Educational Leadership with Indigenous Partners

SUSAN LOVETT
University of Canterbury, NZ
Email: susan.lovett@canterbury.ac.nz

NEIL DEMPSTER
Griffith University
Email: n.dempster@griffith.edu.au

BEV FLÜCKIGER
Griffith University
Email: b.fluckiger@griffith.edu.au

ABSTRACT: The project known as Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) was developed by Griffith University in partnership with the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA). The 2011 and 2012 participating schools were located in remote Indigenous and urban and regional settings across three Australian states and territories. The project included an enabling element in its design, namely the inclusion of Indigenous Leadership Partners from the schools’ communities. This was in response to findings from existing research work such as that by Priest et al. (2008); Frawley and Fasoli (2012); and Muller and Associates (2012) claiming that full partnerships between homes and schools enhances children’s learning. We discuss the project’s impact on the participants and their work to establish a two-way leadership partnership around literacy learning, specifically in the teaching of reading using survey data.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to analyse and discuss data from a study of educational leadership in Indigenous school communities in the light of positions derived from research literature on shared leadership and cross cultural community connections which support children learning to read. To undertake this task, we first describe the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) Project on which the study was centred. This is followed by an explanation of literature informing two of the project’s design positions, the first on leadership as a necessary process to make a difference to children’s learning by acknowledging and engaging in dialogue in open ‘intercultural spaces’; the second on leadership partnerships for learning in and beyond the school. In the third part of the article, we show how the two positions were expressed in the design of a short initial questionnaire for the leadership teams involved in the project. We
then present and analyse the data produced before drawing conclusions and discussing them in the light of the literature related to the two positions.

**Outline of the PALLIC Project**

The PALLIC Project was an educational leadership endeavour funded by the Australian Government in 2011-12. It gained approval from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) under the Government’s initiative called: *Closing the Gap – Expansion of intensive literacy and numeracy programs for under achieving Indigenous students.* Forty-eight schools in three government jurisdictions, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory took part. Education Queensland was responsible for hosting the project and for contracting the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) to implement and manage it in the schools which were located in remote Indigenous communities and in regional/urban areas with significant proportions of Indigenous children. APPA in turn, sub-contracted Griffith University to design and implement professional leadership learning modules with an accompanying research program.

A distinctive feature of the approved project was the establishment of leadership teams consisting of the principal and at least two local Indigenous people. These the project called Indigenous Leadership Partners to acknowledge the importance emphasised in relevant research literature of Indigenous leadership roles in children’s literacy learning, more about which is said later. The Indigenous Leadership Partners were, more often than not, Indigenous people working in the schools or closely affiliated with them.

The project’s professional learning program was designed around five modules combining two areas of knowledge and understanding: (i) what it takes to connect leadership with learning and (ii) what it takes to learn to read in Indigenous communities. Each of the modules was research-based and aimed at creating shared understanding of the strategies needed to enable leadership teams to take action in their local contexts. The purposes of the five modules are outlined in brief below.

**Module 1: Leadership for literacy learning**

The first module introduced participants to a framework or Blueprint derived from a research-based synthesis of meta-analytical studies of leadership for learning. Following the module, principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners were asked to apply the framework to scaffold improvement discussions about eight dimensions influential in literacy learning in their schools.

**Module 2: Learning to read**

The second module presented research findings on what it takes to learn to read, highlighting what the project called the ‘Big Six’: oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Follow-up application asked principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners to commence the development of a local version of a reading practices guide based on the Big Six with teachers.
Module 3: Analysing data

The third module focused on the qualitative and quantitative data necessary to gain: (i) diagnostic assessment of children’s achievement in the Big Six as a foundation for future planning; and (ii) an informed understanding of how actions in each of the Blueprint dimensions contribute to improvements in reading. After this module principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners were asked to carry out the necessary assessments to identify reading strengths and weaknesses as well as to commence the development of a home reading practices guide with family or community ‘leaders of reading’.

Module 4: Planning for reading improvement action

Module 4 engaged participants in how to plan evidence-informed strategies for reading improvement based on diagnostic assessment related to the Big Six. The primary purpose was to enable principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners to lead the development of Reading Action Plans (RAPs) back at school.

Module 5: Evaluating Reading Action Plans

Using program evaluation research findings, participants were exposed in Module 5 to processes designed to enable them to plan and implement school-based evaluations of their Reading Action Plans. This task was carried out subsequent to the module over a period of approximately six months.

Intrinsic to the design and conduct of the professional learning modules was a series of research-derived positions related to the leadership of learning, how children learn to read, reading interventions, shared leadership and support for leaders learning on-the-job. Two of these positions are particularly relevant to the present article. We turn now to the literature to explain them and present an indicative overview of supporting literature.

Literature which Informed Two of the PALLIC Positions

1. The PALLIC position on leadership

Compelling research evidence shows that quality leadership makes a difference to children’s learning and achievement no matter the context (Bishop, 2011; Day et al., 2010; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2006; MacBeath & Dempster, 2009; Masters, 2009; OECD, 2008; Robinson, 2009). That said, schools situated in Indigenous communities present principals with particular challenges because the cultural knowledge of Indigenous peoples is different from their own. Principals working in Indigenous communities need to accept and respect difference and learn how to create and interact in open ‘intercultural space’ (Taylor, 2003) where the cultural knowledge and experiences of Indigenous people are given equal value and voice in shaping the ways that schools and their communities create effective learning environments for children. Taylor defines this intercultural space as:

The ‘meeting of two distinct cultures’ through processes and interactions which retain the distinctive integrity and difference of both cultures and which may involve a blending of elements of both cultures but never the domination of one over another. (p. 45)
Indeed Angelides (2012) suggests that if there is a serious intent to offer equal opportunities to all learners then this means identifying what and how leadership actions can enhance children’s learning. In the context of Indigenous communities, such consideration of leadership requires a rethinking of how to blend two cultures for the sole purpose of helping children and their learning. As sources for learning are derived from schools and their communities, Priest et al. (2008) advocate that ‘both ways’ leadership is one way to formally recognise Indigenous people as active and necessary contributors to children’s learning, signalling the limitations of relying on mainstream knowledge for this work. The abbreviated phrase wurri jarrinjaku: ‘working together everyone and listening’ encapsulates how ‘both ways’ leadership was realised in their work in a remote central Australian context with senior Anangu and Yapa women.

The hard work required to make intercultural spaces a reality is acknowledged. Hernandez and Kose (2012) suggest that a first step is supporting principals to acquire new understanding and skills so they become culturally sensitive and competent. Likewise Frawley and Fasoli (2012) advocate intercultural leadership capabilities for ‘both ways’ education. They note that the report, Closing the Gap of Indigenous Disadvantage: A generational plan of action (2008) with targets for the future does not address the preparation and ongoing support for current and aspiring educational leaders’ intercultural capabilities, saying this is a serious omission. They also draw attention to the small number of research studies concentrating on educational leadership in remote Australian Aboriginal communities. What is reported, they say, confirms the very real challenges and constraints encountered by principals when attempting to negotiate school community partnerships in their respective communities, all of which are unique.

One project entitled ‘The Linking Worlds Research’ (Frawley et al., 2010) has made some headway dealing with the uniqueness of school leadership in remote and indigenous contexts. Its research team emphasises that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people must be willing to step into an intercultural space where new leadership practices can be learned. The difficulty of this step is noted by Fitzgerald (2003, p. 10) who argues that Indigenous educational leaders ‘… face the dilemma of double consciousness as they struggle to interpret, negotiate and survive in two distinct-cultural worlds’. Non-Indigenous educational leaders are similarly challenged to convey convincingly, the message that Indigenous people’s knowledge is valued and deemed crucial for the success of children’s learning in school.

Working in intercultural space necessitates new learning for school leaders which Hansuvadha and Slater (2012) refer to as cultural competence. This term is defined as the knowledge about how one’s personal beliefs inform interactions with other cultural groups. Moreover Lindsey, Roberts and Campbell-Jones (2005) suggest culturally competent leaders know how to add to, rather than subtract from, the cultural identity of Indigenous peoples. This is an important precursor to ‘both ways’ leadership. The need for intercultural space to be inclusive and fluid is depicted as a ‘yarning space’ by Flückiger, Diamond and Jones (2012) who report ways in which school leaders can listen to the stories of Indigenous peoples on what matters to them about their children’s learning and then use that knowledge to foster further opportunities for Indigenous people to share their ideas and expertise and initiate changes. Yarning is not about power and control residing with the school and remaining unchallenged. Instead it is a co-constructed space in which both school and community contribute.
In summary, we note a small though significant recent shift in the educational leadership literature which is giving greater prominence to the recognition of culturally diverse perspectives in the leadership of learning. We also recognise that a focus on generic leadership knowledge, skills and attributes in remote Indigenous schools is insufficient because these cultural contexts are unique and learning to lead in them requires a sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon and thus an alternative approach (Hallinger, 2011). We argue that the position we take is that alternative, endorsing the ‘both ways’ leadership concept put forward by Priest et al. (2008) where decisions and plans for education take place in a space in which both non-Indigenous and Indigenous understandings are voiced so that the knowledge systems of both cultures can be brought together in the interests of children learning to read (Ober & Bat, 2007). In short, leadership needs to be sensitive and responsive to context, yet able to harness its strengths; and as Hallinger’s (2011) review of 40 years of leadership research highlights, much greater attention needs to be paid by researchers to understanding what works and why in different cultural contexts like those in the PALLIC Project.

2. The PALLIC position on shared leadership through partnerships

Making improvements in learning and achievement requires parents, teachers and community members to work together. While this may seem self-evident, it is easier in the saying than the doing as the literature we have examined shows. The PALLIC position on shared leadership through partnerships originates from a search of two areas of recent literature: parents as partners in learning (deFur, 2012; Emerson et al., 2012); and partnerships with Indigenous parents and communities (Bishop, 2011; Muller & Associates, 2012).

Lessons from policy and practice provided by Emerson et al. (2012) in a report on parental engagement in learning and schooling suggest ‘families, schools and communities contribute in unique and complementary ways to a child’s learning process’ (p. 12). Therefore, approaches to promote home and community partnerships must recognise that there are multiple actors (parents, teachers, and members of the wider community) who contribute. In other words, the notion of ‘parallel leadership’ between principals and teachers within the school, as articulated by Andrews (2008), needs to be extended. That extension embraces the idea of multi-lateral leadership as a partnership involving the people most significant in influencing and supporting children’s learning – principals, teachers, parents and community members. Indeed this tells us that in the PALLIC Project, all should be included as leaders of reading.

Formal schooling is just one of many ways that children learn and develop. Emerson et al. (2012) suggest ‘parents can play a critical role in providing learning opportunities at home and in linking what children learn at school with what happens elsewhere’ (p. 7). Partnerships need to value parents’ roles. Muller and Associates (2012) argue that the decisive factor determining the success of home-school and community partnerships for an Indigenous context is the attitude and commitment of the principal. They write that successful principals ‘give high priority [to the partnership ideal] . . . and they devote considerable time and resources to it’ (p. 16). Likewise Auerbach (2009) argues that the commitment of school leaders is vital to school community connections yet she claims it is poorly documented in the literature and insufficiently addressed in training for administrators.

Muller and Associates (2012) propose a child-school-family partnership model which consists of six elements. These are an open-door policy, a place for parents, conversations which focus on
children and their learning, the visibility and availability of parents and teachers and respect and celebration of Indigenous cultural knowledge. They also suggest that from research, both old and new, several concrete ideas emerge. These are the need for outreach by the schools, personal contact by the school and having a designated parent liaison person whose sole job is to keep in touch with parents. In Indigenous communities, it helps greatly when this person is from that particular cultural group.

The importance of relationship building (Bishop, 2011; Ishimaru, 2013) receives frequent mention in the literature on partnerships with Indigenous peoples. Lester (2011) specifies several levels for relationship building which matter particularly for remote rural settings: professional, school-based, personal and community-wide. She writes:

Principals and teachers who understand the importance of relationship building – especially its personal and community-wide facets – who take the initiative in establishing and nurturing relationships and improving them through reflection over time, are more successful at motivating, inspiring and aligning country people to facilitate change. (p. 79)

While Lester’s (2011) work does not report specifically on remote Indigenous community schools, nevertheless, her findings carry important messages for shared leadership through partnership building. She shows that trust and respect take time to develop and that ‘relationship building may be an important precursor to success, because key stakeholders can withdraw their support and thereby block innovation’ (p. 85). Time spent on fostering reciprocal exchanges matters just as much as a focus on the talk.

To sum up, learning in Indigenous school communities must capitalise on the leadership contributions of the key people concerned with children’s growth and development. Gaining their involvement as partners relies on, as mentioned earlier, what Priest et al., (2011) call a ‘both ways’ leadership approach – an approach which is orientated towards the needs of the whole community rather than one part of it. The creation and continuation of partnerships requires outreach from the school, a deep commitment to shared leadership by the principal and trusting relationships with Indigenous parents and community members. All this takes time and respectful acceptance of the cultural reciprocity necessary to sustain good working relationships in open intercultural space. Thus, shared interest in the ways children grow and learn depends on working with parents and community members regardless of whether community members are parents of school children. Sharing leadership through partnerships is helped as Flückiger, Diamond and Jones (2012) have already told us, by ‘yarning up’. This process signals how Indigenous community members can begin to see themselves as leaders when their voices are heard and valued. It is the encouragement of shared leadership voice and activity from mainstream and Indigenous communities (Priest et al., 2011) that is promoted in the PALLIC project.

Having examined briefly source material underpinning the two positions related to leadership in the PALLIC Project, we now explain one of the research instruments used to gather data not only on these positions but also on the extent to which the project’s leadership for literacy frameworks and processes were applied and reported in observable actions in Indigenous school communities.
Data Gathering Method

Indigenous Leadership Partners (N=43) and principals (N=48) were surveyed during Module 5, nine months into the project, seeking their responses to an 11 item questionnaire directed towards gaining an understanding of the strength of agreement the respondents had to the leadership and literacy positions, frameworks and partnership processes forming the nucleus of the PALLIC Project. Here we report on five of the 11 items from that questionnaire. Figure 1 lists the five items and presents the data collected, displaying mean scores for each in histogram form. These items relate specifically to partnerships to promote and support children learning to read between principals and Indigenous people and between home and school.

Presentation of the data

Overall, Indigenous Leadership Partners were slightly more positive than principals on the matters that relate to connections between them and home and school (see Figure 1). The fact that they were engaged with their principals in a leadership role is a positive finding. This is no better evident than in the results for Item 6 where Indigenous Leadership Partners showed their strongest agreement (4.18) indicating that the relationship between themselves and principals was well established. Principals (3.81) agreed that this partnership was well established with their mean only slightly lower than that for their Indigenous Leadership Partners.

There was close agreement (Principals: 3.36; Indigenous Leadership Partners: 3.4) on progress made on a Home Reading Practices Guide (Item 5). The data on Item 11 show that Indigenous Leadership Partners rated interest amongst parents and community members in Reading Action Projects slightly higher than Principals (Principals: 2.77; Indigenous Leadership Partners: 3.17). Item 3 relates to parents’ and family members’ learning about the Big Six in the teaching of reading and shows that principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners were in fairly close agreement about the limited learning that had occurred, suggesting that there is still a lot to be done (Principals: 2.64; Indigenous Leadership Partners: 2.92). The lowest rated item (Item 7) shows that both groups of respondents agreed that there was limited success in finding leaders of reading from the community (Principals: 2.52; Indigenous Leadership Partners: 2.48), with the latter a little less positive about success than principals.

Discussion

From the data presented in Figure 1, three main findings are warranted. First, the positions and processes requiring out of school support (Items 3, 5, 7 and 11) have proven difficult to implement. Second, there is encouraging evidence from the responses to Item 6 on in-school leadership partnerships that principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners were making influential inroads on the key PALLIC position of leadership ‘both ways’. However, this was reported as occurring within the school rather than beyond it. Third, the positive tendency in the stance taken by Indigenous Leadership Partners on matters that connected their work on literacy with the community is an encouraging sign that they valued their leadership involvement. The extension of this initial in-school success to include and involve other Indigenous family and community
members in partnerships from outside the school gates in productive ‘both ways’ leadership is a challenge, which the data suggest, remains open.

**FIGURE 1: PRINCIPALS’ AND INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP PARTNERS’ VIEWS ON PARTNERSHIPS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>All Principals</th>
<th>All Indigenous Leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Parents and family members are learning about the Big Six in the teaching of reading.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. We are making progress on our Home Reading Practices Guide.</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Our partnership between Principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners is well established.</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. We have had success in finding leaders of reading from the community.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Our Reading Action Project is creating interest amongst our parents and community members.</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taken together, these findings show that the conditions for an open intercultural space in which leadership decisions and planning can occur, as Taylor (2003) advocates, were being observed in the PALLIC Project, but that space was occupied for the most part, by principals and their Indigenous Leadership Partners. The strong agreement by both principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners that their partnership was valued points to the development of a parallel form of leadership (Andrews, 2008) rather than the multi-lateral leadership espoused by Auerbach (2009), Muller and Associates (2012) and Emerson et al. (2012). In addition, the inference may be drawn from the data that principals were committed to forming helpful partnerships with their Indigenous Leadership Partners, hence the high value placed on it by them. However, though Auerbach (2009, p. 9) asserts that ‘the commitment of school leaders is vital to school community connections’, our findings suggest that while this may be essential, it is not sufficient. The data on the lack of real traction in enrolling family and community members as leaders of reading or in gaining their interest in school actions on reading show up this partnership problem.

Lester’s (2011) research suggests that there is further work necessary in the PALLIC Project schools on the building of relationships so a principal’s and a school’s outreach is based on a platform of respect and trust in open intercultural space. Our findings confirm what Frawley and Fasoli (2012) and Muller and Associates (2012) have found, that while sound principles for shared leadership action with Indigenous community members are quite explicit in their research findings, this knowledge does not translate easily into practice. In other words, the exposure of principals and local Indigenous people to the PALLIC Project positions on leadership did not guarantee their application.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while there is some promise in results produced just nine months after the commencement of the project, the findings are indicative of the very real challenges faced in developing school and community leadership partnerships so essential in supporting Indigenous children learning to read. Knowing what principals and their Indigenous Leadership Partners encountered during their exposure to PALLIC’s five leadership learning modules, we suggest that far greater attention needs to be placed on a repertoire of outreach strategies to lift the concept of leadership in open intercultural space from the confines of the school into the community. With this added knowledge and much hard relationship work, engaging in leadership ‘both ways’, we contend, will enable new leadership partnerships to form, be valued and become self-sustaining.

References


