Yarning space: Leading literacy learning through family–school partnerships

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EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS, teachers and the community have universally been heralded as crucial to improving young Indigenous Australians’ participation in early childhood education and their literacy development. This study of one remote preschool setting identifies the features that successfully framed family–school and community-led partnerships there. Our account is based on reported experiences with Parents and Learning (PaL), a long-established program, and Mums n Bubs, a recent initiative in the community preschool. Mothers said they felt empowered when equal value and respect were accorded to them as key participants in what we have described as a ‘yarning space’. This was a jointly constructed space and an intercultural strategy centred on the preschool where everyone listened carefully and respectfully to each other, helping to build and lead a literacy learning community. The co-researchers were privileged to be invited into this space to hear the mothers speak with pride of their achievements.

Introduction

One of the co-researchers was a trusted friend of the preschool staff, which facilitated entry to and acceptance of the chief investigator in the research site. She encouraged and supported their sharing of personal narratives. As co-researchers, we viewed the mothers as potentially effective agents in establishing and sustaining family–school partnerships. We were invited into their ‘yarning space’, a safe, jointly constructed space centred on the preschool in which all voices are heard as they ‘yarn up’ (Burchill & Higgins, 2005). The space was not so much a physical location as a positioning or sociocultural strategy for communicating across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In this ‘third place’ (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet, 1999), the participants were able to articulate the multiple dimensions of their own intercultural space and identity. This study of how to promote collaborative agency documents an alternative approach to traditional practices in other family–school settings where power and control rest firmly with the school and its agents and remain unchallenged. We then used a narrative case study to contest the power and control of research traditions that, like some school or project leaders, only talk or ‘yarn down’ (Burchill & Higgins, 2005) to their community members.

We also write in part from the first-person point of view to take advantage of the developmental opportunities that such autobiographical writing affords all participants (Pinar & Grumet, 1976). (Auto)biographical research is a powerful and effective way to study knowledge formation and to understand (pre)schooling (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). Using such a personal knowledge approach helps prevent projects or programs being misunderstood as uni-dimensional—as bodies of knowledge or ‘right ways’ to be applied generally.

In late 2009 we commenced this study at the community preschool in Napranum, an Aboriginal Community on Western Cape York in remote far north Queensland. We were keen to identify the nature of the family–school and community partnership that seemingly underpinned the success of its long-established Parents and Learning (PaL) program and a recent initiative, Mums n Bubs. The aim of both these programs is to engage parents as partners with the preschool in their children’s literacy learning.

PaL was designed in 2001 as a bespoke literacy program to support parents in Napranum as they sought to engage in their child’s literacy learning. Initially, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative parents and the preschool teacher/director considered implementing
Participation in early childhood education programs has been identified as a way to enhance literacy skills, and has been found to be more cost-effective than intervention at later ages (Elliott, 2006; Frigo & Adams, 2002; Heckman, 2006). However, three- to five-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in very remote areas are far less likely to attend preschool than are those living in other areas of Australia (Australian Government, 2009; Biddle, 2007). While the Australian Government is committed to the provision of universal access to early childhood education by 2014, attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in educational programs clearly remains a major issue (Banks, 2009).

Hattie (2003) identified two of the most critical factors that contribute to such disparities in children's learning and development. These involve the attitudes, values, behaviours and other attributes children bring to their learning, along with family levels of expectation and encouragement. Therefore, establishing shared aims and goals, and developing common understandings about literacy learning specifically, and education generally, amongst families, schools and their communities from the earliest stage of a child’s development is seen as crucial to increasing the participation of Indigenous children in preschool, and in later schooling (DEEWR, 2008).

Daniel (2005) articulated the need for research to investigate the outcomes of a range of involvement practices, including those in Indigenous Communities. Research is reconceptualised in the present study to take account of the informal stories and conversations (the ‘yarning’) of the participants and the researchers by adopting a narrative inquiry approach. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry involves an understanding of ‘narrative as both phenomena and practices, including those in Indigenous Communities.’

We are restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us. Academics are given the ‘story line’ that the ‘I’ should be suppressed in their writing, that they should accept homogenization and adopt the all-knowing, all-powerful voice of the academy. But contemporary philosophical thought raises problems that exceed and undermine the academic story line. We are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves (p. 2).

Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their parents have for too long been given the ‘story line’ that ‘they’ must remain unheard and suppressed at the margins of schooling, unable even to voice their ‘we’.
Participants and setting

The Napranum preschool is situated in a dry (alcohol-free) Aboriginal community near the mining town of Weipa on the remote western side of Cape York in far north Queensland. It was chosen for the study because it has enjoyed prominence for its success in engaging parents in literacy activities with their children through its PaL program (DKCRC, 2009). As explained above, one of the co-researchers was a trusted friend of the preschool staff, which facilitated acceptance of the chief investigator and encouraged the sharing of personal narratives or local knowledge.

The preschool is affiliated with C&K (a provider of community not-for-profit early childhood education and care services in Queensland) and supported by the Napranum Aboriginal Shire Council. It caters for approximately 65 children, most of whom are Aboriginal but also include a proportion of Torres Strait Islanders, in three rooms: Alandahk (barramundi) for children aged 3–3½ years; Keynbal (crocodile) for 3½–4½-year-olds; and Thungghan (flying fish) for 4½–5½-year-olds. The staff consists of local Aboriginal women, with the exception of the teacher/director who is of Torres Strait Islander/European heritage (hence considered an outsider), and a teacher of European heritage (also an outsider) who lived in Weipa and travelled to Napranum each day.

The main participants in the study were the current classroom teachers (including the teacher/director) \( (n = 3) \), teacher aides \( (n = 3) \), parents \( (n = 5) \) of children currently attending the preschool, past parents \( (n = 6) \) who are tutors and coordinators of the PaL program, and the program manager (a past teacher and co-developer of PaL). Conversations with three representatives of the broader community who attended the preschool end-of-year function also contributed indirectly to the researcher’s construction of how family–school partnerships were co-constructed. The participants (a grand total of 20) were willing for the preschool and its programs to be identified. Pseudonyms have been used for parents.

Method

A combined qualitative approach, using narrative inquiry, portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), and case study (Yin, 2006) methods, was chosen as we wished to illuminate a particular situation (Napranum), and to provide a close (in-depth and first-hand) understanding of how its home–school and community viewed the learning partnership.

We had no preferred explanation for what contributed to the positive home–school and community partnership at Napranum preschool but were empathetic to the participants. We were intent on discovering the relationships and underlying concepts that characterised their yarning space, while gaining an understanding of the phenomenon of leading literacy learning (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and honouring their stories as we took them to where they could be heard by all. In this research account, features of the PaL program and activities in the Mums n Bubs program are used to illustrate how partnerships connected to leading the children’s literacy learning were built.

Storied data collection

The data was collected over several weeks at the end of the preschool year, using direct observation, field notes, interviews and document reviews. Informal conversations (yarning) replaced interviews as the primary way in which understandings were solicited. Yarning has been described as ‘a transactional activity that involves negotiation and trust’ (Imtoual, Kameniar & Bradley, 2009, p. 27). The conversations focused on involvement in the preschool; the operation of programs and activities; home reading; and roles and relationships of teachers, parents and the community. Observations and field notes were taken of interactions in the preschool, on the bus trips to collect and deliver children, and during the end-of-year party and graduation ceremony. Documents generated in relation to the PaL program were also examined. These included an evaluation of PaL at Napranum (Makin, 2003, 2006) and a 2009 report by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using a content analysis process similar to that used in grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2002) and in narrative inquiry. First, recordings of the yarning sessions were transcribed and read repeatedly in conjunction with the observation field notes to identify ‘bites’ of information considered important. A code was assigned to each bite and then codes were compared to find consistencies in order to develop categories and identify themes. We did not try to make the data fit any preconceived themes (Trace, 2001). Throughout this paper, selected extracts from the participants are cited to illustrate the four main themes that emerged. To honour the owners of the stories and their portraits (see Pearl and Catherine below) a draft of this paper was sent to the participants for comment, and changes were made in response. This membership checking helped to corroborate our main findings.

Findings

Typically, schools have been responsible for initiating the development of family–school partnerships with a focus on school learning and school agendas (Cairney,
Lack of apparent participation by many parents does not mean that they are not interested in their children’s education. As one parent remarked about the progress of her little boy:

*I took notice of the way, how he speaks. He’s speaking, like, really good, speaking out there, using big words, different words. I find that, I’m very proud of that, like what the teacher’s done and all the others. I’m very proud of that. That’s why I come and give my time to the preschool.*

### Issues of power and leadership

Despite setbacks such as the closure of the primary school, there is a growing belief among some of the mothers in the community that they can initiate change and take up leadership roles. A group of parents shared their story of the ‘sorry business’ within the community over the State Government’s authorised closure of the primary school in Napranum in 2007. The primary school was described as ‘... part of our history path. It was the spirit of the community’ and a safe meeting place for mothers. Shutting it down meant that young children would need to catch the bus to Weipa to attend Prep. Parents and staff expressed a sense of loss and grief. In the words of one mother: ‘The community is still angry and grieving over the way we were treated in not being consulted in the decision-making process. It was decided to close the school before we were told. Parents felt powerless’. In the words of another: ‘People [bureaucrats] don’t listen to our voices. They just listen to what is on paper. [They think] word isn’t truth. [They think] writing is truth’. In what is traditionally an oral community, there was a sense that the written word was valued over the spoken word. However, the preschool teacher/director, a member of the community (though an outsider), was not defeated. A tireless intermediary, she arranged a meeting with the educational authorities explaining:

*I’m always going to stand up. And it helps when you’ve got the support of your family and your colleagues and your community. It does help. If we come as a united voice for the voice of our children, people are going to listen to us. And that’s what we did when we wanted to keep the Prep room open. We got our mums together, we got reinforcements and bang, that day, we’re the only kindergarten in the state that offers Prep.*

Her role as leader in the community, however, is not without boundaries. She commented, ‘I’ll help on things educational and be their advocate because they’ve asked me to, but I know better than to poke my nose into things that I haven’t been asked to poke my nose into’. In many ways her leadership role is one of service. She supports parents with the demands placed on them by a literate community. For example:

*...*
I help them with their blue card … helped them with their resume, doing stat decs [statutory declarations], taking them to the court house to fill in birth certificates. — Ain’t my job. I don’t get paid to do that but you just do it.

Preschool parents have also taken on leadership roles within the preschool community. Pearl acts as an agent in getting children to attend preschool:

If I went past and I see other kids sitting on the step, and they are ready to go to school, I sort of, I got the authority to bring her up because I’m involved in the school and they [the parents] know that you know.

Catherine has also become an activist for the preschool. She commented:

Sometimes when I go out I tell parents that, you know, ‘Go down to the school and if youse (sic) really want to know what your children do. Go and see. Like, they’ve got books like that. What they do, they show you, and they break things down in their own ways so that you can understand.’

These examples of advocacy come as no surprise given that there is quite a history of strong women in Napranum demonstrating leadership in education. In 1967 one mother (name withheld to respect the deceased) in the community established the kindergarten in Napranum and became its first preschool teacher.

‘Yarning up’ as exercising agency and voice

In 2001 a small group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers approached the non-Indigenous preschool teacher/director, seeking support for them to assist in their children’s literacy development. These mothers demonstrated the importance they placed on promoting literacy in their children’s lives.

It is the somewhat unexpected courage of these women in stepping forward to assist their children to learn to be literate in standard Australian English, and their belief in their own capacity to learn, that make their actions remarkable—especially in a community that speaks Torres Strait Islander Creole and Aboriginal English [referred to as Broken English]. Kral (2009) maintained that, in comparison to most Western or other major literate cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the remote world have made the transition from an oral to a literate culture only relatively recently. They are pioneers in social literacy practices. She reminds us that literacy in English has taken more than 1,000 years to evolve and, if the current generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are to acquire a set of literate cultural practices in our lifetime, then literacy needs to be incorporated into the fabric of their life beyond the school.

The teacher/director responded to the mothers’ request by providing further opportunity for them to be involved. She engaged them to work with her in the development of PaL, describing her role as: ‘I see myself as part of a team. As a teacher, I am a guest in their community. You have to fit in with the rhythm of the community’.

The mothers investigated other literacy programs but found them unsuitable. In the words of one coordinator, ‘PaL is a success because we knew the Hippy Program wouldn’t work … I said our children are not going to understand that … we need to do our own. And we did it our way, you know’. Another remarked, ‘We made the game. We took it, tested [it] with our kids. We’re sitting there and writing things down and saying, “Oh, we should change it this way, this way and that.” And then we went back [to the preschool] and said, “Okay. This is the game. This is how you’re going to play the game because this is how the kids played it”’. Similar opportunities for parents to exercise agency and develop their feelings of self-efficacy (belief in their own competence) are evident in the continual development and expansion of the activities in the PaL program.

Mums n Bubs is another program designed for mothers to exercise their voice in an educational setting and where opportunities to develop self-efficacy are provided. In the words of one tutor who does not ‘yarn down’, ‘We want Mums to feel good about themselves’. The current teacher/director explained further, ‘They have to come out of their safety zone at home and they have to engage in a professional educational setting where people do work and they can see us as working and this is not just a home thing … We set this up to show mothers what they can do, not what they should do, what they can do’.

One mother who regularly attends Mums n Bubs said: ‘I find that [Mums n Bubs] really good, like, because it helps. It helps other parents to come forward. It helps them how to read and how to connect to their kids’.

‘Yarning up’ as promoting empowerment

We saw the mothers’ involvement with PaL as having an empowering effect as they grew more confident about speaking up. One of the first parents to be involved in PaL now has a Bachelor of Education degree and is the current teacher/director of the preschool. Another past parent who is now the coordinator of PaL was described by another mother:

From doing PaL she’s more confident in speaking, like, she goes and addresses all these people. I went with them to Melbourne. We went with [sic] a big conference they had, from all over the world. She’s got her driver’s licence. She’s got a steady income. Now, she’s flying halfway around Australia,
all these places that I’ve never been … She’s planning to start a business with her partner. I think it’s earthmoving.

A third past parent described her own involvement in the PaL program and its powerful effects on her:

Yeah, it started, because I was a parent and after my daughter finished her two years and someone asked me if I wanted to be a tutor so it just went from then, like we became a tutor from a parent and took on six families, went out into the community once or twice a week and then moved onto being a coordinator … And it’s just like a stepping stone for the parents I suppose. All of the parents that have come through as tutors have moved on to bigger and better things. We can’t sort of hold the parents back for maybe not even a year because they just moved on to other things. I think PaL has been an instrument. I think it builds their self-esteem in more ways than one. I suppose just going out and talking to people gives them a bit of courage to maybe go up and look for jobs, because I know some of these parents. You go to do your weekly visits and they’d hardly say two words to you, now they’ve gone on to full-time jobs, driving trucks with Rio Tinto and you think ‘Oh, you know that’s a big step because yeah, I’d like to think PaL had a hand in that’.

Discussion

In many family–school interactions, the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and their communities are often overlooked or undervalued by inappropriate interventions and by inexperienced but well-intentioned practitioners (Shepherd & Walker, 2008). In many instances practices have been imposed within ‘a broadly paternalistic framework, assuming the superiority of mainstream views’ (Priest, King, Nangala, Brown & Nangala, 2008, p. 123). The experiences of the staff and parents at Napranum preschool, characterised by trust and a mutual respect, suggest that an alternative model is possible.

The approach to family–school partnership building at Napranum preschool, with examples taken from its PaL and Mums n Bubs programs, has demonstrated that genuine collaboration and leadership can occur in a space where leadership, power and responsibility are shared. The approach has resulted in ‘power to’ rather than ‘power over’ (Stone, Doherty, Jones & Ross, 1999, p. 354).

Smyth (2009, p. 14) described approaches that focus on ‘building power that results in social justice’ in school contexts as ‘community organizing’. The following principles (Makuvira, 2007) inform community organizing: participation—seen as an end in itself through knowledge-building and being responsible custodians; inclusiveness—drawing diverse communities into the decision-making processes, especially those at the periphery of decision making; scope of mission and vision—clear and precise aims and goals that embrace broader issues affecting the community rather than being narrowly focused; and critical perspective—advocating positive policy and institutional change conducive to active participation, ownership, accountability and transparency in organisations and institutions that marginalise people (pp. 383–384).

We hope this beginning study will encourage other leaders to learn to encourage parents to ‘yarn upwards’ and so challenge the existing power structures in schools and to seek ways to emancipate both leaders and followers. As researchers, we were often humbled by the wisdom of the mothers and inspired by their stories of survival and hope. We learned to appreciate their points of view and stories simply for what they were and to resist appropriating or smoothing them for our own ends.

Conclusion

A yarning space can provide a culturally safe, appropriate and effective solution to meet the literacy needs of an Indigenous community. ‘Yarning up’ relates to ‘yarning for outcomes’ rather than speaking down to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ‘Yarning down’ is an indication that an outsider, advocating some ‘fly-in, fly-out’ service model, knows best or has taken control of the outcomes for Indigenous people. Well-meaning school leaders often set out to ‘fix the problems’ within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities instead of supporting a space where meaningful engagement and reciprocity can occur. Such a space can have an empowering effect, as exemplified in the words of one Napranum mother: ‘It wasn’t somebody, some white person outside saying “you need to be doing this because it will be good for your kids”. It was Napranum parents saying “this is what we want for our kids”.’

References


