PETRA project
Pursuing Equity Through Rich Accountabilities

Learning Commission Report: Connecting schools with communities

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In partnership with the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment

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Background:

Pursuing Equity Through Rich Accountabilities (PETRA) is an Australian Research Council funded Linkage project being conducted through a partnership between researchers at The University of Queensland, Victoria University, and the Queensland *Department of Education, Training and Employment* (DETE). The PETRA project has been conducted with a group of eight schools in the Wide Bay Burnett region of Queensland at the behest of DETE. This region is among the lowest SES areas in Queensland, where education is more regionalised than elsewhere in Australia.

There are five stages to the project:

1. A regional case study of eight schools (5 secondary, 3 primary) in Bundaberg, Childers, and Gin Gin;
2. Community-based curriculum projects in each of the case study schools;
3. A Learning Commission to canvass community views of the purposes and achievements of schools in the Region;
4. Developing rich accounts and providing these to the system as a whole;
5. Developing a conceptual and operational framework of rich accountabilities.

A draft model of rich accountabilities will serve as a basis for the critical and structured conversations that will be the basis of Stage 4 of the project. Conceptualising rich accountabilities will be the final Stage 5 of the PETRA project. The Learning Commission work will also be utilised to inform this final stage of the PETRA project, that is, developing a conceptual and operational model of rich accountabilities for schools, regions and the system.

Accountability:

A central aim of PETRA has been to develop the concept of what we are calling 'rich accountabilities'. In trying to conceptualise rich accountabilities, the broadest purposes of a schooling system need to be kept in mind. Overly reductionist and overly simplified data neither provide for good accounts about what society invests in schooling, nor do they guide programs for educational change and improvement. The extended definition below outlines the notion of rich accountabilities:

Rich accountabilities are part of a new wave of thinking and conceptualisation about accountabilities in school systems that need to work in more productive, effective, educative and democratic ways. Accountability has traditionally had two basic meanings: namely being held to account and giving an account. Rich accountabilities incorporate both, while changing the relationship between those who give the account and those who receive and judge the account. This involves rethinking what we mean by accountability, reclaiming the ethical sense of 'giving responsive accounts'. They address more authentically the complexity of ways in which schools and systems are working in the contemporary environment. Rich accountability enacts a different type of relationship across different parts of the system, with everybody taking responsibility for provision of multiple forms of data, complex analysis and appropriate action.

Rich accountabilities are multilateral and multidirectional in character. They are designed to inform educational practices and improvement in respect of both performance and equity within schools, regions and systems. Rich accountabilities involve debates about what counts and what should be counted in schooling. This involves more people in the constitution of the fields of judgement, thus making them more democratic. Rich accountabilities draw on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including the voices of students and families who are 'least advantaged', and multiple data sets in various forms (quantitative and qualitative) to provide complex, contextualised and balanced assessments of teaching and learning and accounts of the broader (academic, social, cultural) achievements of schools.

Rich accountabilities serve equity goals by (a) providing alternatives to accountability practices that can unfairly narrow the focus of curriculum and pedagogy for some students in an effort to improve testing performance; (b) making visible a broader spectrum of what schools achieve for students; and (c) taking account of community 'funds of knowledge' as assets for learning, as well as students' and families' needs and aspirations, in order that there is rich accountability in evaluations of school and systemic performance and the allocation of resources.

Rich accountabilities imply an opportunity for schools and their communities (including student voices) to speak back to the head office and policy in relation to what they need in order to achieve systemic and school goals. They also imply the necessity of systemic learning and dialogue, which involve listening and capacity for flexibility as the basis for action at the appropriate level. This form of accountability allows for systems to learn and in so doing improve policy, the targeting of funding and support for schools.

The eight key ideas of rich accountabilities include:

A. The first three relate to broadening the participants and stakeholders, and ensuring democratic processes and dialogue. Rich accountabilities are:

1. Multilateral – involving all partners and stakeholders,

2. Multidirectional – horizontal, vertical and reciprocal, and

3. Processes of accountability are more inclusive, dialogical and productive.

B. The next two relate to learning goals and domains. Rich accountabilities focus on:

3. Equity and performance – promote learning for all, and the

4. Multiple domains of learning including academic, social, emotional and career aspirations.

C. The final three relate to what accountability data are collected and how they are interpreted. Rich accountabilities involve:

6. Debate concerning what data are collected and for what purposes,

7. Debate invited regarding interpretation of data, and

8. Student viewpoints and aspirations are foregrounded.

The project has worked with and is seeking to develop, as an outcome, the concept of rich accountabilities for schools and systems. We see rich accountabilities as consisting of five component parts (see Table 2: Conceptualising rich accountabilities). The first element is the currently dominant top-down, test and performance based accountability (e.g. NAPLAN, OP scores, school audits, teaching and learning audits, great results guarantees). We see the other elements as complementing that mode. The second element is also a vertical form of accountability, but a bottom-up one, which in the literature is referred to as 'opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards', that Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests are able to 'secure more equitable education' as they 'attend to the opportunity gap as well as the achievement gap' (p. 310). This might consist of both quantitative and qualitative data. These data are about articulating for the system what schools and their communities see as necessary for schools to achieve the broader goals the system has set (e.g. the Melbourne Declaration). The third element of rich accountabilities is horizontal and about school-communities and communities–school relationships and the expectations and responsibilities working across the two. We use communities here to signify the diversity and multiplicity of communities that schools need to interact and work with. This horizontal mode might include formalised qualitative data. The fourth component is situated and singular narrative accounts that arise

from and are illustrative of school community relationships and broader school achievements. Conceptualising and operationalizing rich accountabilities will also perhaps require some moderation so narrative accounts can be compared, regionally and systemically. Rich accountabilities are then multilateral in character, the final component of the concept.

The Learning Commission:

In August 2013 a Learning Commission was established in Bundaberg as part of the PETRA project. The Commission was based on the idea of 'competency groups' (Whatmore, 2009; Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011), which have been formed in English research projects to address issues of significant concern for communities (e.g. flood mitigation). Competency groups are 'forums for collaborative thinking' (Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011, p. 586) that bring together experts and publics in relation to specific problems. The competency group approach recognises that solutions can be found by connecting scientific or research-based expertise with the diverse range of experiences and expertise held by local communities. In a sense, the competency group approach could be seen to accept that there are useful 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 2014) in all communities and offers a forum in which these funds can be drawn upon to provide multiple perspectives on the purposes and outcomes of schooling in local communities.

Adapting this idea to the educational objectives of the PETRA project, the Learning Commission brought together a diverse group of community members who met regularly over a period of eight months to gather evidence that would support insights about how schools and communities could provide multilateral 'rich accounts' of educational expectations and outcomes. One purpose of competency groups is to provide a forum in which thinking about a particular problem can be 'slowed down' and subject to scrutiny (Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011). In the case of PETRA, the values and expectations that inhere in present accountability mechanisms were subject to careful scrutiny by a range of different community stakeholders in education. The Learning Commission also sought to provide equal status and opportunity for all engaged to express their views freely in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The first Learning Commission meeting was a closed event held in August 2013. This meeting established the Commission process and the following guiding questions were developed in consultation between the Commissioners and the PETRA research team:
- What do communities expect from schools?
- How do communities know if expectations are being met?
- How can schools provide reliable evidence of meeting expectations?

The narratives:

There are six key narrative accounts derived from the Learning Commission data. These are: a suggested reform of *system-wide practices* and a revision of measurement and funding expectations by education authorities; alignments and gaps related to *community expectations* and schools; increasing *parental involvement* to support schools, children and young people; developing *work-readiness* and citizenship skills in young people; *acknowledging diversity and difference* and developing a greater understanding of cultural diversity; and t*eaching and learning practices* that involve meaningful learning and feedback.

1. **System-wide practices:**

This narrative of 'system-wide practices' was drawn from aspects of funding, measurement strategies and notions of success, and the progression towards a 'systemless system'. Three key ideas were identified:

    a. Funding: The availability, access, and timeframes associated with funding were identified as problematic, especially when funding was withdrawn.

    b. Measurement strategies: Many broad ranging issues of performance measurement and definitions of success were identified at the Learning Commission. Central to the discussion surrounding these accounts was the concept of 'What counts?' and 'How is this measured?'

    c. The 'systemless system': Concerns were raised about the possible emergence of what principals saw as a 'systemless system', that is, a schooling system in which much responsibility was devolved to the school without commensurate systemic supports.

2. **Community expectations:**

While these narratives were generally found across most groups that participated in the Learning Commission, there were frequently competing expectations and ideas with regard to what schools should, and could, be doing. These included:

    a. Different priorities: There were varied expectations regarding the purposes and goals of schooling from the perspectives of the system, schools, parents, employers and communities, and how to best address any gaps.

    b. Community partnerships: The Learning Commission heard many examples of partnerships between students and teachers; teachers and parents; parents and schools; principals and regional departments; principals and employers; and parents and local government officials.

    c. Negative perceptions: The Learning Commission raised the issue of negative community perceptions about schools based on media reportage. It was considered that negative reportage frames public perceptions of schools and

communities, and the staff and students within these communities, raising public concern. Developing relationships with media outlets was considered of high importance.

3. Parental involvement:

Parental involvement can operate as a mechanism of horizontal accountability. Additionally, when parents are involved in schools there is recognition of mutual accountability and opportunities for relational, two-way horizontal accountability practices in relation to the educational outcomes of the children and young people in schools.

    a. Participation: Most accounts suggested the need for greater parental involvement and participation in schools. The teachers' curriculum interventions demonstrated creative and productive ways to engage and involve parents and communities in schools.

    b. Feedback: Encouraging parental feedback was considered essential by members of the Learning Commission, but very difficult to obtain as parents were often time-poor making them difficult members of the community to gain access to.

4. Work-readiness:

It was suggested that schooling practices should more holistically cater for the children and young people in their care.

    a. Developing work-related skills: It was suggested that schools should be developing work-ready citizens, equipped with skills in numeracy and literacy.

5. Acknowledging diversity and difference:

The Learning Commission valued school practices that acknowledged diversity and difference. These included:

    a. Cultural awareness: While an improvement in recent times was noted, the members of the Learning Commissions enforced the importance of schools acknowledging and raising cultural awareness, especially of Indigenous cultures.

    b. Costs of schooling: Acknowledging socio-economic differences was raised in accounts that suggested the costs associated with students' participation in schooling were at times, prohibitive of students' participation in sporting and cultural activities.

6. **Teaching and learning narratives:**
   a. Teaching approaches: Young people valued learning experiences that included group work, hands-on activities, and multi-modal tasks.
   b. Teachers: It was suggested that system-based monitoring practices were promoted in preference to school-based mentoring. Teachers indicated their preference for school-based mentoring practices.
   c. Equitable outcomes for Indigenous students: There was some criticism of teaching and learning practices regarding the amount of time teachers spent with students who were considered 'less academic'. This raises equity issues in relation to teacher availability to assist students who are perhaps struggling with the curriculum.
   d. Meaningful learning and curriculum: While the notion of 'meaningful' varied, the Learning Commission often encountered the need for choice was highlighting by some of the limitations associated with current teaching and learning and curriculum practices in schools that limit choices.
   e. Meaningful feedback and reporting: While parents were appreciative of the feedback found in system-wide reporting practices, they were critical of the generic manner in which reports were produced. Additionally, they indicated the need for commentary on citizenship skills with a view towards schools developing 'productive' and 'good' citizens who are able to effectively engage in society.

A way forward:

The process:

The Learning Commission application of the 'competency groups' approach (Whatmore, 2009; Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011) to data collection and for accessing community views of schools, their purposes and successes appeared to work reasonably well. However, we cannot understate the work involved in establishing the Commission and organising the logistics of meetings and input and submissions, particularly from parent groups.

The partnerships:

The possibility and importance of schools having partnerships with their communities was raised across the research, but particularly at the Learning Commission. There was a recognition that these ought to be multidirectional relationships.

Being heard and having someone listen:

There was a very strong sense expressed in all elements of the research, but especially at the Learning Commission, that system restructuring and certain policy frames had 'responsibilised' the schools, principals and teachers and they felt they were alone in being responsible for everything. This sense might reflect the location of the PETRA schools on

the northern periphery of their region and also the lack of face-to-face contact with personnel from that region, but it was a view very strongly expressed across the research.

Rich accountabilities:

Some principles derived from the Learning Commission process are listed below. These will inform the conceptualisation of rich accountabilities.

1. Systems value quantitative data that can be collected at large scale and which allow for evaluative comparisons.
2. Schools do much important work that is not captured by data of this kind.
3. What becomes valued by systems is what is measured by systems, but this does not necessarily match community expectations of schooling, as shown by the Learning Commission.
4. Schools and systems need mutually developed and agreed processes that make publicly visible the broad achievements of schools and school communities.
5. These accounts should respond to community values and expectations in relation to schooling.

However, there are some important caveats in respect of these principles. Rich accountabilities:

1. Must not intensify the work of principals and schools;
2. Must have as their goal improved learning for all and more equitable outcomes;
3. Are costly to develop and time-consuming; and
4. Face difficulties in authentically involving parents and communities in these processes.

Concluding remarks:

It needs to be reiterated that this Learning Commission report is a report on just one stage of the PETRA project. In writing it, we have drawn to some extent on two earlier stages of the project.

Through the Learning Commission, we have begun a process which requires ongoing commitment and trust between each of the communities, that is, school communities, parental communities, local communities, and educational authorities. It also requires each of the communities to listen and support each other, giving previously 'silenced' stakeholders the opportunity and the platform to participate and be heard, allowing for improving learning outcomes of young people.

Note to reader

If, as the reader, you are interested in the background to the PETRA project, you should read the entire document.

However, if you are only interested in Learning Commission report, you should start reading from page 23.

The PETRA project: Aims and background

Pursuing Equity Through Rich Accountabilities (PETRA) is an Australian Research Council funded Linkage project being conducted through a partnership between researchers at The University of Queensland, Victoria University, and the Queensland *Department of Education, Training and Employment* (DETE).[1] The PETRA project has been conducted with a group of eight schools in the Wide Bay Burnett region of Queensland at the behest of DETE. This region is among the lowest SES areas in Queensland, where education is more regionalised than elsewhere in Australia.

OBJECTIVES

The PETRA project was guided by five objectives, to:
1. Identify gaps in existing information about students and schools;
2. Seek richer information that provides more complex and balanced pictures of schooling and its multiple 'achievements';
3. Work with school staff to understand and use a variety of information sources to design teaching, learning and assessment practices that help improve student engagement and outcomes;
4. Support schools, communities and government to develop methods for sharing knowledge and information during the design, practice and reporting of teaching and learning; and
5. Better understand factors that impede schools making a difference for their students and communities.

Table 1 outlines the five stages to the project:

Table 1: Five stages of the PETRA project

Stage of the project	Details
1	A regional case study of eight schools (5 secondary, 3 primary) in Bundaberg, Childers, and Gin Gin
2	Community-based curriculum projects in each of the case study schools
3	A Learning Commission to canvass community views of the purposes and achievements of schools in the Region
4	Developing rich accounts and providing these to the system as a whole
5	Developing a conceptual and operational framework of rich accountabilities

This report deals with stage three in order to inform stages four and five (also see Table 1: Five stages of the PETRA project).

In the first stage of the PETRA project (2012), researchers worked collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to develop case studies of eight schools, documenting existing knowledge and accounts of student learning and the effects of existing accountabilities in schools, as well as seeking rich information about resources and needs for supporting learning in the regions surrounding schools.

In the second stage of the project (2013/2014), researchers worked with (a) teachers and (b) Learning Commissioners. Teacher workshops were provided to support teachers to design and implement rich teaching, learning and assessment practices as part of community-based History curriculum units. Students in these schools participated as student-researchers of their communities during these units of work, helping to identify community-based resources that can be used to connect school learning with the needs and aspirations of the communities the schools serve. The findings from student research projects, as well as students' and teachers' experiences of working with community members and community knowledge in curricular ways, were included as one important set of rich accounts that were gathered by the Learning Commission in the third stage of the project.

The project also convened a Learning Commission, which brought together a group of community members to inquire into what communities in Bundaberg and surrounding areas

expect of schools, what resources are required to meet these expectations, and how communities know if their expectations are being met. The Learning Commission process expanded the conversation about how schools can develop rich accounts of their achievements to include a broader cross-section of community members. Submissions were given to the Learning Commission meetings by the teachers and students involved in stage 2 of PETRA, as well as from principals, and a range of community groups.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Schools increasingly are 'held to account' through tests and other routinized and standardised reporting on teaching and learning outcomes. The *Pursuing Equity Through Rich Accountabilities* (PETRA) project takes such standardised data as just one kind of information about how well schools are working with and for their students and their communities. Ranson (2003) suggests:

> Trust and achievement can only emerge in a framework of public accountability that enables different accounts of public purpose and practice to be deliberated in a democratic public sphere: constituted to include difference, enable participation, voice and dissent, through collective judgement and decision, that is in turn accountable to the public. (p. 476)

Given such understandings, the project argues that there are richer types and sources of information about the capacities of schools and communities to make a difference for learners – 'rich accounts' – to be gained from families and local community members with stakes in how young people engage with and succeed in schooling. School staff can provide rich accounts of teaching and learning beyond formal assessment and reporting. Indeed, the local and regional environments of students, families and schools have much to tell us, if we ask sensible questions about the varied educational experiences, knowledge and other resources in these spaces.

A central aim of PETRA has been to develop the concept of what we are calling 'rich accountabilities'. In trying to conceptualise rich accountabilities, the broadest purposes of a schooling system need to be kept in mind. Overly reductionist and overly simplified data neither provide for good accounts about what society invests in schooling, nor do they guide programs for educational change and improvement. The extended definition below outlines the notion of rich accountabilities:

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Rich accountabilities are multilateral and multidirectional in character. They are designed to inform educational practices and improvement in respect of both performance and equity within schools, regions and systems. Rich accountabilities involve debates about what counts and what should be counted in schooling. This involves more people in the constitution of the fields of judgement, thus making them more democratic. Rich accountabilities draw on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including the voices of students and families who are 'least advantaged', and multiple data sets in various forms (quantitative and qualitative) to provide complex, contextualised and balanced assessments of teaching and learning and accounts of the broader (academic, social, cultural) achievements of schools.

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The eight key ideas of rich accountabilities include:

A. The first three relate to broadening the participants and stakeholders, and ensuring democratic processes and dialogue. Rich accountabilities are:

    1. Multilateral – involving all partners and stakeholders,

    2. Multidirectional – horizontal, vertical and reciprocal, and

    3. Processes of accountability are more inclusive, dialogical and productive.

B. The next two relate to learning goals and domains. Rich accountabilities focus on:

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    4. Multiple domains of learning including academic social emotional and career aspirations.

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    8. Student viewpoints and aspirations are foregrounded.

Figure 1: Making accountability multilateral

The PETRA project is working to develop and support conversations and collaborative work between researchers, school staff, students, families, communities and policy makers. The project aims to strengthen connections between schools and communities, to increase student engagement, and to improve student outcomes. The project has been developing approaches for gaining 'horizontal' accounts—school-to-communities and communities–to-school exchanges of narratives and ideas—as well as 'vertical' accounts from schools to systems through test scores and other data. The project also seeks to 'scale up' findings from multilateral accounts to systems so that the latter will have richer information for educational policy consideration. 'Bottom-up' accountability of this kind is often referred to as 'opportunity-to-learn standards' (Darling-Hammond, 2010): claims made by schools and their communities to systems in terms of what resources of various kinds are required so schools can meet systemic expectations, as well as enrich those expectations. Bottom-up accountabilities are particularly important in low SES communities, where school attempts to meet the top-down expectations of improved academic outcomes can have negative effects on curriculum provision and broader learning outcomes. The project sees these forms of *multilateral* accountability (see Figure 1: Making accountability multilateral) as an important complement to *unilateral* test-based, top-down accountabilities.

The project has worked with and is seeking to develop, as an outcome, the concept of rich accountabilities for schools and systems. We see rich accountabilities as consisting of five component parts (see Table 2: Conceptualising rich accountabilities). The first element is the currently dominant top-down, test and performance based accountability (e.g. NAPLAN, OP scores, school audits, teaching and learning audits, great results guarantees). We see the other elements as complementing that mode. The second element is also a vertical form of accountability, but a bottom-up one, which in the literature is referred to as 'opportunity-to-learn (OTL) standards', that Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests are able to 'secure more equitable education' as they 'attend to the opportunity gap as well as the achievement gap' (p. 310). This might consist of both quantitative and qualitative data. These data are about articulating for the system what schools and their communities see as necessary for schools to achieve the broader goals the system has set (e.g. the Melbourne Declaration). The third element of rich accountabilities is horizontal and about school-communities and communities–school relationships and the expectations and responsibilities working across the two. We use communities here to signify the diversity and multiplicity of communities that schools need to interact and work with. This horizontal mode might include formalised qualitative data. The fourth component is situated and singular narrative accounts that arise from and are illustrative of school community relationships and broader school achievements. Conceptualising and operationalizing rich accountabilities will also perhaps require some moderation so narrative accounts can be compared, regionally and systemically. Rich accountabilities are then multilateral in character, the final component of the concept.

Table 2: Conceptualising rich accountabilities

The component parts	Stage of the project
• **Vertical: top-down , test-driven**	Case study (1); Learning Commission (3)
• **Vertical: bottom-up**	Developing rich accounts (4)
• **Horizontal: school-communities / communities-school**	Teacher curriculum projects (2); Learning Commission (3)
• **Horizontal: other narratives**	Case studies (1); Learning Commission (3); Developing rich accounts (4)
• **Multilateral**	Developing conceptual framework (5)

There is an added complexity to this definition of rich accountabilities. It raises the question of what schools and systems should account for, that is, who controls the field of judgement and what counts? We need to ask: 'Who are these various accounts for?'; 'At what levels ought they be provided?'; and 'For what purposes?'. Underpinning this conceptualisation of rich accountabilities is the notion that accountabilities ought to serve educative as well as

managerial purposes. We also see the strengthening of horizontal school-communities relationships and modes of accountability as an important part of achieving more equitable outcomes for schools located in disadvantaged communities (Gonzalez et al., 2005). This latter construction works with the 'funds of knowledge' approach developed by Moll and colleagues in the USA (see Moll, 2014) that has demonstrated the existence of productive knowledges in all communities and all families, irrespective of socio-economic advantage or disadvantage. This 'funds of knowledge' approach seeks to reject deficit accounts of both communities and families classified as 'disadvantaged' and instead works with the 'cultural resources' of both to use them as valuable assets in the work of teachers and schools for educative purposes (Moll, 2014, p. 4).

SELECTION OF REGION

The region and case study schools were chosen on the advice of the previous Director General, who identified the region as one impacted by economic restructuring, resulting in a community that had historically been relatively affluent becoming 'disadvantaged'. We also noted that this is a community that has limited infrastructure (libraries, cultural centres), is often impacted by natural disasters, and is under-researched. It is important to understand the situated findings of this report, which reflect the views and experiences of communities located in a regional centre, disadvantaged by changing economic conditions. This regional case study thus has broader relevance, given the highly regionalised nature of Queensland as a state. PETRA also raises questions about the necessity, in such a state, for policy to address regional differences (socio-economic, demographic, and geographic).

This regionality has implications for policy support for schools. Student achievement data are organised across various organisational levels within the state schooling system in Queensland. This includes the individual student within the classroom; aggregated achievement at classroom level; aggregated at whole school level and then again at regional and system levels. Variance can be found at each of these levels. For effective policy and practice interventions, we need to be able to decompose the distribution of variance at each of these levels. For variance within classrooms the interventions required are clearly classroom level and pedagogical ones. Additionally for example, there is substantial variance within and between regional performance on NAPLAN. This is the case for the region in which the research schools included in PETRA are located. Variance in performance within and between regions demands specific policy interventions that acknowledge these differences. One hope of PETRA was that we would be able to develop such data at a sub-regional level, but this has not been the case (see Creagh, 2014).

Another element of the regionality of PETRA schools was very evident in the initial case studies we did of each of the research schools. Here there seemed almost to be a binary divide in relation to academic success: those who did well academically would leave the region and those who did not would remain within the region seeking employment post-

school. Central Queensland mines also played a large part in these varying mobility/immobility narratives, with early secondary school boys (falsely) imagining high income futures working at the mines without the need for academic success or qualifications.

There is also another important regional aspect to the study, namely the location of the research schools within a particular administrative region of DETE. The schools in the study are located at the northern periphery of the North Coast region. At an earlier period of state department structure, Bundaberg was the location of the regional office. The regional office is now located a long distance from Bundaberg. The principals 'felt' this distance and spoke of how it meant that most often their relationships with regional office were through phone calls, teleconferences and data talks, rather than face-to-face. This distance had seen them strengthen their collective, shared identity, which they thought was a great advantage for the schools in their area.

On this very point, one school principal observed:

> I see Bundy as a very unusual community, in terms of the way we work together, educationally. You look at the way we work with the university and our TAFE connections, our industry connections ... I think it's probably because it's a small geographic area. We are not quite as close to the outliers, to Gin Gin and - we do work closely with them but the town schools, particularly, given that regional resources have been devolved to us to manage, so it's on us to work together around how we get the best out of that. Sunshine Coast, when I was there, I felt we were - well, I was in a very competitive school and it was "all about us", and the other comparative schools, it was "all about them" ... It's more about the State schools here. We are very close as a State school system here.

The PETRA Learning Commission: Structure and process

In August 2013 a Learning Commission was established in Bundaberg as part of the PETRA project. The Commission was based on the idea of 'competency groups' (Whatmore, 2009; Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011), which have been formed in English research projects to address issues of significant concern for communities (e.g. flood mitigation). Competency groups are 'forums for collaborative thinking' (Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011, p. 586) that bring together experts and publics in relation to specific problems. The competency group approach recognises that solutions can be found by connecting scientific or research-based expertise with the diverse range of experiences and expertise held by local communities. In a sense, the competency group approach could be seen to accept that there are useful 'funds of knowledge' in all communities and offers a forum in which these funds can be drawn upon to provide multiple perspectives on the purposes and outcomes of schooling in local communities.

Adapting this idea to the educational objectives of the PETRA project, the Learning Commission brought together a diverse group of community members who met regularly over a period of eight months to gather evidence that would support insights about how schools and communities could provide multilateral 'rich accounts' of educational expectations and outcomes. One purpose of competency groups is to provide a forum in which thinking about a particular problem can be 'slowed down' and subject to scrutiny (Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011). In the case of PETRA, the values and expectations that inhere in present accountability mechanisms were subject to careful scrutiny by a range of different community stakeholders in education. The Learning Commission also sought to provide equal status and opportunity for all engaged to express their views freely in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The Learning Commission was chaired by Shirley Johnson, a former school principal with extensive experience working in the region. The other members of the Commission were:

- Cr Judy Peters, Bundaberg Regional Council, Community Services Portfolio.
- Bob Dieckmann, Community development worker (Gin Gin).
- Liz Carson, *Bundaberg News Mail* journalist/editor.
- Renee Crilly, Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools (EATSIPS) teacher.
- Dr John Dungan, Director of Strategic Policy and Research, DETE.

An invitation to participate in the Commission was published in the local newspaper, the *Bundaberg News Mail*, and a website was established to enable community members to express interest in participating. Researchers from the PETRA project team attended all Learning Commission meetings and acted as a secretariat to the Commission, providing support or comment as requested.

The initial terms of reference for the Commission, established by the PETRA research team, were:

- To inquire into how schools and communities can support each other to provide the best possible learning outcomes for all students.
- To gather and synthesise rich accounts of schooling in this region by receiving submissions from expert witnesses and commission members.
- To produce a Statement on Educational Goals (2014), which will describe priorities for learning in this region and the infrastructure and support required to achieve desired outcomes.
- To contribute to the development of 'opportunity-to-learn standards'.

These terms of reference were then modified in consultation with the Learning Commissioners at the outset of the process.

THE MEETINGS

Six Learning Commission meetings were held across the second half of 2013 and into early 2014. These meetings varied in purpose and structure. Four open meetings were held in which different educational stakeholders shared their views with the Learning Commission. Two closed meetings were held to (a) establish and (b) reflect upon the Learning Commission process. Appendix 1 provides an overview of the meeting schedule, including dates, participants and key accounts or narratives that emerged from each meeting.

The first Learning Commission meeting was a closed event held in August 2013. This meeting established the Commission process and the following guiding questions were developed in consultation between the Commissioners and the PETRA research team:

- What do communities expect from schools?
- How do communities know if expectations are being met?
- How can schools provide reliable evidence of meeting expectations?

Learning Commissioners discussed what input was required from various community members to answer the Learning Commission questions, what specific questions would be put to community members, and who should be approached to present to the Commission. The Commissioners compiled a list of representatives from a range of groups including: parents and caregivers, principals and teachers, community groups, Indigenous women and business people. The Learning Commissioners came to the project with their own views on schooling and these were also canvassed and discussed.

During the following three open meetings the Learning Commission interviewed a range of representatives from parents, the Bundaberg Aboriginal Corporation for Women (BACFW), disability care sector, a youth worker, small business owners, bank managers, school students, teachers and principals. These participants were drawn from communities in Bundaberg, Childers, and Gin Gin. The format for open meetings involved Learning

Commissioners asking predefined questions of invited participants and engaging in conversation about issues of importance to participants in relation to schooling.

The third open meeting varied in format from the previous two open meetings. This event brought together two aspects of the project: (a) the Learning Commission inquiry process and (b) the curriculum work conducted by teachers and students. Teachers from three schools presented with a small group of students on community-based research conducted as part of the History curriculum. Learning Commissioners asked questions of teachers and students following each presentation.

After three open meetings had been held, a closed meeting was convened to reflect on the process. Commissioners discussed key narratives that had emerged and the strengths and weaknesses of the process. This meeting also addressed the challenging issue of recruiting parents.

The fourth and final open meeting of the Commission involved a conversation between the Learning Commissioners and three principals of schools in Bundaberg. This culminating meeting drew on insights from the process to that point and facilitated a broad discussion about community expectations of schooling and relationships between schools and education systems.

PETRA research team members also participated in the discussions during each Commission meeting. The discussions were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis of these transcripts provided the basis for the findings outlined below.

There is an important caveat to the Learning Commission process. The PETRA Learning Commission constituted a local experiment in gathering 'rich accounts' about schooling. The Commission did not have the time or resources to conduct a sustained and broadly representative sampling of views from across the communities of Bundaberg, Gin Gin and Childers. Participants were generally invited on the basis of pre-existing relationships with Commissioners or connections to the PETRA project. This generated a data set with some clear accounts, which are outlined in the next section, but it is important to acknowledge that there are groups and perspectives that were not able to be included in this process. As such, the researchers have approached the data using a narrative inquiry perspective (see section on Methodological Considerations), where the participants' experiences are 'expressed in lived and told stories' (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), thereby detailing their 'rich accounts'.

Limitations

One weakness of the Learning Commission mode of intelligence gathering and data collection was the small number of parents who were interviewed by the Commission. An attempt was made to organise community consultation meetings on two separate days in a central Bundaberg venue. However, after extensive publicity through a range of school-based channels and the local media only two parents indicated willingness to attend the

events. This difficulty connecting with parents is not uncommon in these schools and communities and reflects the complexities of contemporary work and family life, which can leave little spare time for attending such events. The principals indicated to the research team that this was also their experience when also trying to get parents to attend actual school meetings. They indicated they had very much better and more responses from parents through on-line communications. One outcome of the Commission is work to develop an online and mobile digital device application to solicit parents' views on schooling in the region. This work will be conducted in the second half of 2014. If successfully developed, the device would be used to collect additional parental and community data and also has potential for usage by schools and other administrative units in terms of school/community relationships and strategic planning.

A PUBLIC MEETING

On the 30 May, 2014, PETRA held a public meeting in Bundaberg titled, *Schools in*

communities: A public conversation (see Appendix 2: *News Mail* newspaper editorial about the PETRA public meeting). This meeting brought together all the stakeholder groups from the various schools and communities to further discuss how education systems, schools, students, families and community members can work together in developing teaching and learning that makes a difference for students in schools of regional Queensland (see photos). The public meeting heard from a panel of the Learning Commissioners who addressed the public meeting, sharing their experiences on the Commission and providing feedback. Additionally, the public meeting heard from the teachers and students who planned and implemented community-connected history curriculum projects that drew on rich accounts beyond the school environment. The meeting was attended by a local member of parliament, who has taken the Learning Commission concept to the *Education and Innovation Committee* of the Queensland Parliament In personal email communication, the member of parliament indicated the report was 'very well received' and that his 'colleagues were excited about the project'.

This Learning Commission Report was presented in draft form at the 30 May meeting. This next iteration has been developed following the public meeting and consultation with the Learning Commission and research team. This report will be the basis of a meeting in Bundaberg on 10 November 2014 amongst all the stakeholders (principals, teachers, Learning Commissioners, researchers, and Departmental representatives) as another step towards advancing conceptualisation and design of rich accountabilities. This reporting back is seen as central to the bottom-up accountability which is one component of rich accountabilities. It might also be seen as a step towards creating opportunity-to-learn

standards. An important component of this penultimate stage of PETRA will be systemic listening to inform the development of richer modes of accountability. This stage was agreed to in the original negotiation about this PETRA Linkage project and in contractual agreements. It was also envisaged that senior regional personnel would also participate in this final 'conference'.

Public meeting: Bundaberg, May 2014

The Learning Commission: A narrative inquiry

Methodological considerations

In the reporting of these accounts drawn from the Learning Commission, we utilise a narrative inquiry approach to data representation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Within this perspective, Clandinin, Murphy, Huber and Orr (2009) suggest there are three dimensions that focus on 'temporality (past, present, future), sociality (the dialectic between inner and outer, the personal and social), and place (the concrete physicality of the place or places in which experiences are lived out and told' (p. 82). This approach to data representation aligns with the 'funds of knowledge' perspective that recognises the existence of rich cultural assets for learning in all communities and all families, regardless of socio-economic advantage or 'disadvantage' (Moll, 2014). While this three-dimensional approach enabled the development of situated 'rich accounts' from all participants, it also acknowledges the unique position of the researchers in the Learning Commission. We note that submissions to the Learning Commission are not being treated as research interviews, but rather as accounts that were produced collaboratively and are made public in this report.

During the Learning Commission, the researchers were also participants in the process, as was the chairperson of the Learning Commission and the other Commissioners. Consequently, the views of the researchers and Commissioners became incorporated into the inquiry, working alongside the lived experiences of the participants (Clandinin et al., 2009).The views of the Commissioners shaped participant selection, and the types of questions that were asked during the Learning Commissions. This process enabled and facilitated the development of the concept of 'rich accountabilities'. Additionally, this narrative perspective enabled the researchers to identify 'competing stories' about education, that is, those stories that 'live in dynamic but positive tension with dominant stories of school whereas conflicting stories collide with dominant stories of school' (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 82).

The narratives:

The following section outlines a number of narratives from the Learning Commission meetings (see Appendix 1 for a visual summary). These narratives are drawn from discussions during (a) the four open meetings of the Learning Commission, conducted with parents and caregivers, employers, community workers, teachers, students, and principals, and (b) the two closed Learning Commission meetings involving the Commissioners and PETRA researchers.

When reading the following sections, where possible, excerpts of data from the Learning Commission meetings have been used as descriptions to provide 'richer' accounts of the conversations. These excerpts appear in the green text boxes so as to make them distinct

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and easily identified in the text. It should also be acknowledged that these accounts do not represent the views of all the members of the specific groups; rather, they provide an example that elaborates on a particular narrative. Additionally, while a number of these narratives were identified by more than one group that participated in the Learning Commission, different groups might have different slants on identified themes; and some of these accounts were of specific relevance to only one group of participants.

There are six key narrative accounts derived from the Learning Commission data (see Figure 2: Key Learning Commission narratives). These are: a suggested reform of *system-wide practices* and a revision of measurement and funding expectations by education authorities; alignments and gaps related to *community expectations* and schools; increasing *parental involvement* to support schools, children and young people; developing *work-readiness* and citizenship skills in young people; *acknowledging diversity and difference* and developing a greater understanding of cultural diversity; and t*eaching and learning practices* that involve meaningful learning and feedback.

Figure 2: Key Learning Commission narratives
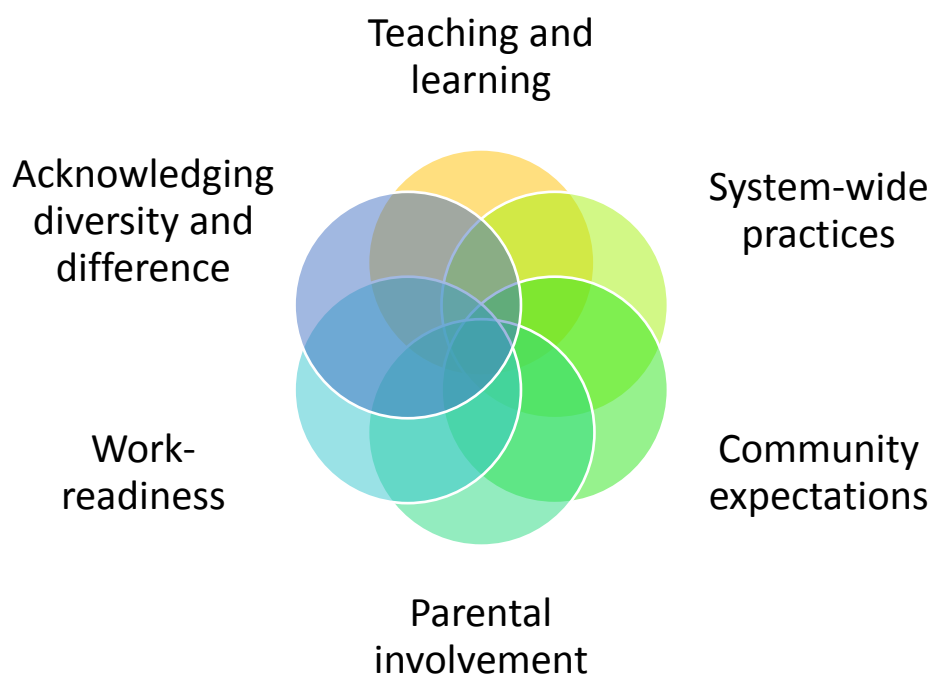
The narrative of 'system-wide practices' draws on aspects of funding, measurement strategies and the notions of success, and the progression towards the 'systemless system' (see Figure 3: System-wide practices narratives).

Figure 3: System-wide practices narratives
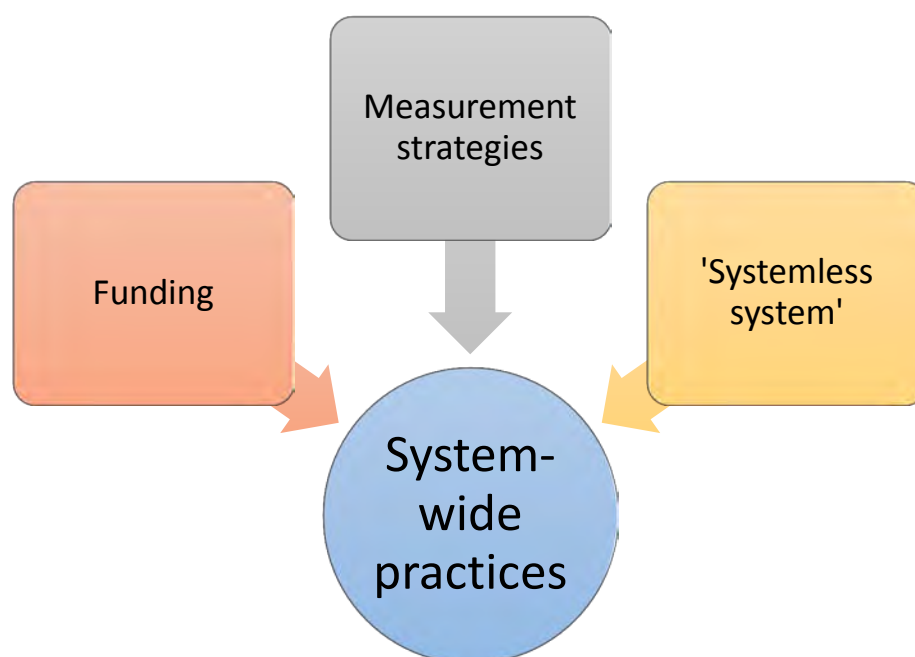
The narrative of 'system-wide practices' is drawn from understandings of regional, state and federal government systemic practices and reforms in education. Education reforms and systemic practices are often a site of struggle. Ball (2006) suggests, 'The issue of who controls the field of judgment is crucial. One key issue of the current educational reform movement may be seen as struggles over the control of the field of judgment and its values' (p. 144). Currently, issues of performativity prevail, tying numerical data on performance to funding and governance practices. Ball (2006) defines performativity as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)' (p. 144).

A. Funding

Participants in the Learning Commission gave accounts of issues related to funding. In discussing these accounts, it is important to address the notion of 'equal opportunity' as outlined in the *Review of funding for schooling* (Gonski et al., 2011). In a speech this year, Boston (2014), one of the members of the review panel, outlined the importance of equal opportunity so that:

> School performance is neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by parental income, ethnic background, religion, school size and location, or whether a student attends an independent, Catholic or public school, success at school will be determined essentially by the student's ability, application and hard work.

Additionally, if resources are allocated to schools according to need, this will reduce the impact of disadvantage on the educational outcomes of young people (Boston, 2014). However, this becomes problematic when funding is retracted, only allocated for short-term projects, or unavailable. It is also problematic when schools are expected to improve long-term outcomes in response to short-term funding. Indigenous community members suggested that often non-core funding was allocated to projects for essential services and not renewed:

> It's always funding. They ran out of funding and they don't get more funding for another ten years or whatever; and then that runs out and, yeah. With the ASSPA [Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness] funding - see, we had homework classes when we had the ASSPA funding and we used to get cordial and biscuits and a bit of fruit and that for the kids, that wanted to stay after school. But the funding has gone.

When the funding ran out, such programs, and the young people they supported, were left with gaps in terms of support and educational provision. Often, the potential to attain future funding for Indigenous projects took a very long time.

The principals also identified another perspective regarding funding. Some suggested that the performative expectations associated with an educational authority's provision of funding to schools were often associated with unrealistic and often unattainable expectations. The principals indicated the disjuncture between the political imperative for documenting short-term gains in relation to ad hoc distribution of funding and that educational change takes a long time to initiate, incubate, and come to fruition.

The political and system understandings, of the amount of time needed for change to occur, and the educational understandings differed, greatly. There needs to be recognition of these competing temporalities. This concept strongly aligns with the notion of the 'systemless system' which is discussed later in this section as part of this narrative.

B. *Measurement strategies*

The accounts related to system-wide measurement strategies that were raised during the Learning Commission address the broad ranging issues of performance measurement and definitions of success. Central to the discussion surrounding these accounts was the question of 'What counts?' and 'How is this measured?' A Learning Commissioner gave an example of a form of horizontal accountability that utilises the 'unmeasurable' qualitative data that, currently, is an example of what does not get 'counted' in schools. This example related to a dance performance by Indigenous students from the Bundaberg region:

> Guess where the benchmark was for their Indigenous dancers?… Did the kids up there do the same dance? Yep. Guess who everyone is talking about? The kids in Bundaberg … and how wonderful their presentation was. That is the thing that I think can't be measured with OPs and can't be measured; but maybe needs to be … a community measure of that involvement.

Debates regarding notions of 'success' and schooling outcomes were linked to discussions about measurement strategies. One parent argued that academic success is not the only important outcome of schooling:

> … Because academic failure is not failure. Again, I use an example: my brother, he was an average student. He still doesn't spell well. He owns his own business, profitably, for 27 years.

Another parent provided a similar example:

> I think there's been too much emphasis strictly on curriculum as opposed to getting those young people ready to be worthwhile citizens and getting a job, and so on.

These narratives critiqued a singular focus on academic success, raising the issue of what constitutes success in schools. For some, success was characterised by preparing young people to be 'worthwhile citizens'. Again, many of these broader notions of success were not measurable in numerical terms.

Often, measurement strategies are incorporated in judgments of school performance that do not recognise such broader definitions of success. One principal explained:

> [In a] recent conversation with my line manager around, you know, "You are doing great work in that school. It's all settled. Discipline is great. You know, you have made a lot of changes and it's all working well, but look at your data."
>
> So I am looking at my data and this is what it tells me.
>
> "No, look at the other data, your NAPLAN and your QCE, you know, your Year 12 results."
>
> "Yeah, I know about that. But what about all this other stuff?"
>
> "Yes, I know about that, but…"

> NAPLAN and Year 12 data, because that's all that's used to measure schools. That's what's on the ten-page report. That is what's on the MySchool website. Even if the Government are saying, "We are not going to use it as a comparative measure anymore," no-one … [believes it].

Here, system-wide practices support the use of measurement data derived from high-stakes testing. Other forms of measurement data appear to be less 'useful' to the line manager in such conversations. Subsequently, the principal raises the following points:

> There's little recognition of input. If you think of all the inputs that schools like ours do and then what we are measured on two single outcomes. … It's really an imbalance, a significant imbalance.
>
> The last meeting that we went to, that we spoke about, it was very much about "This is how much we are spending, but we are actually going backwards". Instead of all the other stuff that matters as much as the [academic] education.
>
> … we were told to sit down and do an analysis of our QCE data as a small group. We were given the names of those kids who just missed out and it was like, "That was really bad". It was as if we were being belted for not getting those kids across the line. But when we looked at ours, these were all kids with disabilities, who [got] 19 QCE points [which] was a huge achievement, but, "No, no, no, no, no, why didn't you get them over the line?" "Hang on, we did damn well to get them this far". So that story is not told.

In this part of the account, the principal identifies additional measurement sources that 'count' in their school situation but that are not accounted for in vertical accountability systems. A member of the Learning Commission also noted that measurement in schools does not capture longer term outcomes:

> … But the measuring is happening while they are at school. We need to be measuring what happens five years after they have left school. What happened to the kid that was well-rounded and got an OP 10? Probably more successful than the one who got the OP 1, that had a narrow view of the world. But we don't measure that, either…

in the school principals presenting to the Learning Commission also raised the difficulties associated with measuring the 'non-hard data', that is, measuring qualitative outcomes that are not currently measured. A principal explained:

> How do we measure the stuff that is not really measured? So we can measure performance data, achievement data; how do we measure the non-hard data? How do we measure the tone? I know one of the questions that's come up in this new assessing school thing that they are going to bring in, one of the things that we have put forward is, there's got to be a way to measure the effective aspects of school. How do you do it? That's the big question.

It was also suggested that:

> There's nothing homogeneous about our schools, but the way that we are measured is.

This creates a 'significant imbalance' between funding inputs and the specificity of school communities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the single set of measurements on which their outcomes are often judged. The principals also signalled that this point often created tensions due to a 'disconnect between the system expectations and community's'. They called for more use of 'honest data' and non-quantitative data.

This disconnect was also evident in another account given by a principal:

> It is the system expectations and it's about, "What do I do"? I mean, it's important to have kids … [who are] numerate and literate and it's important to have people getting access to tertiary study and things like that. They are important things. But it's [also] about, "What do I do with this group of people to be able to get those outcomes?" So you are thinking about, "Yes, that is the goal, but what are these other things that have to happen?" And they then become other goals that you need to achieve. … You have to be flexible. That's about really knowing your kids and your families and, if we know what the destination is, we need to know all of that stuff about the individuals, to work out how we can make the best opportunities for all of the kids, [including] individuals within that. And it is not easy.

This account refers to knowing the school community, their needs and aspirations, and helping them with the pathways towards their goals. This principal goes on to suggest that sometimes, system-wide measurement practices that have a political basis lose sight of the day-to-day understanding of schools and communities:

> My personal belief is that education should not be political. If we are serious about what education is, it should not be a political thing. At the end of the day, there are certain formulas and things that you need to put in place and politics should not be part of it. If it wasn't, I think we would probably be in a very different position.
>
> I would like to say to [DETE]: "Come and walk a week in my shoes. Come to my school and experience it. It is not The Gap; it is not [a Brisbane school] … Talk to our people, talk to our parents and our kids, and find out for yourself.

As well as understanding the school community, a principal gives an account of how schools need to be given the freedom to cater innovatively to regionally-based needs:

> What's actually not there is the recognition of the fact that: if you are working in those communities, and this is about "relative gain" … You know, it is not like working at a [Brisbane school], where you can maintain your traditional structures and processes in your school, where you might be dealing with a very small cohort of kids that might need that extra gap for improvement. Whereas in … these types of communities, you actually have to be extremely innovative, you have to be extremely, very, very capable. You have to be a really good educator and really think about how you can make this stuff work effectively and it's much harder to do that.
>
> That's one of the things about the measures … is about the level of innovation in a school. You know, "Is there innovation there around trying to address significant issues that are affecting that school population? By doing that, it's actually bringing up some evening up of the playing field?" … we have some significant work to do about "How do you create that structure in your school that's going to provide, to fill those gaps for kids in the school, in a way that addresses kids individually, or gets close to addressing them individually?"

These accounts of measurement strategies focus on the perverse effects of narrow forms of vertical accountability rather than the educational responsibility to make a difference in specific contexts. Sahlberg (2010) suggests that accountability policies based on 'professional responsibility and trust' are intelligent systems (p. 53). Similarly, Hargreaves (2009) makes the observation that often, 'responsibility precedes and supersedes accountability' (p. 101). Therefore, a focus on responsibility, that takes into account the community needs, should be a priority. Biesta (2004) explains:

> Redefining our relationships on the basis of responsibility might also be a way to regain and reclaim the political dimension of accountability, in that we can understand "the political" as taking responsibility for that which is of common concern (the *res publica).* (p. 250)

C. The 'systemless system'

Lawn (2013) has recently described the English system of schooling as a 'systemless system', echoing one of the research principals' comments in PETRA. Principals collectively raised concerns about the possible emergence of what they saw as a schooling system in which much responsibility was devolved to the school without commensurate power or systemic supports. One principal gave the following example:

> Currently in this town, in terms of managing behaviour, we have started a trial of three clusters of schools coming together and managing [resources]. Now, that was all very fine when it was a regional resource, they said, "Yes, you could do that." Now it's a resource that goes back to schools and individual schools make the decision about what they want to do with it. So that could quite potentially be a situation where people take their money and run. You know, we would all be given a bit of a parameter about how we make the decision but what was re-enforced to us was that it's a principal's decision about that. So, what's been taken away is that sort of system of "this is how we make this stuff operate and work", throwing back to schools and almost saying, "Well, you almost have to work that out for yourselves, how you want to work together". And that's why this working relationship is vital, in the community, for your community, for the greater community.

There is international support for such analyses, with Ozga (2012) suggesting that traditional, bureaucratically-organised and controlled systems have been replaced by 'networks of relationships in which cooperation and coordination must be constantly negotiated and managed' (p. 440). Both the principal and the research literature indicate the importance of negotiation, cooperation and support between schools and communities. In rural and regional school communities such cooperation is particularly important.

The principals at the Learning Commission raised a number of concerns about what they saw as a move towards a systemless system and a lack of shared infrastructure. One principal noted:

> But those managers that used to do all of this from the regional office are gone. So all that work that was done … Now we have to do it. Nothing will support us to do it. We are just being asked to do it.

Another principal added:

> But the signs are that we are going to be managing more and more resources on either an individual school level or a cluster level. That brings with it additional work.

Yet another principal agreed, suggesting:

> You see it, more and more of the responsibilities and accountabilities that are being thrown on principals … [who] don't have the skills. And there is no training, at this stage.

These principals have raised the issues of workload and training. Research by Brennan (2009) suggests there has been a steady intensification of the work undertaken by educators over the last three decades and often due to neoliberal governance practices such as those described by the principals and the focus on measurement and comparison in the USA (e.g. Lipman, 2009).

Another concern is related to the level of expertise required to make many of the operational decisions that are now devolved to schools and principals. A principal explained:

> And that then puts back onto schools that sense about that "you are going to need to know everything and be very well-researched and know a lot of stuff about things", whereas that expert sitting out there can actually come and help me with that stuff.

In relation to English schooling, Lawn (2013) argues that it is now only the centre that has a feel for what the system is and that this is basically constructed and made legible through data that the system has available to it to create a panoptic view. Specifically, he situates this systemless system in relation to New Public Management principles and the enhanced significance of policy as numbers and data infrastructures for managing and running schools and systems. Specifically, he notes:

> The tendency of New Public Management to focus on efficiency, productivity targets and strategic capacities allows the system to be re-imagined through data and, indeed, allows the centre to shape, direct and steer a system that only it fully determines and views as a single, complex system. (Lawn, 2013, p. 232)

We see similar dynamics evident in the PETRA study.

The narrative of 'community expectations' draws on accounts of perceptions in school communities, especially related to priorities, partnerships and perceptions of schools (see Figure 4: Community expectations narratives). While these narratives were generally found across most groups that participated in the Learning Commission, there were frequently competing expectations and ideas with regard to what schools should, and could, be doing.

Figure 4: Community expectations narratives
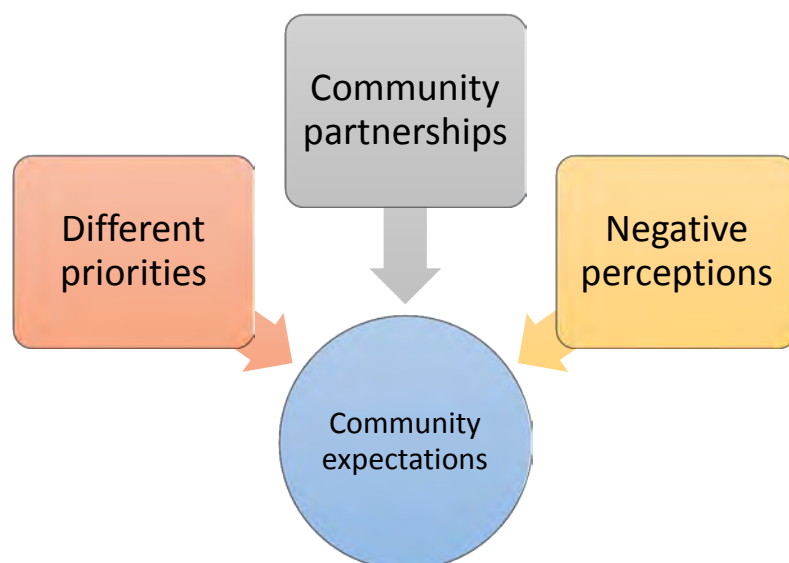
A. Different priorities

The Commissioners and the principals noted the varied expectations regarding the purposes and goals of schooling from the perspectives of the system, schools, parents, employers and communities, and how to best address any differences. The Commissioners also noted differences between the desired outcomes of community stakeholders and the accountability foci of the system and governments. Additionally, it was suggested that there is interplay between school specific and system-wide expectations that sometimes do not align (also see narrative: System-wide practices). Some principals suggested that there were broad community expectations that schools had ethical responsibilities to be reliable, honest, responsible and trustworthy. Another principal, in a more concerned voice, suggested that community expectations can be highly demanding:

> There's an expectation that we will provide everything that a child needs in terms of education.

B. Community partnerships

While many of the accounts in the Learning Commission report are also examples of partnerships between students and teachers; teachers and parents; parents and schools; principals and regional departments, the following accounts acknowledge two specific

issues : partnerships between principals and employers, and employers' perspectives on schooling outcomes.

In the first account relating to the narrative of community expectations, an employer outlines the value he places on links with the local school, which admittedly are self-interested but nonetheless suggest a degree of trust and engagement with the school:

> I have been very, very lucky, in the sense that we have got a good relationship with the local school principal. So when we have employed locally, we have actually got his feeling first, before we have advertised, of any potential school leavers which he believes could be an asset to us. So he's actually given us the names of good students with good acumen, being able to talk to people. They are not introverted or have trouble talking to people. So we had their list and tried to get that principal then to get those children to actually apply for those roles, which we have.

Community partnerships need to go beyond self-interest to consider the general good, but it may be that effective partnerships begin in the context of reciprocal favours as noted above, and over time broaden and deepen into a richer set of relationships with broader benefits for both parties. The latter requires greater extension and inclusion in dialogues where reciprocal accounts are shared and can check-and-balance particular interests of different stakeholders.

A Commissioner raised the following point about the differing expectations of teachers, employers and parents.

> I think the thing that correlated around everything is: despite the media, despite the hype about MySchool, about a million other things, of the thing that was consistent was [*sic*], "positive culture, support, how do we balance it? One being tossed out against the other? Can we get the best of both worlds?" That surprised me with the employers. Even though I would absolutely agree with them, it really, really surprised me that the employers wanted to know that. It really didn't surprise me with the parents. With most parents, you want your kids to be happy and secure and to get - parents are pretty reasonable now.

The Commissioner, in noting how media tends to focus on measured and published criteria comparing school 'success or failure' in terms of literacy, numeracy and other academic results (with economic implications), was impressed that employers expressed care about how to balance academic success with supporting student needs for positive social-cultural lives. Learning Commission dialogue thus pushed beyond media simplifications, towards recognition of the greater complexity in which different stakeholders recognise purposes for schooling.

In another account, a Councillor relays a story about an encounter with a parent from a local school about her daughter's participation in the Learning Commission:

> I was randomly said "Hello" to by a mum, again randomly because I don't know her at all, but she said, "I want to say 'Thank you'. My daughter participated in something over at [the High School] that you were at, something about her school. I just think that was wonderful.

> She was really, really embarrassed, but she said that Councillor [Name] was there and I just wanted to come up and say, 'Thank you'. " If anything, that was the first time that this girl had participated in anything like that. "And you have really given her the confidence to speak up. On behalf of the school"

Schools that interact with, and enlist the support of, students, parents and local community members as well as governments have greater opportunities to share rich communication in which horizontal accounts from multiple voices are heard and can make a difference to the learning process (Lingard, 2014).

C. Negative perceptions

The Commissioners and the principals who were at the Learning Commission raised the issue of negative community perceptions about schools. A Commissioner suggested that community perceptions were often formed through media reportage:

> I didn't believe the community was - or the good that was doing in the community - was actually being presented properly through the media.

Negative reportage is likely to frame public perceptions of school communities, and of the staff and students within these communities. Such media accounts are never neutral (Fiske, 2011). While media reportage may, at times be 'positive' and supportive of school practices (see Appendix 2), it was the negative reportage that Commissioners mostly spoke about; for example:

> There is the outside reporting, that most often comes through the printed media or the visual media, and, of course, the social media. Sometimes that's good, sometimes it is not so good. I think schools are manic about negative reports. They don't like them and, of course, for all sorts of good reasons.
>
> The school is engaged in self-reporting, which they take the opportunity through the school newsletters, through the media, through functions, to report on how their school is going. And from an ex-principal's point of view, we obviously don't like reporting negatives.

Along with self-reporting, direct conversation is a way to correct simplistic negative impressions about schools that people in the community may absorb:

> There is that community perception   in fact, a friend of mine … she said, "Oh, how are you going?"
> "Great, thank you."
> She said, "Oh, every time I hear a story out of [school], I just feel really sorry for you."
> I said, "What stories are you hearing out of [school]?"
> "Oh, there are always stories coming out of [school]."
> I said, "No, there's not. There hasn't been a negative story out of our school for about three years. I think tell you all the positive stories," and I rattled them off. She went, "Oh, that's great."
> She's a hairdresser. So I made sure she understood all the great stuff that's happening.

Of course this means of interrupting unwarranted negative impressions is limited to a happenstance encounter. A rich accountability approach would bring community members into dialogue with school staff in a more systematic and extensive way, hopefully including members of the media, in order to dispel simplistic negativities and replace them with appreciation of complex realities.

The narrative of 'parental involvement' draws on accounts of the need for parents to participate in schools, as well as providing feedback to schools (see Figure 5: Parental involvement narratives). Parental involvement can operate as a mechanism of horizontal accountability. Additionally, when parents are involved in schools there is recognition of mutual accountability (Sahlberg, 2010) and opportunities for relational, two-way horizontal accountability practices in relation to the educational outcomes of the children and young people in schools (Lingard, 2014).

Figure 5: Parental involvement narratives

Participation

Feedback

Parental involvement
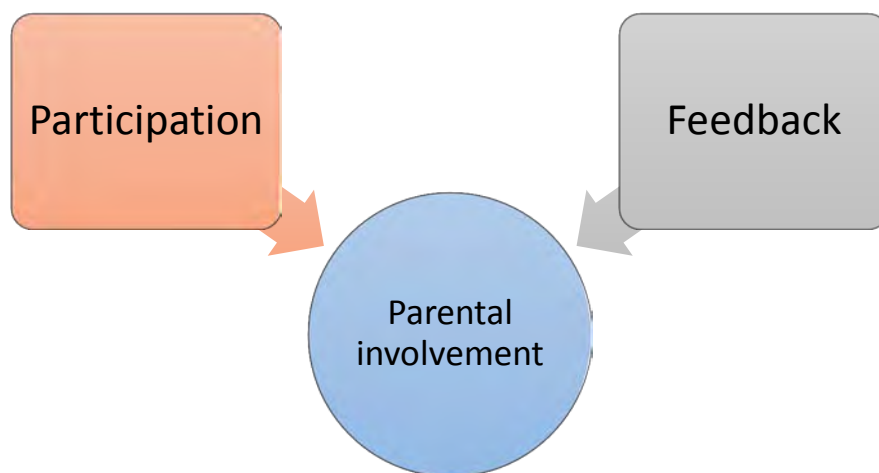
A. Participation

Members of the Indigenous community who participated in the Learning Commission gave accounts of the need for greater parental involvement and participation by parents in schools. A Commissioner gave an example:

> I MC-ed a school concert which had a three-day workshop … You know what was disappointing … what were the teachers absolutely so disappointed with? Not performance of the kids. They were brilliant; and the interactions they have. Do you know the amount of parents from 6.30 to 8 o'clock dropped their kids and left and came back at 8 o'clock for the pick-up.

The 'drop-and-go' mentality was disappointing for all members of the community who were involved in the school events that were not supported by parents and the community. However, more inclusive and richer dialogue is needed to understand, from parents' and other community members' perspectives, whether their lives are too busy, or they find the school environment in some ways alienating, or what other reasons might be involved, as well as what could be done to invite stronger involvement. This was indeed the message of an Indigenous community member who noted that Indigenous parents tend to avoid spending time in the schools, and so called for more opportunity to:

> Stand up and talk like we are talking here [in the Learning Commission], now … A lot of our parents - look, they will only go as far as that gate and say "goodbye", they will not walk on the grounds because of what they went through at school. They would rather just leave their kids, walk away and let their kids get on with it. We need more of our workers, honest and truthfully, in the school that's got an interest in our children.

The relationship of Indigenous parents to schooling needs thoughtful attention because of the long history of indigenous distrust of white schooling, and low expectations experienced by indigenous students at school. The "drop and go" practice noted by the Commissioner may indicate a lack of agency on the part of the parents, or a lack of feeling welcomed and part of the school community. These kinds of resistant practices need investigation and action-oriented initiatives – such as more Indigenous workers in schools – to change the patterns of (dis)engagement.

Teachers' curriculum interventions demonstrated creative and productive ways to engage parents and communities in schools (see Teaching and Learning Narratives below.).

B. Feedback

The degree of difficulty encountered by the Learning Commission to gather comment and opinion from some community groups, especially parents, was notable (also see The PETRA Learning Commission: Structure and Process > The meetings > Limitations). A principal explained:

> It's hard to capture that [feedback] because they don't necessarily - everything is going fine. You don't make contact with them [parents]. You don't see them. They come to parent/teacher interviews; kids are doing well. You don't see those people. It's very hard - you know, they are quite satisfied with what's happening and their kids are feeling - they are developing and they are engaging in the school setting.

It is hard to know if the principal's interpretation is apt that non-contact from parents beyond formal parent/teacher events means satisfaction with their kids' experiences in schools. This would take understanding and working on the problem of parents' non-responsiveness, in order to bring parents perspectives into the picture. The principal added:

> Even when you do "parent satisfaction surveys", hardly anyone returns them.

It may be that satisfaction surveys are inadequate in addressing what is actually of concern to parents. Yet a risk from parental non-involvement is that schools' decision-making and funding allocations do call for community/parental input and approval. 'Online parent surveys' seem to have been more successful in some instances. However, it might be that each school needs something like a 'learning commission', with careful efforts to make appealing invitations to parents to join and stay involved, including parents who might have biographical reasons to avoid contact with schools.

The narrative of 'work-readiness' draws on the suggestion that schooling practices should more holistically cater for the children and young people in their care (see Figure 6: Work-related narratives). A recent report by the OECD (2013) suggests that policy makers around the world are focused on 'equipping citizens with the skills necessary to achieve their full potential' (p. 3) including in the labour force and economy. As such, developing work-related skills are considered necessary, but not sufficient to allow full participation..

Figure 6: Work-readiness narratives
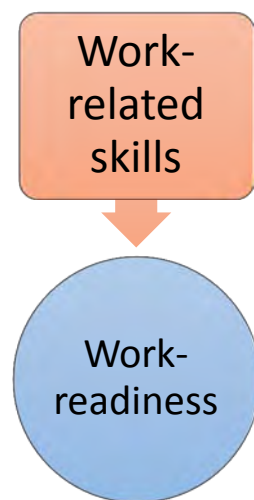
A.   *Developing work-related skills*

The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) is introduced with a statement that suggests that a high quality of life will depend on a person's 'ability to compete in the global economy' (p. 4). Additionally, goal two of the Melbourne Declaration promotes active and informed citizenship (MCEETYA, 2008). Employers and community workers who participated in the Learning Commission gave strong accounts of their perceptions in relation to schools developing work-ready citizens.

It was suggested that some specific skills could include:

> … effective personal presentation skills and social etiquette; refined communication skills such as listening and speaking; resourcefulness in terms of knowing how to gain knowledge and access to various resources, for example, Centrelink; basic life skills such as following instructions or operating a microwave; and had developed self-discipline strategies and skills.

Other skills that were indicated as mandatory by these participants included young people with developed numeracy and literacy skills, in particular, reading and writing (including handwriting); and skills in writing a resume. In this context, a local employer said:

> Yeah, Maths in schools is definitely a concern, because they use calculators. Also writing, it is quite disgraceful. Mine is disgusting (laughs). But then the kids, again, they seem to be worse.

This list of work-related skills is varied and covers a broad range of skills and practices with specific expectations for education provision.

Other accounts outlined their concerns related to regionality and the limited employment opportunities afforded to the young people in the area (also see The PETRA project: Aims and background > Selection of region). An employer suggested:

> Well, in a small town/communities, kids have got to fight for everything they want. So when a lot of them can't get jobs here because there aren't jobs available and they have to go to Bundy and they have got to have the edge, then what are these kids having in these larger towns?

Additionally, some parents mentioned that there seemed to be a 'fall-back' mentality amongst some of the young people that local industries, such as mining, would cater to their employment needs. Some young boys in particular assumed that they would be able to obtain high paying employment in the mines with limited educational success. This is not necessarily borne out by experience. One parent explained:

> We talk about education to fit into our lives and let's take mining as an example. If those kids now are saying, "Yes, there is plenty of mines in the jobs,"

The narrative of 'acknowledging diversity and difference' in the Learning Commission findings draws on schooling practices that value cultural diversity and, in particular, non-dominant cultures, as well as the socio-economic diversity within school populations (see Figure 7: Acknowledging diversity and difference narratives).

Figure 7: Acknowledging diversity and difference narratives
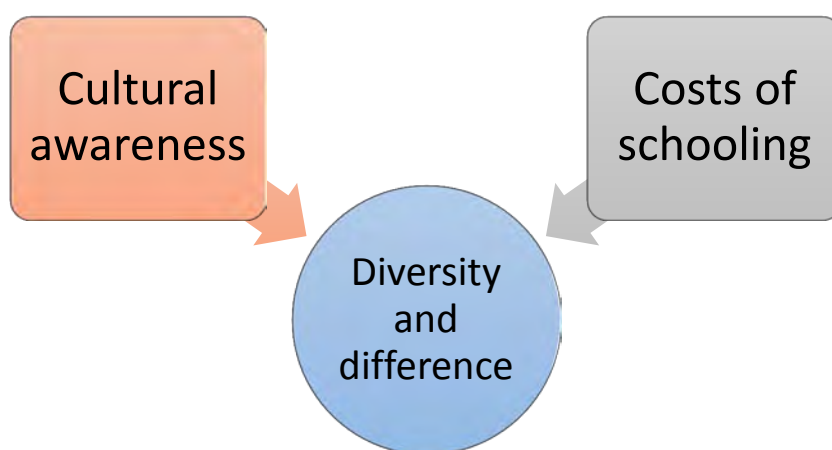
A. *Cultural awareness*

Some members of the Indigenous community gave accounts of the importance of schools acknowledging and raising cultural awareness. They indicated that there had been improvement over the years with an increasing number of graduate teachers and school communities demonstrating greater awareness of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. Some schools in the region have specific cultural programs in place. A member of the Indigenous community described an encounter with another parent:

> Even when I went to Uncle Bernie's funeral, someone would come up to me and say, "Oh, my kid is only in Grade 5, but they are coming over to the [the High School] because I told them that they have got the cultural program over there and that's where you are going to be nurtured in your culture."

This suggests that the cultural knowledges of the non-dominant culture's beliefs, languages, or practices are being valued at such schools (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 68). The Indigenous community member added that such programs had the tendency to encourage enrolments and attendance at the school:

> When I started at [the High School] six years ago, we had about four students and now it's up to 65.

Another aspect of cultural awareness that was raised by the Indigenous community related to their perceptions that there has been improvement in university teacher training programs in relation to understanding Indigenous cultures. A parent suggested:

> When we were going to school, when our children were going to school, they had a hard time. But I think there must be some sort of - there has to be some cultural awareness or something going on in the Uni now, that the teachers are coming out of there with a better education on how to communicate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids.

Such practices, which demonstrate the valuing of cultural knowledges at universities and school, mean that these cultures are legitimised for all students, 'through the inclusion, recognition and transmission of this cultural knowledge' (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 68).

B. Costs of schooling

Socio-economic differences were raised in accounts that focused on the costs associated with students' participation in schooling. A Commissioner suggested:

> It is expensive now to participate in school; it's expensive now to participate in the cultural activities. Because I think there's evidence that broader participation has positive flow-ons in schools.

While government schooling is often discussed as 'free' schooling, the Commissioners highlighted that a range of escalating costs associated with students' participation in sporting and cultural activities often did not acknowledge the diversity of SES backgrounds in school populations. They suggested that these extra costs were often prohibitive of participation by some, which in turn, had a number of flow-on effects and consequences for schools and communities (also see narrative: System-wide practices > Funding). Research by Holt, Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer (2011) suggests 'participation has been correlated with numerous positive developmental indicators, including improved self-esteem, emotional regulation, problem-solving, goal attainment, social skills, and academic performance' (p. 490). However, their research also indicates that financial obstacles in 'disadvantaged' or low-income communities often restrict a child or young person's participation in school sporting activities (Holt et al., 2011). This issue was raised by many parents and students during project interviews.

The narratives presented to the Learning Commission on 'teaching and learning' comment on aspects of teachers and their teaching approaches, equitable outcomes for all young people, meaningful learning and curriculum, and meaningful feedback and reporting. (see Figure 8: Teaching and learning narratives).

Figure 8: Teaching and learning narratives

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                          ┌─────────────┐
                          │  Equitable  │
           ┌──────────┐   │ outcomes for│   ┌─────────────┐
           │          │   │  Indigenous │   │  Meaningful │
           │ Teachers │   │   students  │   │ learning and│
           │          │   └─────────────┘   │  curriculum │
           └──────────┘          │          └─────────────┘
                    ╲            ▼           ╱
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     │ Teaching │ ───▶ │   &       │ ◀─── │  Meaningful │
     │approaches│      │ learning  │      │ feedback and│
     └──────────┘      └───────────┘      │  reporting  │
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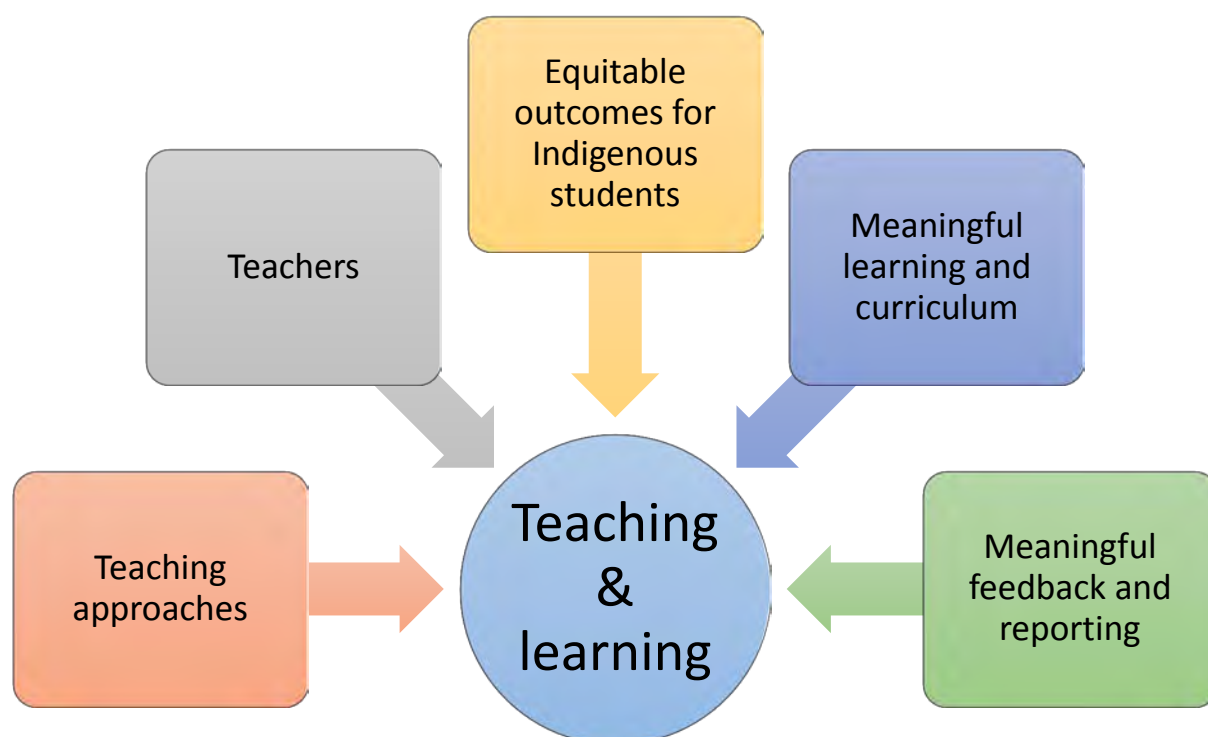
These narratives require something like the 'opportunity-to-learn' framework where Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests:

> [T]he opportunity-to-learn the curriculum assessed in state standards, access to the resources needed for success in the curriculum – such as teachers who are well qualified to teach the curriculum, appropriate curriculum materials, technology, and supportive services – and access to other resources needed to succeed in school and life. (p. 310)

Opportunity-to-learn standards suggest that those in schools and their communities are enabled to make demands of the system for those resources necessary to achieve the goals set for them.

A. Teaching approaches

The students involved in the Learning Commission predominantly gave accounts of teaching and learning strategies, drawn from personal reflection following the completion of a unit of work in history that incorporated local knowledge through project-based learning. This narrative indicated that young people valued learning experiences that included group work, hands-on activities, multi-modal tasks and

engagement with their communities. Some accounts are given below by year 10 history students who indicated the level of satisfaction with these types of learning activities:
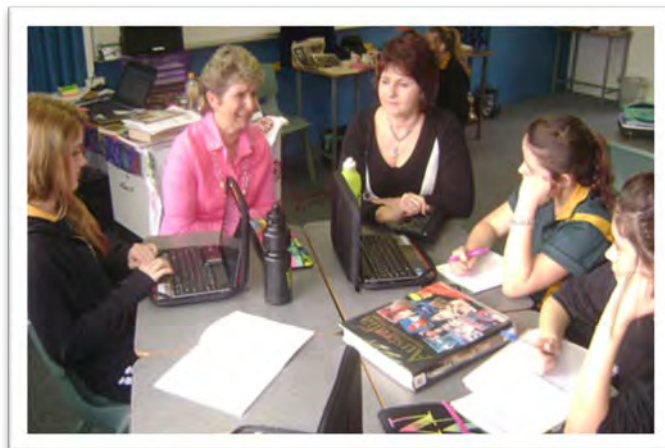
> Yeah, it's more interesting, like hands on and fun. Because good to get to know them. I think they really enjoyed it as well, to share the experience. You can kind of comprehend, like, how they actually felt through the experience and it helps to remember and understand a lot of other things that you wouldn't get from just reading a textbook.

Another student added:

> It makes you actually understand it. Like, when you read something in a book, it doesn't really sink in as much as someone who has actually gone through telling you ... talking to someone for a whole lesson and getting to know their experience ... because it is not knowing the person, just reading about the story, you don't really understand as much.

The projects the students are referring to in these accounts are drawn from a school-based project designed and developed by teachers at each of the participating schools. The teachers planned learning activities for their students, as part of the PETRA curriculum unit of work that utilised local knowledge and raised community awareness, by drawing on past experiences within the community (see included photos). These projects were designed to draw on the 'funds of knowledge' perspectives, that is, 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133) are present in all, including low SES, communities. This acknowledges that communities hold rich perspectives on knowledge that matters, both within their school and local communities and beyond and rejects a deficit account.

This next account is also drawn from focus group interviews with year 10 history students, reflecting on their interview experiences:

> … Some of them [accounts] are very personal … like, the Croatian, he said when he was a child, there was some army that came into their town that was going to execute them. It was only because some other armies actually came along that they survived. So there was [*sic*] a lot of personal stories being told.
>
> … The woman I had, she told us how her mother had been in a Japanese war camp because she was from Indonesia. Because of that, she always made sure people had food and water and was very welcoming and stuff.
>
> … The woman I had, she was left because her mum was sick after the 9-months-old and she was left for four days and was retrieved by an orphanage and she came to Australia by herself when she was 13, after being left by her brothers and stuff. So she's had to grow up by herself, pretty much. Yes, got put into an orphanage and she said that the carers there weren't nice at all and she ended up running away sometimes and being a 'rebel', as she says.

These accounts were very personal, and often emotional, reflections of traumatic experiences. This was one of the features of this approach to curriculum and pedagogy, which deeply engaged the students participating. The young people had the following to say about the experience:

> … Sort of, just to get first-hand knowledge about various experiences that are actually so personal. So it's not just a record; it's an actual experience and emotional … not something that you read out of a textbook. It actually, actually happened.
>
> … I think getting to speak to someone who actually experienced it, helps you to understand it a lot more. Getting to know actual stories, not just reading about something and trying to picture it…
>
> … It makes you actually understand it. Like, when you read something in a book, it doesn't really sink in as much as someone who has actually gone through it telling, you know, someone for a whole lesson and getting to know their experience ... because it is not knowing the person, just reading about the story, you don't really understand the learning practical…

These accounts illustrate that people's social lives in family and community contexts do not lack richness in cultural knowledge and practices. This includes all communities, even those that are materially disadvantaged. .

Teacher accounts about teaching and learning in relation to this project highlighted the perception that effective

teachers were those whose practices suggested they understood the young people they taught. A teacher commented:

> We actually devoted the whole term to this unit. So we spent the 11 weeks on it and really getting into it and adopted it in that way. And looked at the pop culture part of it and then modified that, so that it suited the local perspective and we really enjoyed that … the kids enjoyed it, we enjoyed it and had a good success rate with it; and still met all the requirements.

Some of the parent accounts related to the teaching and learning narrative indicated they valued 'caring teachers' who made 'challenging demands' of their children so as to encourage and promote learning. One group of parents specifically indicated that they valued teachers who were able to:

> Communicate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids.

As Noddings (2003) suggests, teaching is a 'relational practice' with teachers engaged in 'relations of care and trust' (p. 250). Positive relationships between teachers and students, such as those expressed by teachers and students involved in the curriculum project, where the students enjoyed the learning experiences, are more likely to consider learning meaningful (also see section on narrative: Teaching and learning > Meaningful learning). An OECD report confirms:

> Students tend to thrive when they form positive relationships with peers, feel part of a social group, and feel at ease at school. A lack of connectedness can adversely affect students' perceptions of themselves, their satisfaction with life, and their willingness to learn and to put effort into their studies. (OECD, 2013, p. 51)

B. Teachers

One of the Commissioners gave the following account of teacher selection practices, past and present:

> In my opinion, in the last ten years of my principalship, I think we have got kids coming out as a teacher, who that was their first choice, more than not. Whereas I think in the past we got teachers who fell into teaching out of vet science, out of default.
>
> Yeah, we have got some weak teachers but I saw that as my job to either help them build their skills or help them decide to not be teachers. And we put a lot of time and money into using really good teachers to meet and give support to teachers who had a weakness. Usually it was behaviour management. Nine times out of 10, it was physical management stuff. But I think they were better trained [as a result]…
>
> That was something that you were passionate about. You wanted those teachers to also engage and have the same passion that you did. So you were literally the driver and that mentoring happened. I think that's a must. Because how then does a weak teacher or a teacher who is not confident actually grow?

> … The only thing that I was going to add to that was this teachers selection business. I know that sometimes it didn't work when schools gave teachers their final rating because then it came back right again to, "Are you tough enough to do it?", as you should. But now, it's gone back to the best academics, the best students, the best applications, and there's no input from the people who do their ten-week practical. I think it needs to come a bit both ways. I am saying, it should go back to schools because, boy, I can think of some of the ones who shouldn't have gone through the door of any school.

Historically, teaching is considered a highly demanding career, but one that is professionally rewarding (Lortie, 1975). In particular, occupational rewards associated with teaching are often cited in the literature as relating to the benefits of working with children (Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Lortie, 1975; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Here, the Commissioner has highlighted the importance of in-school support for motivated and passionate teachers, guiding and mentoring them in their post-tertiary teaching experiences.

In contrast to the mentoring role suggested in the above account, a competing narrative about teachers was drawn from the principals' accounts of the demands the system places on them and their role in schools. For example, one principal indicate that instructions were often given by their supervisors to monitor teachers' performance in the classroom:

> So one message is you are instructed to get in your classrooms and make sure the teachers are doing their job but keep managing all this other stuff - and then the director-general, the director-general of all Education and State schools in Queensland is just one little part. So there's all this other - I see that as a conflict.

Here, system-based monitoring practices were promoted in preference to school-based mentoring. This situation caused some frustration on the part of the principals, insofar as such time for such monitoring practices is often unavailable due to pressures that require principals to engage in an overload of other management-related tasks. This point also relates to the stresses of the 'systemless system', which is discussed in another narrative: System-wide practices.

C. Equitable outcomes for Indigenous students

As part of the teaching and learning narrative, participants in the Learning Commission gave account of the need for equitable outcomes for all students, in particular, 'equality of access' for Indigenous students (Rennie, 2013). There was some criticism of teaching and learning practices regarding the amount of time teachers spent with students who were considered 'less academic'. This raises equity issues in relation to teacher availability to assist students who are perhaps struggling with the curriculum. An Indigenous parent commented:

> I think that's our problem now … that there's too much work with the brainy ones and the ones that are not achieving, they are just left to go their own way … We have got to remember that those kids there have got a dream, too. Who are we to judge them, to say "Your dream is not going to come true"?

Sullivan and van Riel (2013) suggest, 'comparative under-achievement of many Indigenous Australian students is a major concern' (p. 139) with Rennie (2013) indicating 'Indigenous youth in Australia continue to perform well below their non-Indigenous counterparts' (p. 155). Given this, finding ways to encourage and motivate all young people and promote learning is absolutely necessary. One suggestion being, 'connecting learning to students' experience is both engaging and can build success, which it is assumed is connected to their confidence to engage with learning' (Sullivan and van Riel, 2013, p. 152) (also see narrative: Acknowledging diversity and difference > Cultural awareness).

Additionally, another account suggested that support practices did operate within schools, if or when problems were identified. An Indigenous parent explained:

> As soon as the principal at the school picked it up that he [my child] had a learning difficulty, she got in contact with me straight away and we worked together. I reckon it just depends on who you got. She knew there was something going on in his life, so she came and saw me and said, "Look, we should get a counsellor in," which she did; she did that. She brought the counsellor in. The counsellor worked through with the child and got right through to where he was throwing things around in the classroom; the counsellor got through to him. That's why I said it's different. I think it's different everywhere; everywhere you go, it's different.

D. Meaningful learning and curriculum

Accounts by some parents centred on the importance of meaningful learning and curriculum choices in schools. However, this varied in terms of the concept of what was 'meaningful'. One parent commented:

> My son struggles with English, normal English, Romeo and Juliet is like another language to him and he thinks, "What's the use of that? Why do they need to teach that still?" He's Grade 10 now but, like, he can't see any sense in that, nor can I, "Why are they still teaching that?"

This parent is suggesting that her son would find it more useful if greater emphasis were placed on English and literacy, before enrichment texts were introduced into the curriculum. Another parent gave a similar example in relation to learning languages other than English:

> "There's no way my son will learn Japanese because he struggles with English." So we got an exemption … I think they should have a choice.

An Indigenous parent gave an account from her perspective:

> A lot of parents believe that the cultural classes - like, we used to have one lesson a week was given to us which was 70 minutes and we could do that for Indigenous art, the dancing, didgeridoo classes and rah, rah, rah. Now we haven't been able to have that because of the new Australian curriculum. Parents are saying, "When are they going to start up again?" But you can't fit everything in and then you are fighting against the establishment because the parents believe that the cultural side of it - because if you are complete within yourself, your culture and who you are, then everything else flows on.

This raises the notion of culture (also see narrative: Acknowledging diversity and difference > Cultural awareness) in relation to timetabling constraints and the content demands of the Australian curriculum. In this example, culturally rich experiences were withdrawn due to time constraints.

Another account came from employers who made the following observations of the young people they employ:

> They lack the ability to communicate. Some of them have severe communication issues; that they are used to being all social media or something like that. To actually verbalise with another person, it seems to be a real issue for some people. That is probably the biggest thing I have noticed.

Each of these narratives raises the question of choice by highlighting some of the limitations associated with current teaching and learning and curriculum practices in schools. Additionally, while these narratives present different points of view, teaching and learning practices should strive to develop meaningful or 'authentic experiences' in teaching, the curriculum, and assessment (Hargreaves, Earl, and Schmidt, 2002). Authentic, in that, intellectual and practical skills are 'transferable' to 'real-life' social settings and work environments (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Falk, 1995).

E. Meaningful feedback and reporting

These accounts raise the issue of meaningful feedback and reporting practices within the narrative of teaching and learning. One account by a parent suggested that such feedback should include commentary on citizenship skills with a view towards schools developing 'productive' and 'good' citizens, who are able to effectively engage and participate in society. Another parent added:

> The most important comments are those ones that vary in the report, where the teacher has got maybe three lines; is talking specifically about "what your child is doing; how they are going socially". I would like to see more of that. I would rather know - I suppose that is the side of making them a productive citizen, rather than, "Yeah, it's great that there's all these marks there for English and Maths," but most of these comments are cut and paste.

In the above account, the inclusion of the social and citizenship information about a child's progress was considered important. Additionally, this parent suggested that the 'cut and paste' approach for progress comments by schools when producing schools reports provided little meaningful feedback to parents and students.

In another account, another parent indicated the importance of the non-academic data on the report card:

> I don't even look at my children's academic rating, when I get the report. As a teacher, it doesn't really mean that much because I assess my kid at home. There's two things I do look at, though, "effort and behaviour". The other two things - like, even when my boy finished last year, if those things aren't 'A's, that mark is nowhere near what it should be. So they

are the only two things I look at on my kids' report card, those comments. It's like - "my kid is lovely". Well, my son is not. He's very opinionated; he tells you how it is and he's 6-years-old . So I always laugh because it is the behaviour and the effort, especially effort.

While, 'effort and behaviour' were identified as meaningful feedback to this parent, she did acknowledge there was a necessity to attain a level of understanding in, for example, mathematics:

…Yes, we need to know certain levels of understanding, certain aspects of Maths and that, but the mark that they are getting explains that. I would much rather read about how they interact in the classroom with other kids and that's all that stuff about setting them up to be a good citizen down the track.

The notion of citizenship was also identified in accounts by employers:

For me, I just find the kids that play team sport - and I have coached a lot of them when I was in Blackwater as well - they are more rounded. They know what it's like to work with others in the workplace. I found, as a generalisation, those students that have never played a sport or been in a school band or done anything else, really are behind the other kids.

This account suggested that some employers found feedback about a child's participation in sport and music programs useful when reviewing potential employees' resumes. That is, children that participated in community, cultural and sporting activities were categorised as having developed useful characteristics and experiences that were considered valuable to potential employers; for example, developing public speaking skills or the capacity for working in teams.

One final aspect of this teaching and learning narrative related to school and system communication practices with parents. In this account, the parent complains that limiting communication to parent/teacher interviews is problematic, especially if there is an ongoing or underlying problem with their child:

I think they should ring you up if your child is struggling or if your child needs extra help at home, they should ring you up and say, "Your child is struggling with this. Can you help them at home a bit more with that?" And they don't do that … Not in high school. You might find out at the parent/teacher interview that there's a problem. But they [students] have got this diary at high school. They [teachers] are supposed to write notes in it and we [parents] are supposed to check it. I never got one! The teacher is supposed to write notes in it if they want you to do something but nothing gets written in the diary. I don't think the teacher has ever written in the high school diary. I think this year I scored a good teacher with my daughter. Otherwise it should have been picked up years ago. Yeah, they don't really tell you when there's a problem until you get to the parent/teacher interview or the report card…

Conclusions: A way forward

The process:

The Learning Commission application of the 'competency groups' approach (Whatmore, 2009; Whatmore & Landstrom, 2011) to data collection and for accessing community views of schools, their purposes and successes appeared to work reasonably well. However, we cannot understate the work involved in establishing the Commission and organising the logistics of meetings and input and submissions, particularly from parent groups. This observation should not be taken to present a deficit account of parents or community. Such an account of course would be disjunctive with our 'funds of knowledge' approach that acknowledges the cultural and intellectual resources in all communities. Rather our difficulty in tapping into parental views is more a reflection of our approach to achieving this. There were other aspects of the project, including the case studies of alternative educational provision (both outside and within school) and the teacher-led History curriculum projects, that engaged productively and educatively with community members. Both these approaches making the community part of the curriculum were successful in engaging with and involving parents and community members in the work of schools.

For those who did participate in various aspects of the project, and specifically the Learning Commission, there was very strong support the attempts to draw schools and their communities closer together in ways which hopefully will have positive effects on students' learning and the achievements of schools (Tate, 2012). There was appreciation for involving all groups in a constructive discussion about how rich accountabilities might be conceptualised and operationalised in a restructuring school system. There was much support for allowing many voices into this conversation and we became very aware of the necessary capacity to actively listen as part of processes of policy production and enactment. One Commissioner commented:

> I think the benefit of the [Learning Commission] process has actually been the process. When was the last time someone actually asked the broad sector, as the Commission has, what they want, how they feel or how they would like it delivered? When were they last asked that? You might have filled in a survey at school and gone tick - well, those who could be bothered - go "tick, tick", or whatever. But you are actually involving a cross-section of students, a cross-section of teachers and a cross-section of community people, workers, parents or whatever. Again, this is probably the first time they have ever been asked. So if anything comes out of this, it should be further engagement to keep and grow those Commissions.

The partnerships:

The possibility and importance of schools having partnerships with their communities was raised across the research, but particularly at the Learning Commission. Recognition grew, in the process, that these need to be multi-directional relationships, and that key voices needed for such multi-directional dialogue are often missing. The following observation was made by a Commissioner:

> I was going to add - and this is what this is about - community partnerships and that's what we are talking about here. That's absolutely critical. Oftentimes, I would say most times, it is the school going out and creating the partnerships. It would be nice to have it as a two-way thing. That is not to say that we don't have really great partnerships here, because we do, but schools, I believe, work very, very hard on establishing and maintaining those relationships.

It may be that schools take initiatives to create a two-way communication and do not always find that other 'partners' join in making this a mutual effort. However, it may also be that schools, and their needs to comply with governing pressures upon them, too often set the terms of communication and interaction, and that parents and other local community members need more opportunity to have a voice in establishing those terms. This is a question that requires both deepened and expanded conversation.

Being heard and having someone listen:
There was a very strong sense expressed in all elements of the research, but especially at the Learning Commission, that system restructuring and certain policy frames had 'responsibilised' the schools, principals and teachers and they felt they were alone in being responsible for everything. This sense might reflect the location of the PETRA schools on the northern periphery of their region and also the lack of face-to-face contact with personnel from that region, but it was a view very strongly expressed across the research. Schools increasingly operate within frameworks of new public management, network governance and neoliberalism. Given this, Couldry (2010) suggests:

> As neoliberal rationality becomes institutionalized culture, it shapes the organization of space. Some types of space become prioritized, others fall out of use and so stop being imagined; because voice is embodied, this matters hugely for the effectiveness of voice, since neoliberalism literally changes where we can and cannot speak and be heard. (p. 12)

Therefore, practices such as the Learning Commission that encourage and value the voices of communities and schools create a space where individuals and communities 'can speak' and 'will be heard'.

There was an overwhelming sense of gratitude expressed by participants in the Learning Commission, for the opportunity to participate and be heard. A Commissioner said:

> I just want to say thank you for the opportunity to be part of [the Learning Commission]. All I could offer was interruptions, and I still do, but again just to be part of this and give young people a voice, a positive voice and the community a voice; so that they are proud of their community, they are proud of their kids. That's nice to hear - all you ever read is negatives - and they are willing to share. Sometimes it's hard.
>
> Whether it was [Name] or whoever, sharing around the table, they were willing to share. Ask them a question, they honestly didn't hold back. And that says about the importance of

> your project; you sitting here and being interested in them. It had a great feeling of involvement.

Another Commissioner added:

> The other thing that we learnt about it, and I certainly did, is that people are open to sharing. You ask them; they will tell you. Broadly speaking, the questions that we had were fairly broad and let them share; you know, they weren't really prescriptive, "What do you think?", and people were willing to share. The students even, whether they were prepped or not, but again they were comfortable to some extent, even though we were on school grounds, to actually share. That surprised me that people want to tell you — those people felt comfortable saying, "If I can make a difference in my community to the school or to the future of young persons, I am here to help".

Rich accountabilities:

Earlier in this report, we defined rich accountabilities in the following way:

Rich accountabilities are part of a new wave of thinking and conceptualisation about accountabilities in school systems that need to work in more productive, effective, educative and democratic ways. Accountability has traditionally had two basic meanings: namely being held to account and giving an account. Rich accountabilities incorporate both, while changing the relationship between those who give the account and those who receive and judge the account. This involves rethinking what we mean by accountability, reclaiming the ethical sense of 'giving responsive accounts'. They address more authentically the complexity of ways in which schools and systems are working in the contemporary environment. Rich accountability enacts a different type of relationship across different parts of the system, with everybody taking responsibility for provision of multiple forms of data, complex analysis and appropriate action.

Rich accountabilities are multilateral and multidirectional in character. They are designed to inform educational practices and improvement in respect of both performance and equity within schools, regions and systems. Rich accountabilities involve debates about what counts and what should be counted in schooling. This involves more people in the constitution of the fields of judgement, thus making them more democratic. Rich accountabilities draw on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including the voices of students and families who are 'least advantaged', and multiple data sets in various forms (quantitative and qualitative) to provide complex, contextualised and balanced assessments of teaching and learning and accounts of the broader (academic, social, cultural) achievements of schools.

Rich accountabilities serve equity goals by (a) providing alternatives to accountability practices that can unfairly narrow the focus of curriculum and pedagogy for some students in an effort to improve testing performance; (b) making visible a broader spectrum of what schools achieve for students; and (c) taking account of community 'funds of knowledge' as assets for learning, as well as students' and families' needs and aspirations, in order that there is rich accountability in evaluations of school and systemic performance and the allocation of resources.

Rich accountabilities imply an opportunity for schools and their communities (including student voices) to speak back to the head office and policy in relation to what they need in order to achieve systemic and school goals. They also imply the necessity of systemic learning and dialogue, which involve listening and capacity for flexibility as the basis for action at the appropriate level. This form of accountability allows for systems to learn and in so doing improve policy, the targeting of funding and support for schools.

As such, Table 3: Operationalised examples of vertical and horizontal accountabilities, outlines a number of project-based examples of 'rich' accountabilities.

Table 3: Operationalised examples of vertical and horizontal accountabilities

Type	Components	Examples
Vertical	• Top-down (interactions between school, regions, departments, and governments)	• Standardisation, benchmarking, comparison data, and test-driven data (quantitative data) • OP, student destination data • Annual reports; headline data; Great Results Guarantee; associated funding • Data-*driven* strategies • Feedback and reporting strategies to parents and communities
Vertical	• Bottom-up (interactions between school, regions, departments, and governments)	• Learning Commission • 'Opportunity-to-learn standards'; system listening to the voice of schools • Data-*informed* strategies • Quantitative and qualitative data
Horizontal	• School-communities / communities-school (links between schools; schools, students and families; schools, communities, and employers)	• Learning Commission • Practices supporting the education of the whole person • Meaningful and useful feedback and reports strategies • Developing community-linked curriculum • Teachers and teaching approaches • Enhancing school autonomy with regional and systemic support • Distributive justice – costs of schooling, funding allocation and spending • Parental involvement and participation in schools • Student, parental, and community feedback to schools • Enhancing public and media

		perceptions
		• Quantitative and qualitative
		• Possible moderation
Horizontal	• Other collaborative narratives (links between schools; schools, students and families; schools, communities, and employers)	• Learning Commission • Case studies • Cultural diversity • Quantitative and qualitative • Possible moderation
Multilateral	• Involvement of all of the above in combination.	• Emergent

As noted already, the Learning Commission report has developed a concept of rich accountabilities that has been constructed from the research project to date and from interrogation of these data through relevant literature and research. Because of this mode of development, the focus of this emergent definition has been community (horizontal) and bottom-up (upwards vertical) elements. The final stage of the research will move the definition to consider a system perspective and a possible design for system wide rich accountabilities.

The Learning Commission work will thus be utilised to inform Stage 5 (see Table 1: Five stages of the PETRA project) of the PETRA project, that is, developing a conceptual and operational model of rich accountabilities for schools, regions and the system. The meeting with senior DETE personnel (Stage 4) will also inform this process. The conceptualisation of rich accountabilities developed in this Learning Commission report will serve as a basis for the critical, structured and dialogic conversations that will be the basis of Stage 4 of the project. Conceptualising rich accountabilities will be an important final stage of the PETRA project.

Here we will outline some principles derived from the Learning Commission process that will inform the conceptualisation of rich accountabilities. First, systems value quantitative data that can be collected at large scale and which allow for evaluative comparisons. Secondly, schools do much important work that is not captured by data of this kind. Thirdly, what becomes valued by systems is what is measured by systems, but this does not necessarily match community expectations of schooling, as shown by the Learning Commission. Fourthly, schools and systems need mutually developed and agreed processes that make publicly visible the broad achievements of schools and school communities. Finally, these accounts should respond to community values and expectations in relation to schooling.

However, there are some important caveats in respect of these principles. Rich accountabilities: must not intensify the work of principals and schools; must have as their

goal improved learning for all and more equitable outcomes; are costly to develop and time-consuming; and face difficulties in authentically involving parents and communities in these processes.

What would we do differently

We probably needed to recognise earlier in the project the difficulty of accessing parental and community views of schools. In the first stage of the project where we collected data to create deep case studies of the schools the parental interviews were arranged by the schools. These interviews were by and large with parents who already had close relationships with the schools. An alternative way of accessing parents and communities as part of the original research design would have been helpful. The seeking of a variation of expenditure to allow the development of a phone app to access these views has resulted from this difficulty. There might be a possibility, which will be explored, of attaching this app to DETE's *QSchools* app.

There was much organisation involved in establishing the Learning Commission. We perhaps underestimated how long it would take to create relationships with communities, establish the Commission and get submissions. We also underestimated the complex logistics in organising all of this at a distance. It is almost as if we are now in a stronger position to do what we were setting out to achieve with the Learning Commission.

We also underestimated the deep commitments and the length of time required in the communities to do the sort of ethnographic work necessary to tap the funds of knowledge in these communities.

While we secured local media coverage of key Learning Commission events, we might have engaged the media more to solicit greater involvement from the community in the Learning Commission process.

Concluding remarks

It needs to be reiterated that this Learning Commission report is a report on just one stage of the PETRA project. In writing it, we have drawn to some extent on two earlier stages of the project.

The rationale for the Learning Commission was a funds of knowledge view of communities and an acknowledgement that enriching school/community relationships will enhance the quality of schooling provided. As the great psychologist Vygotsky observed:

> Ultimately only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greatest failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the real world as is fire without oxygen, or as is breathing in a vacuum. The teacher's

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educational work, therefore, must be inevitably connected with his [or her] creative, social and life work. (Vygotsky, 1997, p.345)

As already noted, the Learning Commission also worked with the 'competence groups' approach for bringing together researchers and community 'experts'. This approach worked well in this social science context.

The 'rich' conversations that were had during the Learning Commissions enabled 'horizontal' exchanges of ideas about what 'counts' in education and how schools might report in relation to these purposes. Such exchanges are offered as both an alternative and possibilities for improvement to the more common vertical and unilateral accountability relationship that exist within education systems.

Here, through the Learning Commission, we have begun a process which requires ongoing commitment and trust between each of the communities, that is, school communities, parental communities, local communities, and educational authorities. It also requires each of the communities to listen and support each other, giving previously 'silenced' stakeholders the opportunity and the platform to participate and be heard, allowing for improving learning outcomes of young people. The working of the Learning Commission also demonstrated that it is hard work to involve communities in schools; it takes time to build trust and get communities involved. We believe one reason for the success of the Learning Commission was the trust built over time between the research team, the schools their principals and some teachers, and with the Commissioners. There is thus an important temporal element to the multilateral modes of accountability that the Learning Commission was exploring and attempting to develop through the research.

We leave the reader with one final concluding remark about the Learning Commission. It is fitting that this should come from a member of the local Bundaberg community, and it is also fitting that the water analogue is used, given the display of the power of water during the Bundaberg floods:

> I'm not surprised that...the amount of willingness or motivation and excitement - we have seen it today - that the kids and the parents want to be a part of - they want to learn. They want to be a part of this community. They want to be engaged in the school, but they don't feel that connection. Whether it is the Indigenous ladies that we had or whether it is the businesses and stuff, everyone wants to help. Everyone wants that next generation to be the best they can be, at the schools that they can be, and the employment or whatever. They are all anxious to get in there, boots and all. We are providing a little trickle of water to say, "This is where we think maybe how," but I would not like to see that momentum cease as a trickle but more become the stream, literally, you know …

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LEARNING COMMISSION

28/08/2013 → FIRST LC MEETING (closed)
27/09/2013 → FIRST LC (open)
25/10/2013 → SECOND LC - GIN GIN (open)
8/11/2013 → THIRD LC (open)
30/01/2014 → SECOND LC MEETING (closed)
28/04/2014 → FOURTH LC (open)

FIRST LC MEETING (closed)

COMMISSIONERS
- Meaningful feedback
- Work-readiness
- Communication
- Financial costs
- Measurement
- Competition
- Access
- Diversity and difference
- Opportunity and choice
- Relationships and interest in students
- School culture/environment
- Varied expectations
- Social skills
- Parental involvement

FIRST LC (open)

PARENTS
- Meaningful feedback
- Teacher qualities
- Curriculum relevance
- Communication and involvement (parents)
- Funding

INDIGENOUS WOMEN
- Individualised attention
- Community as behaviour management
- Cultural awareness
- Acknowledging culture
- Racism
- Notions of success
- School fit
- School-readiness
- School selection

EMPLOYERS
- Meaningful reporting
- Work-readiness

SECOND LC - GIN GIN (open)

COMMUNITY WORKERS
- Work-readiness
- Life skills gaps

EMPLOYERS
- Meaningful reporting
- Work-readiness
- Competitive
- Relationships

PARENTS
- Meaningful reporting
- Teacher qualities
- Curriculum relevance

THIRD LC (open)

TEACHERS / STUDENTS
- Teaching strategies
- Group work
- Hands-on
- Multimodal presentations
- Understanding young people
- Community awareness
- Local knowledge

SECOND LC MEETING (closed)

COMMISSIONERS
- Reasons for LC success
  - Prinicpals' support
  - First LC meeting
  - Selecting participants
  - Open to sharing
  - Confidentiality

FOURTH LC (open)

PRINCIPALS
- Understanding **community** expectations
- **Community** expectation
- Trust Honesty Reliability Responsibility
- What are schools' responsibilities?
- Service groups
- Negative **community** perceptions
- **Community** partnerships
- Individualised programs
- Collecting data on **community** perceptions (game app)

- **System** leaders don't get past the principal's office
- **System** needs to listen
- Schools should not be political **systems**
- **System** conflicts

- System expectations and **measurement**
- Measuring the **unmeasurable**
- Honest **data** analysis
- Funding

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Moulding our kids for the future

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WHEN we think of what we want in a school what comes to mind?

Good teachers? Modern facilities? Extra-curricular activities?

While these are things that a parent might judge a school on, there is a big difference in how schools are deemed successful.

I've been involved with the PETRA (Pursuing Equity Through Rich Accountabilities) project and it's been interesting to learn about this disconnect first hand.

Many parents, including me, don't place a whole lot of bearing on NAPLAN.

Yes, it can be an indicator for areas that a student needs help with, but it really is a single point in time test.

But schools are judged by the results.

The PETRA project has also looked at the bigger picture of what does a successful student leaving Year 12 look like.

Are they the student with the best marks? Are they the student with the most friends? Or is it the student who completed a school-based apprenticeship?

It's become clear we want to see a confident, well-rounded young adult embarking on life.