

# A systematic review of recent research on the importance of cultural programs in schools, school and community engagement and school leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

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# Executive summary of key findings

## The importance of language and cultural programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities expressed their aspirations for their language and cultural programs to be made available through schools
- Accessible cultural programs deepened students' learning, appreciation and understanding of local knowledge and beliefs
- Access to quality programs deepened students' connectedness to kin and Elders, local knowledge and the Dreaming
- The Elders indicated that they want school programs to be developed that meet the cultural and educational aspirations of families.

## School and community engagement

- Concerns that that parental engagement was to primarily enforce contested school programs and interactions between students and the school
- That there was little evidence of sustained success in forging school interactions with parents
- That there was little available evidence that current engagement programs had improved student outcomes
- That school and community engagement was dependent on the co-leadership of families and the school
- That families looked for evidence of sustained, authentic and purposeful collaboration before they were prepared to actively participate.

## School leadership and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes

- That leaders need to empower communities to be actively involved in with schools
- That leadership requires principals to share power with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such that they are enabled to be actively involved in the school's programs
- That a new school leadership selection criterion needs to be established that focuses attention on the leadership skills required to lead a school
- Principals need to be curriculum and pedagogic leaders to affect classroom practice
- That principals need to be given the skills to negotiate the space between management, policy and school leadership (Timmer, Dixon and Guenther, 2019).

# Introduction

This report provides a targeted review of a small subset of systematic reviews into 10 critical areas of Indigenous education across Australia. The report commences with a description of the methodology used by the team of 13 senior academics across 10 universities who undertook a simultaneous systematic review of educational and social sciences research literature as part of the ‘Aboriginal Voices’ project. The purpose of this collaboration was to gain deeper insights and clarity from the over 13,000 studies that formed the initial set, from which they sought to gain understanding of the effective policies, practices and structures that were seen to enhance the engagement of Indigenous students in Australian schools (Lowe, Tennent, Guenther, Harrison, Moodie, Vass & Burgess 2019).

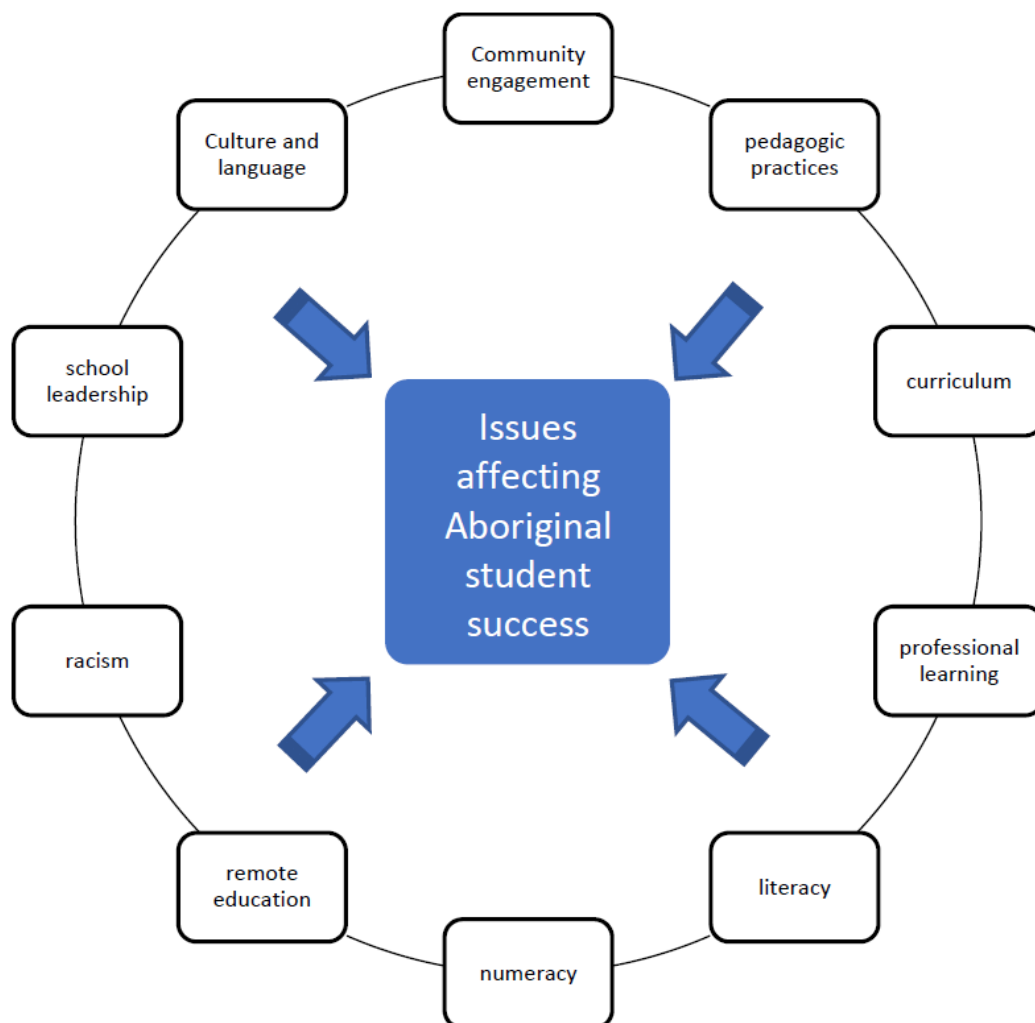


Figure 1: Fields of research in the ‘Aboriginal Voices’ systematic review project.

## Methodology

A well-established systematic review needs to engage a rigorous and transparent methodology that underpins a complete and exhaustive search of the research literature relating to the specific research

inquiry being investigated. This rigorous methodology locates and includes/excludes studies using a consistent protocol across all 10 reviews. Alongside this, the research team also adopted a critical Indigenous approach to the development of each individual study, and the analysis of the findings for the included studies.

### **Critical Indigenous methodology**

The following present the key elements of the critical Indigenous methodology that informed the development of the research question for each review, and the analysis and synthesis of the research data. Smith (2012) argues that the research undertaken in, and/or about Indigenous people must be grounded in the notions of:

1. Being socially responsible
2. Centering community understanding, healing, spirituality and recovery
3. Being responsible to local families and communities
4. Bringing understanding to the experiences, aspirations and needs of Indigenous people
5. Providing Indigenous people with the tools to understand how their discursive environments underpin systemic disadvantage (Denzin, 2010; Grande, 2004).

### **Overarching research enquiry question**

*'What are the issues affecting the underachievement of Indigenous students in Australia and how can research inform solution/s to the array of long-term issues that need to be simultaneously addressed?'*

### **Review protocols**

1. Each review would be inclusive of qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods research
2. The key research question/s illuminate what the research found about the experiences and aspirations of schools, teachers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or their families
3. The common PRISMA (2009) criteria were adopted for each review and was based on the following criteria:
  - a. Research population identified as Australian Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) students
  - b. Research and findings must be on issues particular to each inquiry
  - c. Publication language is English
  - d. Time-period for the publication was 2006 to 2017
  - e. Research context was Australian K – 12 schools and/or their communities
  - f. Studies included peer-reviewed studies, government reports, key grey literature and theses
  - g. Studies met an agreed quality research criterion as described by Long and Godfrey (2004), Ryan et.al. (2007) and Coughlan et.al. (2007).

What follows is an outline of three of the 10 systematic reviews completed by the 'Aboriginal Voices' team over the period 2016-2019. A brief outline of the research purpose, question and methodology, a detailed summary of the main findings, and a bibliography follows for each.

# The impact of school-based traditional languages and cultural programs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: A systematic review

## The place and importance of Indigenous Languages and Cultures on students

This review investigates the cultural, social and educational impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have had the opportunity to access school-based Indigenous languages and/or cultural programs.

### Research question

*Does providing an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school student with access to language and cultural programs have an impact on their educational engagement and learner identities?*

### Primary focus of review (PICo<sup>1</sup> attributes)

The population within this review is Australia's Indigenous people (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), defined by their cultural and ethnic identities; the phenomena of interest are the language and cultural programs, and the impact of these programs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and schools.

### Inclusion/exclusion

This review searched the following Australian and international journal databases: A+. Education, Informit Indigenous education, Eric, Proquest Central, and Web of Science, which located 1372 studies. Additional hand searching located a further six studies and call out to experts located a further 29 studies, which gave an initial total of n = 1407 studies. The subsequent exercise of the PRISMA inclusion/exclusion criteria saw the final number of studies reduced to 29 studies. The research in this theme was coded into NVivo (qualitative analysis software) and highlighted the following four primary themes and their categories.

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<sup>1</sup> The PICo acronym stands for. P –population. I – Interest. Co – Context.

## 1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

This theme captured the level of cultural attachment and aspirations. Evidence looked at the place and value ascribed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to school-based programs and how participants felt that these programs supported their wider socio-cultural aspirations. The theme identified four concepts: community connectedness, the impact of enculturation, the value and place of Elders, and impact on community engagement.

### 1.1. Community connectedness

This category looked at the level of community's access to language and culture and how that gave them access to unique knowledge legitimated on 'Country' and fortified their connectedness to place and Indigenous identity.

- Biddle and Swee (2012) and Douglas (2011) noted that the relationship between Indigenous well-being, access to language and culture and the acquisition of knowledge (Lowe, 2010).
- Abbott, Quinn, Yamaguchi, Wilson and Wakeman (2017) evidenced an improvement in student well-being and educational and workplace outcomes
- Peoples' active engagement with their Country are often connected to a strong sense of identity through language and cultural knowledge (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Douglas, 2011)

### 1.2. Enculturation

This category looked to understand the impact of language and cultural programs on the social enculturation of youth through the accrual of knowledge and connectedness, developing or using community language and participating in cultural programs.

- Colquhoun and Dockery (2012) argued that colonisation demoralised and distanced Indigenous people from the ontological presence of Place.
- Lane (2010), and McNaboe and Poetsch (2010) argue that the establishment of programs improved students' self-worth, cultural identity, resilience and belonging to community.

### 1.3. Valuing Elders

The central role of community Elders highlighted their role in supporting communities and holding their unique histories and knowledge.

- A number of the studies highlighted the key role of local Elders to the development, teaching and authenticity of the school programs (Anderson 2010).
- McNaboe and Poetsch (2010) noted that Elders' participation as the holders and protectors of local knowledge was critical to the authenticity of programs.

### 1.4. Community impact

Studies identified the impact of community agency on their support and participation in school-based cultural programs.

- Lowe (2017) identified the impact of relational capacity building when language teachers partnered with classroom teachers and other staff as they worked to establish whole-school language programs.
- Murray's (2017) paper on bilingual education, identified the importance of the inter-generational enactment of the community's connection to Country and the iteration of deep meaning through people's engagement in cultural practices.

- Studies by McLeod, Verdon and Kneebone (2014) and Green (2010) identified the heightened levels of community aspirations to assert their custodianship of languages and to be actively engaged in local language programs.

## 2. The role of school and school systems

This theme sought to understand the actions of schools in establishing a range of language and cultural programs, the development of curriculum, resourcing the programs and highlighting the importance of these for the school.

### 2.1. Policy

Studies highlighted national and state policy environments that affected the establishment and implementation of state, territory and national policies seen to impact on the implementation of programs.

- Disbray (2016) and Simpson, Caffrey and McConvell (2009) identified how overlapping policies, funding policies, curriculum, and language policies led to policy uncertainty between government agencies, schools and communities.
- Disbray (2016) identified support for the school when communities participated in teaching their local languages in schools.
- Lowe's (2017) study evidenced the unique collaborations and new knowledge creation when Aboriginal language advocates, language tutors, Aboriginal Education Officer (AEOs) were actively supported by school staff in establishing and supporting the language programs.

### 2.2. Families

The research identified the agentic actions taken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait families and their communities to support opportunities for their children to access language and cultural programs.

- Colquhoun and Dockery (2012) identified that parents thought that schools should establish cultural programs that would support opportunities for authentic learning.
- Other studies highlighted that families believed that 'effective' programs needed to be contextualised to the local linguistic and cultural knowledge of (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015; Lowe, 2017).
- Disbray (2016) noted that bi-lingual school programs identified deep, local epistemic knowledge being shared and relived across generations.

### 2.3. Leadership

The case for school leadership was significant in the literature. It was noted that school language and cultural programs required strong, ongoing school support.

- Lane (2010), Douglas (2011) and Guenther et al (2015) noted that the efficacy of programs depended on schools' deep commitment to the concept of 'Country'.
- Program success was dependent on school leaders ensuring that programs were strongly advocated for in the school, appropriately timetabled and resourced.
- Lane (2010) suggested that the primary tasks of school leadership was to bring the diverse language groups and families together into a cohesive body that worked for the common good.



- Osborne and Guenther (2017) and MacMahon (2013) noted that principals who engaged Elders in taking key roles that actively supported students' access to their Country, understood that this provided students with deeper local knowledge.

### 3. Language planning

This theme provided evidence into the manner in which language and cultural programs were developed, how these were planned, the efficacy of genuine knowledge inclusion, and the consequent level of community engagement.

#### 3.1. Systemic support

Many studies provided insights into those issues seen to be crucial to the success of school-based programs.

- Studies by Anderson (2010) and Lowe (2017) found that local Elders facilitated the growth of programs in the town's schools, publicly advocated for the programs and defended those schools and principals they saw as supporting their implementation.
- Lane (2010) and Maier (2010) spoke of the effect of external support for the school programs from other government and non-government agencies.
- Murray (2017) evidenced that this support was critical to the successful establishment of the Tiwi Island language program in developing the whole-school language curriculum.

#### 3.2. Community involvement

When families and community members are directly involved in the development of programs, the level of program efficacy increased.

- Disbray's (2016) report found cross-cultural knowledge was created when programs were planned and had the support of both the school and the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community working to establish a strong, effective and Indigenous knowledge-informed curriculum.
- Douglas (2011) highlighted the pitfalls when schools failed to meet the community aspirations, failed to use appropriate protocols or appoint local community educators.
- Lowe's (2017) study evidenced increased levels of school and community trust, the development of deeper relationships with teachers and the many opportunities that came when local epistemologies were used in the classroom.

#### 3.3. Cultural programs

Families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities sought to engage the school in establishing a broad base of programs that included the epistemic knowledge, identity and beliefs of the community.

- Bobongie's (2017) study on Islander students attending boarding school highlighted the sharp divisions between the students' cultural aspirations and the school when it became clear that they were unable to maintain links to their culture and language.
- Osborne et.al (2017) noted the impact of students' school access (or lack thereof) on students unable to practice cultural activities within schools. He evidenced the effect on students' social and cultural resilience and their knowledge and understanding of how to 'live good ways' both within themselves and their communities.

- Guenther et al. (2015) and McLeod (2014) highlighted the positive effects on students when they were able to submerge themselves in local epistemic knowledge on 'Country' through participating in activities such as song, dance, ceremony, painting as well as language.

## 4. Impact of programs

This last theme evidenced the impact on students, family, community and schools, when schools worked with community stakeholders in establishing agreed language and cultural programs that the community and school 'valued' and saw as culturally authentic, of quality and that provided opportunities for students to develop positive senses of identity.

### 4.1. Cultural connectedness

There was evidence of the deep socio-cultural impact on students and their families when the school enabled student access to a range of programs that enhanced their sense of identity and connectedness to cultural knowledge.

- Armstrong et.al. (2012) found that these programs-built students' resilience when given the tools to negotiate their two-world identities. These findings were echoed by Biddle and Swee (2012), who found that language aided deeper cultural learning and also fortified the community's identity.
- Harrison and Greenfields (2011), Colquhoun and Dockery (2012) and Cairney et al. (2017) found that the explicit elucidation of local culture in the school positively affected students' connection to family, their adjustment to schooling, the levels of wellbeing and a positive sense of Indigenous identity.

### 4.2. Nurturing wellbeing

Studies identified evidence of improvements in student wellbeing, when they were able to actively engage in programs that included deep learning and grounded their identities in their ontological connection to Country.

- Biddle and Swee (2012) identified that Indigenous economic wellbeing was key to underpinning each community's capacity to be involved in cultural activities and resource development.
- Bobongie (2017) noted that the Islander boarding students expressed high levels of socio-cultural disconnect with the school as a consequence of school not providing accessible cultural programs.
- Maeir (2010), Anderson (2010) and, McNaboe and Poetsch (2010) found that students' access to school language programs had a significant impact on the Wiradjuri students' sense of local identity.

### 4.3. Impact on learning

A small number of studies identified the impact of valued language and/or cultural programs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' schooling success.

- Jones, Chandler, Munro and Lowe's (2008) study found a positive impact in improving their acquisition of English literacy in the early primary years for all students in an assessment of English literacy acquisition, when they were provided access to a local Aboriginal language program.
- A study by Wilson, Quinn, Abbott and Cairney (2018) highlighted the importance of the home school relationships in their finding that 'learning about culture and being literate in their first language assisted the development of both Aboriginal and English literacy in remote communities'.

## Findings

The importance of language and cultural programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- **Community aspirations:** The studies speak to each community's aspirations for their languages to be revived, maintained, and made accessible to their children and the wider community (Guenther et al., 2015; Lowe, 2010, 2017).
- **Value:** The studies highlight the deep and multiple points of access, value added to students' engagement with the knowledge being imparted to students by local communities, and the importance of assisting communities to re-acquire hidden knowledge skills and understanding through the re-telling of these local epistemologies (MacMahon, 2013).
- **Connectedness:** Students and their families speak of their deep sense of connectedness to kin, Elders, knowledge and the Dreaming as a result of active engagement in community-centred cultural activities (Biddle & Swee, 2012; Murray, 2017).
- **Community agency:** The systematic literature review demonstrates how Elders want school programs that meet the cultural and educational aspirations for their children (Lowe, 2017; Osborne et al., 2017).
- **Impact:** Studies highlight the positive impacts of participant access to Country and their engagement in ceremony and other shared cultural activities (Guenther et. al., 2015).

# Factors affecting the development of school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement: A systematic review

## Developing school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement

This review looks at the ways in which schools have, often unsuccessfully, sought to establish stronger ties with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents. It provides insights into the reasons why schools have often failed to meet their own and the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family's expectations for authentic, purposeful and productive interactions.

## Research question

The following inquiry question shed light on the many issues affecting Australian school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement programs. It focuses on identifying both barriers and enabling factors of this engagement, and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their communities, teachers and principals.

The primary focus question was:

*What issues affect the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and school collaboration and what impact have these had on schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and their communities?*

## Primary focus of review (PICO attributes)

The database search terms, which came from both the inquiry question and the project protocols (Joanna Briggs Institute 2017), focused specifically on research that reported on Australian Indigenous students, their families and communities within schools (K–12), and their engagement with local cultural and language programs. Using the PRISMA inclusion/exclusion protocol the investigation commenced with 1059 studies and was progressively whittled to 25 studies in this review.

## Analysis

This review is in two parts. The first focuses on findings that identified factors that either enabled or acted as a barrier to the engagement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and schools. A second focus sought to understand the impact of these interactions on each stakeholder group. The analysis was coded as findings into NVivo using a thematic structure of themes, concepts and sub-categories (see Bazeley 2009).

## 1. Barriers to engagement

Overall, this theme revealed those findings that evidenced the many personal, structural or epistemic barriers shown to negatively impact on the capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and schools to establish collaborations in support of students' educational engagement.

### 1.1. Postcolonial experiences and their impact on community engagement

- Bond's (2010) study of the role of Elders in the education of Aboriginal students highlighted the effect of systemic policies that contributed to the breakdown of social cohesion between students and Elders.
- Hayes et al. (2009) and Woodrow et al. (2016) reported on parents identifying the legacy of schooling which they claimed dislocated them from their epistemic relationships with families, elders and connection to their Country.
- Muller and Saulwick (2006) and Hayes et al. (2009) noted that while Aboriginal parents often had expressed a desire to collaborate with schools, they also spoke of their mistrust in schools. Chenhall et al. (2011), Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) and Woodrow et al. (2016), also found that Indigenous communities identified the effect of programs that embedded deficit discourses about them and their children.

### 1.2. Controlling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement: racism, deficit positioning and low school expectations

This category highlighted the effects of racism and deficit discourses perceived to be deeply embedded in school policies and structures.

- Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) noted that while Aboriginal students often were the victim of low teacher expectations, that these were also internalised within some in the community. This manifested as low expectations about the community's capacity, the questioning about the value of local knowledge and its capacity to sustain student's development of 'higher order thinking'.
- Hayes et al. (2009), Muller (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) identified the effects of racism, its impact on schools and communities' expectations, and its destructive impact on students' self-efficacy and wellbeing.
- Hayes et al. (2009) found that parents identified that the primary cause of mistrust of schools was the history of their schooling and the schools' failure to recognise teachers' incapacity or unwillingness to relate to them.
- Dockett et al. (2006) study found that the schools' poorly conceived attempts to work with families with children transitioning to school, were affected by a level of pessimism about their ability to improve children's educational outcomes.

### 1.3. Institutional policies and practices that impact on schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Several studies highlighted issues related to the community's lack of social access to their children's schools and its consequent negative impact on their engagement.

- Barr and Saltmarsh's (2014) highlighted the levels of discord between schools and Aboriginal families, while Berthelsen and Walker (2008) noted that the levels of teacher resistance to parent engagement effected parents' ability to connect to the school and the processes of schooling.

- Many studies noted the impact of the many institutional barriers, which instrumentally affected schools' capacity to establish genuine collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Cleveland (2008) noted community concerns that the partnership policies themselves, suggesting they were vague on detail, generalised and 'feel good' documents that did not provide parents with genuine access.
- Lowe (2017) found that parents understood that the development of these engagement programs had the effect of often isolating them from the 'real work' of school. Parents suggested that the focus of these programs was 'busy work' on ephemeral issues that had little or no impact on students' learning.

## 2. Enablers

This second theme identifies those findings that recorded the practices of schools and communities that had the effect of enabling the establishment of productive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and school collaborations.

### 2.1. Beliefs

Studies made explicit references to the impact of community engagement on teachers' beliefs and attitudes, their impact that community engagement on teachers' beliefs and attitudes and underpinning deep understanding about 'knowing' and giving students access to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge that comes from developing links with families.

- Lowe (2017) highlighted how a number of teachers were able to authentically embed Indigenous knowledge into their everyday pedagogic and relational practices.
- Woodrow et al. (2016) found that parents believed that local community knowledge was critical to students' Indigenous identities and that this fortified them against the homogenising of 'local' Indigenous identities.
- Harrison and Murray (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) pointed to how establishing quality micro-collaborations between teachers and local Aboriginal people shifted classroom practice and deepened students' engagement with school and also local knowledge.

### 2.2. Practices that enable engagement

Many of the studies sought to identify key elements of collaborations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and schools. This review identified research that looked beyond deficit theorising to identify programs shown to facilitate families' exercising their social and cultural capital in support of their children's education.

- The exercise of this capital was shown by Chenhall et al. (2011) Chodkiewicz et al. (2008) and Lowe (2017) to build levels of trust and respect that would then underpin deeper collaboration and support effective use of community and teacher capital.
- Lowe (2017), Lea et al. (2011), Lovett et al. (2014) and Bond (2010) identified how local learning partnerships build trust with schools, supports the establishment of 'high value' cultural and language programs, the inclusion of local knowledge in the schools' and enhanced the role of Elders.
- Ewing (2012), Muller (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) identified that the teaching of local languages provided unique opportunities for cultural and exchange between the school and the community, while supporting teachers' broader understanding of the community and its history.

- Lowe (2017) found that these programs provided opportunities to support pedagogic relationships with students, legitimise Indigenous knowledge in classroom teaching and support broader community initiatives.

### **2.3. School and community leadership**

Studies highlighted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community agency in taking leadership in creating opportunities for meaningful collaborations between themselves and schools.

- Bennet and Moriarty (2015) identified initiatives taken by local Elders and Aboriginal education officers in supporting the professional learning needs of pre-service teachers to effect meaningful partnerships with students and families.
- Owens' (2015) study of a numeracy program evidenced how the actions taken by the community saw the school support their efforts to establish a much-needed childcare program in the school.
- Bond's (2010) study evidenced the agentic actions of the Elders who sought to 'guide' her research to investigate how they and the cultural programs they had run, had been progressively marginalised by the school's principals.

### **2.4. Mobilising capital**

This category captures details of those deliberate actions of communities and teachers in support of their actions for purposeful collaboration designed to effect whole school change.

- The Lampert et al. (2014) study highlighted how a community developed local opportunities for staff professional learning through establishing a cultural program that deepened teacher appreciation of the community's connection to Country, the importance of cultural transmission, and the positive effect of supporting cultural connections between Elders and students.
- Dockett et al. (2006) and Lowe (2017) found that Aboriginal teachers and language tutors had a significant impact across the school, as their very presence legitimated the presence of local knowledge and Indigenous pedagogies. These collaborations were foundational to the schools' new 'position' of knowledge through the establishment of local collaborations.
- Collaborations were seen as critical to a school's capacity to effect change. These interactions underpinned social capital and building relational trust, respect and reciprocity between teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Bond (2010), Ewing (2012), Harrison and Murray (2012) and Lampert et al. (2014) identified the impact that even a small number of teachers can have in their classrooms after deepening their understanding about the socio-cultural needs of students.
- These findings distinguished the importance of teachers' relationships with Indigenous workers and/or families and the potential impact that this had on their beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and in-class relationships with students.

## **3. Impact of collaboration**

The limited impact of community engagement policies in affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational outcomes is seen as a major inhibiting influence on family's willingness to engage with schools.

### **3.1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

The issues that effected the establishment of collaborations between teachers and communities/families were seen to be dependent on the history of schooling in these locations, and the level of authenticity in the school's efforts to engage meaningfully with families.

- Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), Chenhall et al. (2011) and Cleveland (2008) noted that the reticence of parents to engage with schools, based on their negative view and interactions with schools. This included the impact of deficit discourses seen to be embedded in schooling, which reinforced parents' views that teachers had little understanding of how the pervasive attitudes impacted directly on their own and colleagues' classroom practices.
- Bennet and Moriarty (2015) and Guenther (2011) found that when communities had a sense of ownership in a program, there was a positive shift in the community's engagement with schools.
- Lowe (2017), Mechielsen et al. (2014) and Muller and Saulwick's (2006) studies found that parents were aware that their engagement with teachers had a positive outcome in brokering a productive learner relationship between their children and the teachers.
- Chodkiewicz et al. (2008), Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) and Guenther et al. (2015) found that the success of their programs was dependent on parents developing trust in the school, the programs' authenticity and its purposefulness in addressing the learning needs of students.

### 3.2. Teachers, principals and the school

A number of studies focused on the impact of school collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with several identifying the importance of collaboration and trust as critical leadership qualities required by principals and teachers.

- Effective leaders were shown to be purposeful in the construction of projects that promised school change, that understood the need to proactively manage teacher resistance and, as Bennet and Moriarty (2015), Bond (2010) and Lampert et al. (2014) highlighted, build relational connections to students.
- Lampert et al. (2014), Muller and Saulwick (2006), Owens (2015) and Chenhall et al. (2011) evidenced Aboriginal families clearly voicing a view that teachers needed to accept the responsibility to reach out to families and to find opportunities to build learning relationships with students.
- Lovett et al.'s (2014) research highlighted a community driven project to work with a university in support of providing community-run training of pre-service teachers that included community mentoring to support establishing links to Aboriginal families.

### 3.3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The research was scant in respect to findings that were able to show a direct effect of school and community engagement on students' learning outcomes.

- Though there was no evidence of school community programs impacting on student's learning, Bond (2010) did identify an effect on improving teacher–student relationships, students' post-schooling employment, and as Guenther et al.'s (2015) study found, community engagement with schools that positively impacted students' interactions with community elders.

## Findings

Factors affecting the development of school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement.

- **Purpose of engagement:** While the purpose of school and community engagement was explicitly discussed in many of the studies, there were a variety of articulations as to what this should be. The findings reinforce the concerns of parents that their role programs are primarily to enforce



unsuccessful school programs focused on attendance and student behaviour (Berthelsen and Walker 2008; Chenhall et al. 2011).

- **Improving student outcomes:** There is little 'evidence' in the studies that school and community engagement is the 'immediate' panacea to improving student outcomes. While the nexus between engagement and improved outcomes remains unproven. The challenge for future research would be to test the veracity of this key tenant of this government strategy.
- **Establishing collaborative programs:** While policies have exhorted schools to establish collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, the realities of bringing this to fruition are seen as problematic, except where schools demonstrate exemplary leadership in opening themselves to an examination of the policies and practices shown to marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- **Authentic collaboration:** Conversely collaborative programs that centre on authentic efforts to establish educational, language or cultural programs indicate high impact on staff and school alike (Lowe, 2017; Bond, 2010).

# School leadership and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes

## School leadership and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

This review looked to provide evidence of the qualities and attributes of school leaders charged with leading schools and to review their impact on effecting substantive change in how these schools meet the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

### Research question

The research question is as follows:

*What is the role of school leadership and its relationship with community, in developing an environment to support sustained change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student learning and social outcomes?* (Trimmer, Dixon & Guenther, 2019)

Implicit in this question are the impacts of school policy, governance and decision-making as it effects the local communities and students' histories and experience, their agency and the 'need to transform both policies and practices that have been used to subjugate Indigenous peoples' aspirations, capacities and knowledge (Smith, 2000)'.

### Primary focus of review (PICO attributes)

The review used PICO attributes that concentrated on research that focused across Australian schools and identified findings specific to Australian Indigenous K – 12 students, their families and communities. The context of the review identified the concept of educational leadership. The reviewers also used a research 'quality' criterion described in the methodology paper by Lowe, Tennent, Gunether, Harrison, Burgess, Vass and Moodie (2019).

### Analysis

As the majority of the study methodologies were qualitative (over 85%) an interpretive analysis framework (Evans, 2002) was considered more appropriate than tabular presentation of data, followed by a narrative description that is more commonly used for Systematic Reviews. Differences between the studies were examined and similar themes identified. Relationships between studies were explored for key phrases and explanatory themes. Each theme was written up referring back to the original studies to check for accuracy of description. The findings were then presented describing all themes with each supported by exemplars from the studies.

## 1. Relationship to and collaboration between principals and community

Studies within this theme identified actions where the principal and/or community took the initiative to lead or co-lead the development of a school and community engagement project. They provided evidence of the effect of relational leadership in initiating authentic school and community projects to advance our understanding of what motivated parents to exercise agency to affect school action.

### 1.1. Promoting partnerships

Whilst encouraging the promotion of partnerships, AESOC (2006) identified the importance of distinguishing between 'leadership in Indigenous schools' and 'Indigenous leadership in schools' both of which were seen as critical to this issue.

- Kamara's (2009, 2017) study revealed the complex roles and challenges of being a female Indigenous principal in an Aboriginal community grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, beliefs, and value systems, but where the principal felt pressured to embrace mainstream leadership perspectives.
- Leadership undertaken from within Indigenous communities was found to have positive impacts in situations where the community felt empowered when families/community took a lead role.
- Effective partnerships between parents and teachers in a remote pre-school literacy project reported by Fluckiger, Diamond and Jones (2012), saw mothers reporting higher levels of empowerment when accorded equal value and respect.
- Riley and Webster (2016) reported on the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC), found positive working relationships and shared leadership between school principals and Indigenous community leaders to improve literacy rates.

## 2. Complexity of principal role

The role of principals has become increasingly complex including responsibility for system accountability, curriculum leadership, community liaison, financial and human resource management

### 2.1. The complex role of the principal

- Niesche and Keddie (2014) looked at the complexities of school leadership in the day-to-day work of two principals. They noted the importance of context when they highlighted the numerous and complex social, educational and relational difficulties that the principals had to address almost daily.
- Gurr, et al. (2014) identified that the bureaucratic demands for accountability created particular difficulties in managing complexity and balancing tasks. They emphasised the need for effective professional learning and leadership experience prior to principals' placement in what they saw as 'high-needs' schools.
- Johnson, Dempster and McKenzie (2013) discussed the complexity of the PALLIC (Principal as Literacy Leaders) program where principals' roles in leading curriculum change required them to establish valued home-school-community partnerships. This required principals visiting families in their homes to connect and build literacy capacity with families. Lovett, Dempster and Fluckiger (2014) found that these partnerships were necessary to enhance children's learning.

### 3. Models and styles of leadership

Styles of leadership were overtly reported in few studies but implied in others focusing on relationships with community and complexity of the principal role. In each case collaborative models, distributive leadership, servant and transformative leaders are recurring as those that enable empowerment of community and engagement of community and teachers.

- It was clear that a key function of an effective principals was leadership for equity and diversity. For a cluster of three small remote Indigenous community schools in the Nth Territory. It was reported that these three Aboriginal female principals, who all had initially struggled to gain impact, grounded their later successes in establishing a model that met their community's educational aspirations through establishing a strong co-relational leadership model with families.
- Jorgenson and Niesche (2011) found that a model of distributive curriculum leadership with Aboriginal education workers and the community assisted reform.

#### 3.1. Models of leadership

- Keddie and Niesche (2012) concluded that leaders need to know how to engage in critical situational analysis of Indigenous politics, relations and experience to be effective.
- Dempster, Lovett and Fluckiger (2016) demonstrate that both-ways leadership and yarning within the intercultural space is a necessary precursor for culturally relevant conversations and development of collaborative trusting community relationships.

### 4. Leadership of pedagogy and curriculum

While leadership may become subservient to management in schools due to the many demands on principals' time, the role of curriculum and pedagogic leadership was central to affecting classroom change.

#### 4.1. Leadership of teaching and learning

- The complexity of the role, along with inexperience and cultural unpreparedness can make it hard for school leaders to impact on learning (Jorgensen, 2012; Luke, et al., 2013).
- Jorgensen and Niesche (2011) outline a range of challenges faced by principals in remote schools. They argue that new approaches to curriculum leadership are required to implement both curricular and pedagogical reforms.
- Johnson, Dempster, McKenzie, (2013), Lovett, Dempster and Fluckiger, (2014) and, Riley and Webster, (2016) reported that the principals in the PALLIC program could affect curriculum change when they built strong school and community partnerships.
- Owens (2014) found teachers were able to affect pedagogic change when principals made funds available to:
  - manage the school to use whole-school professional development
  - establish a partnership model between school and community
  - revise teaching approaches and curriculum implementation, and
  - value family and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage.

### 5. Participation and achievement

Studies that addressed areas of low engagement, achievement and completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait students in remote schools required multiple, targeted focused leadership programs that

worked across a range of levels to support students and increase engagement and academic success.

### **5.1. Enhancing student success**

- Luke et al. (2013) found in a mixed-methods evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Institute program in Queensland schools, that there was limited evidence of impact on student engagement and academic outcomes.
- The results of the reform 'Whatever it Takes' in Queensland to boost attainment of the QCE by Year 12 students was reported by Button, Dungan, Nixon and Walton (2016). The program, which offered intensive case study management and individualised student support reported that it achieved its key objective within two years.
- Keddie's (2014) study of an Indigenous Independent K-12 school, identified the school's emphasis on relationality offered significant opportunity for increased learning outcomes. This finding is supported by Rahman (2010). Shay and Heck (2016) recommended that using the flexi-schooling approach worked particularly well for this cohort of students, especially when the school developed strategies for students and families when structural, pedagogic or cultural changes occurred.

## **6. Impacts of policy process**

The focus on policy included an important review of competing discourses that reside in both top-down and bottom-up policy development and implementation.

### **6.1. Policy and leadership**

- Guenther et al. (2014) indicate that the broader socio-cultural discourse around disadvantage inexorably leads to the development of a deficit approach to the development of Indigenous education policy. He found that these children are positioned as a 'special interest group' who are problematised from within this framework (Bacchi, 2009) and consequently become 'objects of policy' (Moore, 2012). Moore argues for a policy process that focused on an intercultural approach to recognise and engage in complexity and context.

## **7. Impacts of governance, procedures and accountability requirements on leadership and decision-making**

One of the contributing issues impacting on the complexity of the principal role has come as a result of government policy that seeks to move towards decentralisation and deregulation of school governance. Bureaucratic accountability is seen to negatively impact on principals being able to meet the learning needs of students and the local community.

### **7.1. School management and its impact on leadership**

- Guenther, et al. (2014) suggests a need to reconceptualise what is assessed to include alternative measures of what cultural activities and knowledge are critical for community survival and student engagement. Disbray, (2016) and Prout, (2009, 2010) identified that schools need to give greater weight to the place of communities and culture.

- Osborne (2013) indicates that remote school principals find themselves caught between governmental discourses of accountability and the voices, values and aspirations of families in remote communities.
- Osborne (2013) concludes that collaboration and communication are an absolute requirement for principals to establish collaboratively and locally endorsed ways to work with communities to address issues such as itinerant attendance, and improve literacy and numeracy.
- Disbray (2016) found educational success when stakeholders work together to develop vibrant programs. She revealed the incongruities between local discourses, local identities and epistemologies and institutional discourses that promote a uniform model of education.

## Findings

School leadership and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes:

- **Both-ways leadership:** The results are largely consistent between researchers, states and different education systems, in that they all called for 'both-ways' leadership, cultural competency, and community involvement in decision-making and curriculum implementation. There is also agreement on the need for appointment of experienced and culturally competent leaders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools who are capable of implementing a shared model of leadership that includes commitment to the community.
- **Professional learning:** New models of professional development need to include intercultural awareness and identified leadership models that require new and sustainable leadership.
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives:** Research is limited on how schools can effectively include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, aspirations and codes of behaviour.
- **Whole-community leadership:** The major findings highlight how the principal's role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools is complex and must extend beyond the school gate to include the community as active/lead partners in decision-making and problem solving.
- **Leading change:** At present there is a tension between the demands of the general curriculum and the need to embed local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge. Change is required such that schools can recognise community needs, the development of dynamic and flexible educational policy and organisational structures that support community to improve engagement, retention and academic and social outcomes (Trimmer, Dixon and Guenther, 2019).

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