic and grey literature to support the importance and benefits of establishing collaborative school–community partnerships. Additionally, a considerable number of resources have been developed for schools and Indigenous communities indicating strategies and guidance to plan and implement a solid foundation to build and sustain strong school and community partnerships. However, there is no empirical evidence in the literature to support that these resources and guidelines have resulted in widespread success in achieving effective and sustainable school and community partnerships across a number of school settings (Guenther *et al.*, 2016; Lowe, 2016; Burgess and Evans, 2017); and the findings in this study suggest that despite a verbal willingness on the part of staff to support good school–community relationships and communication, the situation at each of the two sites examined in this research suggest that the situations are not good. These findings support the previous research in this area with several reports of a lack of development of school–community partnerships and/or the sustainability of those that indicated some success.

Although the current research did not focus on the role of school leaders, the literature indicates that the fundamental driver of school–community partnerships is how school leaders support appropriate activities. The ability of school leaders to shape school culture and impart the core values for developing collaborative and meaningful partnerships among staff and community members is vital to achieving sustainability and successful engagement (DEEWR, 2008; Guenther *et al.*, 2016; Lowe, 2016).

There are a number of other factors that assist in strengthening school–community engagement and these include, the sharing of power, active participation in decision making and educational programmes, the provision of training to effectively engage in a variety of school related activities, and seeking regular feedback from school staff and community about what is working and, how can further improvements be made.

The interview findings from the rural and remote schools suggest that gaps remain that hinder the building of strong school and community partnerships. The loss of programmes over a period of time is concerning, given that overall there is increased expectation that teachers will address what is required to improve teaching for Indigenous students (AITSL Standard 1.4) and present knowledge about Indigenous cultures to all students (AITSL Standard 2.4) (AITSL, 2011). The AITSL standards (3.7 and 7.3) are also relevant in relation to the inclusion of parents and carers in the education of the children in their care.

Staff at the remote school indicated that there was little to no cultural awareness/competence induction programmes, and that this left the staff and community with few opportunities for meaningful communication and little opportunity to develop good school–community relationships. As one of the most important aspects of developing school–community relationships is a shared understanding, this lack of training in cultural competence disadvantaged both the school and the community.

This lack of cultural competence training may have resulted in higher staff turnover at the school, evidenced by the short time that current staff had been present in the community. The staff at the remote school indicated more challenges with their work than those in the rural school. There may be other personal factors not included in this research associated with this, however, the staff did indicate an understanding that their lack of integration into the community had a negative effect on the success of their work. As the building of relationships takes time, this low staff satisfaction and high staff turnover produces even more challenges for the school–community relationship as a revolving door of staff does not facilitate trust and relationship building.

On a positive note, there was a willingness to improve the school–community relationship and increase cultural

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understanding amongst the staff at both schools. The development of a community garden at the remote school was evidence of this.

At the rural school, there has been an attempt to involve parents through the use of a school–family–student agreement. However, this strategy was not considered successful, the full reasons for which were not divulged through the research. One of the challenges for the rural school is in connecting with its community(ies). This relates to the cultural diversity of it students who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, not only from Aboriginal cultures. Diversity within its Indigenous student population adds an additional layer of complexity.

In the remote location training for cultural competence, a tool for building trust and respect among school and community members may assist in an improvement of school–community relations and communication.

Despite previous research being undertaken in school and community partnerships, further research is still required to establish empirical evidence that encapsulates all the necessary components that best contribute to successful and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to investigate what is happening in schools that have a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in relation to cultural competence and how the school links with the community. Based on interviews with a range of individuals working within a remote and a rural school, the research has added to the knowledge of what happens in reality within these schools. The findings indicate a reduction in the programmes that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and a lack of linkages with Aboriginal parents. However, the complexity of leadership styles and their effects on school–community relations is an aspect that requires investigation. This together with the views of community members in relation to the school–community relationship would present a more inclusive perspective and will form the basis for further research in this area.

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