Walanbaa warramildanha[1]: The impact of authentic Aboriginal community and school engagement on teachers' professional knowledge.

Abstract

The conundrum of Indigenous education in Australia rests on two contested and polarising narratives, one political and the other data centred. The first argues that there has been significant and long-term improvement in key reportable areas of Aboriginal education, while the second highlights the conclusions of a growing number of evaluative reports which evidence the stalling of Aboriginal student education achievement at similar levels for the last decade. One element of this multilayered problem relates to the depth of the socio-cultural disconnect between Aboriginal students and their communities and teachers. It is argued that, too often, teachers are appointed with limited social, political and professional knowledge about the particular needs and aspirations of Aboriginal students such that it impacts on their capacity to establish authentic connections to students.

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the nature and dynamics of community and school engagement in sites with high proportions of Aboriginal students. It investigated teachers' capacity to develop authentic pedagogic practices responsive to the educational, cultural and aspirational needs of Aboriginal students. In particular the research highlights that the relational dynamics between schools and Aboriginal people have been deeply affected by colonial histories of exclusion and systemic disadvantage, an ever present school discourse that has marginalised the particular holistic needs of Aboriginal students, and resulted in deeply negative relational interactions between schools and Aboriginal families.

The following report briefly outlines key issues arising from an enquiry that underpinned the doctoral research undertaken with Aboriginal community members, teachers and school principals in 2012. This multisite ethnographic study was undertaken within a relational landscape characterised by an enduring socio-cultural dissonance between schools and their Aboriginal communities. The study focused on examples of collaborative, authentic and purposeful interactions between Aboriginal communities and teachers that support teachers in building a deeper understanding to enhance their cognisance of the needs of Aboriginal students.

The research found that when authentic engagement between Aboriginal people and schools occurred, it appeared to positively impact the teachers' professional knowledge and created a consequent interest within these communities to engage with their schools. The research identified that in each site the Aboriginal participants articulated an interest in developing authentic school collaborations that would enhance student outcomes. The research findings suggest that teachers need to honour, understand and actively reflect on community history, contexts and aspirations to develop the skills and knowledge to address the particular socio-cultural and educational needs of Aboriginal students.

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[1] Gamilaraay 'literally translated as '*They stood their ground, and looked ou*t'

Biography

Dr. Kevin Lowe, a Gubbi Gubbi man from southeast Queensland. He has been a high school teacher, TAFE administrator, University lecturer, and NSW Board of Studies Inspector, Aboriginal Education and has had extensive experience in schools, vocational education and universities. He has actively involved in Aboriginal community organisations, Aboriginal language policy and curriculum development and implementation. Over the last 20 years his work has focused on establishing educational projects with Aboriginal communities, schools and education systems that centre on the development of effective school-community learning partnerships. His recent doctoral thesis focused on Aboriginal community standpoint, community collaboration with schools and their impact on changing teachers' professional knowledge.

Introduction

The annual cycle of reporting on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy, along with other key target areas continues to demonstrate the largely unchanged levels of under-achievement of these students (Abbott, 2014; Dreise & Thomson, 2014; Turnbull, 2016). These results largely match those found in the decade old NSW review of 2004 into the state of Aboriginal education in NSW (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004). This earlier review found that on average Aboriginal students entered high school 60 months behind their age cohort in numeracy and 48 months behind in literacy (2004, pp. 20-31). This review spurred significant policy development in NSW, with state governments looking to find ways to improve student engagement and achievement. Though well intended, these policies have, to date, not seen the sustained systems-wide improvement promised in the recommendations of the 2004 review.

This failure has been largely evidenced at both a state and commonwealth level across Australia. Two government reviews of the efficacy of the NSW Department of Education (DEC) literacy strategy completed by the NSW Auditor General in 2008 and again in 2012 (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2012; Auditor-General NSW, 2008) found that there was no evidence to support the assertion that its current suite educational policies would achieve a closing or even halving of the education achievement gap of Aboriginal students, as was promised in the adoption of the recommendations from the review. The Auditor General noted that:

> Notwithstanding gains and losses at individual schools, there has been no significant improvement in the overall performance of Aboriginal students in national and State tests – either in terms of absolute performance, or in terms of the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Despite efforts to close the gap, it has shown no signs of diminishing. (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2012a, p. 2)

Both state and commonwealth governments have responded with increasing policy confusion to the outcomes of these external reviews, and the continued evidence of student underachievement as reported in NAPLAN (ACARA, 2009). There have been numerous policies implemented in response to both the political and community pressures to improve student achievement. These include well funded policies that excised a small number of schools from the 'normal' cycles of policy making and funding. The NSW government sought to separate these schools from the 'normal' governance, staffing and financial constraints as a way of developing responsive programs to suit the particular needs of each school. School principals and the Aboriginal community in each location have been given a greater say over the running of the school (NSW Department of Education & Communities, 2011) and teachers provided with specific training and development programs (Yunkaporta, 2009; Yunkaporta & NSW DEC- Western Region). Considerable effort was undertaken to develop and implement a systems-wide policy framework for schools to support Aboriginal education (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2009) and facilitate greater

collaboration with peak community bodies like the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in establishing a localised policy platform for greater school and community engagement. Yet even with these programs in place, the educational outcomes of many of the Aboriginal students has remained largely unchanged (Woodburn & Glanville, 2016).

The research reported in in this paper which formed the central part of the author's doctoral research was undertaken during the course of 2012 in four sites across central and western NSW. It focused on a yearlong study with forty participants, through a series of wide-ranging interviews with members of the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal education assistants, in-school Aboriginal language tutors, parents, school principals and teachers.

The primary purpose of this research pivoted on looking to understand the nature and dynamics of educational and cultural engagement between these teachers and Aboriginal people. The research sought to understand dynamics of teachers' capacity to engage in authentic community collaboration, and secondly to view if these two-way relationships influenced teachers pedagogic practices (Garcia, Aris, Murri, & Serna, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2012).

The purpose of the report

The underpinning research was undertaken in response to the chronic and largely unchanging and debilitating levels of educational underachievement among Aboriginal students (Ford, 2012; Karvelas, 2015). In this, Aboriginal student achievement in NSW schools has tended to follow national trends. Consequently, this report is situated within a broader intergenerational debate about the nature of educational disadvantage, student disengagement, and the wider issues that emanate from the socio-cultural dissonance between Aboriginal families and schools (SCRGSP, 2014; Tyler et al., 2008).

This report identifies a range of critical matters that have informed the historical context of Aboriginal schooling and identified its impact on the current educational discourse. It is clear that these issues required articulation and critique as they have been implicated in giving form to these often highly contested relationships that have adversely impacted on the education of Aboriginal students. The following looks at three overlapping and issues that proved to be critical in understanding the localised dynamics of community and school engagement. These are:

- A discussion concerning the formation of localised Aboriginal community standpoint positioning and its impact on the way in which relational interactions between Aboriginal people and schools are structured.
- The development of community and school engagement, including its impetus and impact on Aboriginal communities and teachers, and;
- The development, nature and form of the acquired professional knowledge of teachers and its impact on their understanding of the issues that relate to the needs and aspirations of

Aboriginal students and their families, and on how these beliefs and attitudes impact on teachers' everyday educational decision making.

Following these contextualised discussions, there is a brief outline of the theoretical issues that informed the research design, and a final section that outlines the key research findings and conclusions of this research.

Significance of the study

The significance of this research is that it seeks to add to the field of knowledge about the value and purpose of community and school collaboration. The research questions are based on understanding the construct of this relationship and in particular how it supports teachers in building knowledge about the particular educational, social and cultural needs of Aboriginal students. It is argued that it is critical for teachers to understand how students' family and community experiences have historically impacted on this educational experience. Consequently it is posited that only through achieving a consciousness about these matters are teachers then able to establish meaningful quality classroom experiences for all students. It is suggested that knowledge about these issues is situated within the lived experiences and local contexts of each community, and consequently its source must emanate from those who have lived these experiences. If this holds true, then schools need to find ways of linking to those who have such knowledge and to create such interactions that facilitate the sharing of this knowledge.

This proposition is predicated on a view that authentic relationships have a capacity to challenge and affect teachers' assumed knowledge about Aboriginal students and their community's historical experiences of colonisation. It is suggested that there is a significant level of socio-cultural ignorance about the localised manifestations of Aboriginal disadvantage and how this impacts on the substance and shape of interactions between Aboriginal families and schools. It is argued that genuine engagement is commensurately associated with a process of deep two-way knowledge acquisition and understanding that is essential if schools and teachers are to establish an educational environment that supports student engagement and achievement.

While on the one hand Aboriginal participants appeared sceptical about schools' interests in genuinely engaging them on matters that they identified as affecting their children's success at school, many spoke of their commitment in seeking opportunities to develop relationships with staff and to share that knowledge which they thought would provide teachers' with an insight into community histories, experiences and aspirations. There was a clear articulation within each research site that Aboriginal educators and families were keen to improve their interactions with schools if they saw that these efforts were reciprocated and that they would benefit the educational outcomes of their children. In this they are little different from other parents who have reported that their primary motivation for involvement with their child's school is to improve their engagement and academic achievement (Brunner, 1995; Timperley, 2008).

These narratives from Aboriginal people are conceptually entrenched in localised standpoint positions that were seen to explicitly affect parents' willingness to engage with schools. It is suggested that understanding how and why communities took particular actions in regards to their relationships with schools proved to be a critical element in working with teachers. These narratives of teachers and Aboriginal people speak of the potential of authentic cross-cultural collaboration in providing insight into teacher and Aboriginal family capacity to construct relationships that underpin a more robust discourse on the particular learning, cultural and educational needs of Aboriginal students.

Key Issues under investigation

Indigenous Standpoint Theory

From the late 1990s Martin Nakata (2007a, 2007b) sought to provide insight into how the everyday micro-interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are constantly being re-constructed, and how these have a potential to forge new understandings and knowledge across the racial, cultural and socio-political divide in this country. Nakata, using the social metaphor of the cultural interface, described how the complexity and discursive realities of contested histories, knowledge, ideas, beliefs and aspirations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come into play at the moment of their everyday interaction. He explains:

> In this contested space between the two knowledge systems, the cultural interface (Nakata, 1998), things are not clearly black or white, Indigenous or Western. In this space are histories, politics, economics, multiple and interconnected discourses, social practices and knowledge technologies which condition how we all come to look at the world, how we come to know and understand our changing realties in the everyday and how and what knowledge we operationalise in our daily lives (Nakata, 2007a, p. 9).

Given the explicitly contested nature of this notion, it is little wonder that the cultural interface is seen as complex, intellectually messy and multilayered. The cultural interface represents the act of engagement, of community experiences especially as they see their subjectivities constructed by and within the institutions whose role is to govern the lives of Aboriginal peoples (Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos, & Walkerdine, 2008).

These articulations, which are representative of the localised assertions of Indigenous identity, can be captured within the socio-cultural discourses that play out in the cultural interface. Nakata (2007a) argues that the very act of publically acknowledging one's Aboriginality necessitates having to experience the realities of colonialism, forcing those who do so to negotiate an identity that is rooted in resistance to the actions of colonial agents who have been given the task to control Indigenous aspirations through 'mainstream' policy that at their root seeks to assimilate Aboriginal communities (Grant, 2015).

The consequence of these interactions within cultural interface illustrates the dynamic arrangements that constantly need to be renegotiated by Aboriginal families. Within the schooling environment, families are forced to seek remediation of their, children's poor learning outcomes even though these negotiations are undertaken within a climate of contestation that is itself a legacy of each community's collective experiences of the history of underachievement, expulsion and exclusion (Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2008; Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2006; NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004).

Nakata described this critical framework as giving meaning to the expression of an Indigenous standpoint or contextually positioned perspective that is the result of these experiences of oppression. The concept of criticality is key to understanding Nakata's particular concept of standpoint which he argues sees Aboriginal people's exercise of their agentic capacity within these everyday experiences with governments and their agencies. Nakata (2007b), drawing on feminist standpoint epistemology (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 287) highlights the critical nature of this struggle in underpinning the political as well as cultural elements of Indigenous standpoint. Nakata (2007a, p. 11) writes that 'knowledge of these actions is not a product of mere observation or a disinterested perspective, but is achieved by struggling to understand one's experience through a critical stance on the social order within which knowledge is produced.'

An Indigenous standpoint is produced not as a mere reflection of experience, but as a distinct form of knowledge that is born out of the epistemic and ontological differences that represent the essence of Indigenous being (Au, 2012). Both Au and Nakata define standpoint as originating out of this conflict and the differential power that is exerted by the state over its Indigenous people. Without this capacity to resists the constancy of this oppression, Aboriginal people would see their existence absorbed by a state that has explicitly sought to constrain the ways that Indigenous people are enabled to imagine their own world and their sovereign place within it (Byrd, 2011).

The explication of an Indigenous standpoint position within each of these four communities was born from their histories and experiences of the exercise of that colonial power, of seeking to affect an understanding of how this power was exerted, and how best they could ameliorate its influence over their futures. The exercise of their standpoint empowered them to oppose this suppression, to develop a nuanced understanding of the pervasiveness of oppression, and to construct new knowledge and ways of interacting. Within the dynamic of the cultural interface, these standpoint positions are a reflective tool by which Indigenous people can both interrogate their own lived experiences (Crasnow, 2009) and simultaneously gain insight into those colonial structures that are marshalled to perpetuate their marginalisation as the Indigene (Deliovsky, 2010).

A close reading of the participant data in the research identified that each Aboriginal community had developed a standpoint position that was born out of their historical and more contemporary experiences of disadvantage, and reflective of their lived experiences of disengagement with the state. Although the participant commentary in the research helped identify that there were many

common elements of their local standpoint positions, it also distinguished both subtle along with major differences in how they viewed themselves, how they imagined these relationships could be constructed, and how these affected their receptiveness to such a potential. It was seen that these divergences in the how each community expressed their standpoint positions were closely linked to their unique discursive experiences and contexts that impacted on their efficacy to effect change - in this case with schools and their teaching staff. It was noted that successful engagement required a willingness and relational capacity in both the school and community before they were collectively empowered to challenge the erstwhile deeply embedded discourses that have characterised community resistance, school disinterest, student underachievement and deficit theorising.

Community and school engagement.

Educational jurisdictions such as the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) have increasingly been forced to acknowledge the impact of systemic underperformance of Aboriginal students. Schools in NSW have seen these failures quantified in recent external (SCRGSP, 2014)and internal government reviews (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2012). The findings of these reviews are backed by research such as reported by Partington (1998), Munns (1998) , Vass (2015) and Ford (2012), who have each evidenced the adverse impacts of poorly focused, taught, and resourced educational programs that have failed to meet the learning needs of Aboriginal students. Further, research by Andrew Martin (2006) a recent review of the Stronger Smarter project (Luke et al., 2013; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014) identified the deeply negative impact of low teacher expectations on both Aboriginal students' self efficacy and teachers' capacity or interest in addressing the particular needs of Aboriginal students (Munns et al., 2008).

It has been argued that teacher attitudes to Aboriginal students are deeply entrenched in an unpreparedness to either accommodate the diversity of community cultures, or appreciate the particular educational needs that have arisen as a result of generations of educational neglect and disadvantage (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Timperley and Robinson (2002) have argued that the beliefs of many teachers about students' educational capacity and educational aspirations have ensured that many staff are either unable or unwilling to question their impact on student achievement.

It has long been asserted that deficit theorising about particular groups of students embeds low expectations of student capacity and worthiness, and limits teacher interest and capacity (Comber & Kamler, 2004). These views, which are seen to inform key elements of teacher's educational discourse on disadvantaged students, lay largely unchallenged within schooling practices even when extraordinary educational inequalities were exposed (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). It is from this context that parents and educational leadership have sought to alter the dynamics of the educational experiences of such children, by seeking direct opportunities for parental involvement

to influence the development and delivery of education programs. It was this impetus that appeared to drive peak Aboriginal bodies such as the NSW AECG to negotiate the establishment of collaborative partnerships with educational agencies, first in 1999 (NSW AECG & NSW DET) and again a decade later (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2010). These policies have as their rationale a view on 'building' community capacity with the assertion that this collaboration positively impacts on student and parent engagement. However, though the policy is voiced as being a two-way process, little is said of the import of school deficit theorising on students, families and communities; the impact of marginalising discourses on Aboriginal students' capacities and interests; or of the implementation of long term programs that are culturally responsive to the needs of Aboriginal students.

Policy makers have drawn on the body of research on the harnessing parent support to reducing the levels of student resistance to schooling (Biddulph et al., 2003; Goos, 2004; Lonsdale, 2008; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008) to argue that schools need to do more to engage parents in affecting a change in the educational outcomes of children from disadvantaged and marginalised communities. The school and community partnership policy argues that schools that have developed participatory strategies have seen greater levels of parental support for the work of teachers and a commensurate increase in parents actively assisting their children with their schooling. These claims are attractive to many Aboriginal parents in NSW, who have awaited the promise of improvements from the 2004 Review into Aboriginal Education (NSW AECG & NSW DET), or more recent policy on school community engagement (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2010; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2008) that promised to effect system-wide change in Aboriginal education. Aboriginal parents looked to these policies to improve their capacity to actively engage with schools, to shape their children's education experiences, to support the greater inclusion of Aboriginal languages and culture into schools (Lowe & Ash, 2006) and to inform curriculum that was responsive to the needs, aspirations and experiences of their particular communities (Biddulph et al., 2003; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). However to date, these systemic changes have largely failed to materialise, with schools struggling to implement any language and cultural programs, let alone sustain systemic long term improvements in student learning outcomes (Abbott, 2014).

Yet the promise of change for both teachers and students through the establishment of community school collaboration is strongly supported in a growing body of research-based evidence (Edvantia, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Jeynes, 2010). This research suggests that active participation of parents in authentically constructed educational partnerships (Auerbach, 2011, 2012) has impacted significantly in the quality of the educational experiences of schooling for many students. The promise of these findings rings true to the oft-state aspirations Indigenous communities within Australia (COAG, 2009; Daniel, 2011; Lowe, 2011). However a countervailing commentary from diverse Aboriginal communities has highlighted a deep level of scepticism about government claims of their commitment in establishing programs that are genuine in intention and sustainable.

This has led to the question: What is it that was unique in those successful programs that made a difference in facilitating the establishment of sustainable local partnerships with Indigenous people? What is clear in this policy conundrum is the complexity of local experiences of such 'partnerships' and a history of failure on the part of schools and school systems to establish structures that facilitate genuine collaboration. This is at the same time as school systems are seen to have largely failed to substantively address issues affecting the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, or to challenge the construction of schooling and its curriculum that has the effect of marginalising parents while continuing to pursue the cultural assimilation of their children (Gray & Beresford, 2008; Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011).

Given there is now research which suggests that it is possible to construct a culturally responsive educational environment that is inclusive of the aspirations of parents and the wider Aboriginal community (Howard, Feirer, Lowe, Ziems, & Anderson, 2004)while also embedding quality learning through a culturally situated education (Gruenewald, 2003; Harrison, 2013), then the question may become: What needs to occur to facilitate authentic engagement that is genuine, cultural inclusive, purposeful and outcome focused?

Teacher professional knowledge and its impact on school decision making

Current studies of teacher education have highlighted the difficulty in effecting a change in the tacit beliefs and understandings that lie buried in a person's being. For teachers, these internalised beliefs and attitudes about students, their homes and communities become evident as they inform teachers' everyday classroom practice (Fang, 1996). The issue of teacher professional knowledge and its enduring impact on teachers' practices raises a question on how teachers' acquire their 'professional' knowledge about the lives of students whom they have never met or lived among. This finding on teacher professional development goes some way to answering the question of whether professional learning is ever able to disrupt teacher resistance to the acquisition of uncomfortable or unpalatable knowledge (Zembylas, 2016). Olsen (as cited in Richardson & Placier, 2001) found that pre-service teachers did not substantively change their beliefs and assumptions about what they conceived as 'good teaching' even when exposed to explicit instruction on what constituted effective pedagogic and student management practices. Ladwig (2010) noted in his review of curriculum and teacher change that teachers' attitudes and beliefs are in part informed by what they believe about students learning, their understanding of effective pedagogic practices, students, the subject area, and their own epistemic knowledge. This was also found by Calderhead (1996) in his study of teacher beliefs, when he noted that pre-service teachers had an established view about teaching and student learning types long before they had enrolled in any education courses. Ladwig (2010) argued that if teachers' behaviours are to change, then more durable techniques are needed to simultaneously address the issue of teacher beliefs and attitudes.

Extensive observations of systemic professional learning programs suggest that without effective professional support by school systems, the many young, inexperienced teachers appointed to remote and/or difficult-to-staff locations are unlikely to be challenged to effect the necessary change in their views about Aboriginal education. It has been argued that early career teachers in particular are ill-placed to adapt to the challenges of their appointment to unfamiliar environments (Muller, 2012). In such environments, teachers often retreat to a position of pedagogic comfort by adopting conservative, negative and/or uninformed views and beliefs about student cultures, values and their educational capacity. These findings are supported by research both here in Australia and elsewhere, with Luke (2009) and Brandon (2003) noting that newly appointed teachers demonstrated limited capacity in addressing the learning needs of students for whom they had little cultural connection or little understanding.

What is clear is that this issue is critical to our understanding of the dynamics of those schools that serve Aboriginal students. It would appear that many teachers appear epistemically and pedagogically ill equipped to meet the particular learning and cultural needs of Aboriginal students. The research reported in this study focused on one aspect of this larger issue, in seeking to identify whether teacher's professional knowledge could be influenced through genuine engagement with the Aboriginal families and/or local community members. It was this proposition that saw the development of this research.

Research question

The following questions were influenced by assumptions that were centred in the emerging policies that have looked to support schools and teachers develop an understanding of the needs and aspirations of local Aboriginal communities. This enquiry seeks to understand why many Aboriginal communities have come to see teachers as agents of an oppressive and assimilatory system that they believe has shown scant regard for the long-term needs of their children. A further element of this study has centred on comprehending the dynamics of community engagement with schools, with particular reference to their desire to effect change in teachers' professional knowledge about their historical experiences of oppression, their aspirations and cultural needs. These elements led to the development of the following research question:

- How do Aboriginal communities and schools establish and sustain authentic collaborative programs that address the long-term social, cultural and educational aspirations of Aboriginal people?

and three associated sub-questions:

- What are the educational, social, cultural and educational aspirations of Aboriginal parents and communities for Aboriginal students?

- What are the critical elements that underpin the establishment and sustainability of authentic Aboriginal parent and community, and school partnerships?
- What is the impact of authentic Aboriginal parent and community engagement with schools on teachers' professional knowledge?

Research design

This research, which used a critical Indigenous lens to investigate these questions was informed by Indigenous theorists such as Sandy Grande (2009), Russell Bishop (2012) and Linda Smith (2000). Each of these has drawn explicitly from key elements within critical theory in constructing Indigenous research methodologies that seek to challenge the exploitive experiences and positioning of Indigenous people within colonised environments. Similarly, Australian Indigenous theorists such as Martin Nakata (2007a, 2010) Karen Martin (2008), Shawn Wilson (2008) and Lester Irabinna Rigney (1997) also acknowledge the transformative potential of critical and post structural theoretical paradigms to methodologically support research that assist in bringing insight and understanding to the discursive experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Elements of these theoretical positions have informed key underpinning characteristics of this research. The critical element of this methodology was built on an understanding the intricacies of these localised and multilayered community based narratives. The complexity of this material comes from it being grounded in the narratives of individual participants that are themselves also embedded within the fluid and unique backgrounds of each community. In some cases these narratives fixed on the events of history and instances of socio-economic and political repression, while others appeared to be informed by experiences that emerged from knowledge that emanated from their connection to Country, culture and language (Morris, 1992; Short, 2003). This critical Indigenous methodology proved invaluable as it facilitated a nuanced understanding of the memory of events that deeply impacted on each community's standpoint position.

It is the histories of the communities within each research site that provide a backdrop to a deepening appreciation of the nature and form of oppression of these Aboriginal people and the actions they undertook in response. These actions were forged out of the individual and collected struggles of people as they laboured to maintain their dignity, identity and sense of being. These views, formed through the generations of their collective lived experience, provide both a focus and insight into what has been commonly referred to as the 'Aboriginal problem'. Pohlhaus (2002) suggests that these insights are not a product of mere observation or disinterested perspective on the world but are achieved by understanding one's experience through reflexive critique of the broader social order that has created these outcomes. It is this that underpins both the intellectual veracity and strength of each community's idiosyncratic standpoint position as it provided an insight to critique the responsiveness of their children's teachers and schools.

In summary, this Critical Indigenous methodology employs a critical multisite ethnography to provide insight about the participants within each site and their responses to both internal and external forces that impact their lives. Linda Smith (2000, p. 228) described this critical Indigenous methodology as a 'localised critical theory' where notions of critique, resistance, struggle and emancipation are analysed within the local context. The four distinct but intersecting principles of this methodology are:

- That the research is of and about the Indigenous experience, and fundamentally grounded in community understanding of the colonised space they inhabit with the coloniser (Porsanger, 2004).
- That the methodology rests on a relational epistemology that emanates from an encompassing Indigenous ontology that represents the worldview of Aboriginal people (Chilisa, 2012; Shawn Wilson, 2001).
- That it rests on the researcher's responsibility and interpersonal links to participant communities and families. This is underpinned by community prescribed protocols that facilitate and structure these interactions (Saunders & Hill, 2007).
- That this research is critical in its intent to not only explain the nature of the issues at hand but also find solutions that will empower all stakeholders to meet the actual needs of Aboriginal people.

The research took place in four sites in western NSW with (4) school principals, (7) teachers, (10) Aboriginal educators and community members and (2) 'Other' non-Aboriginal staff. In total 23 active participants were interviewed four times over Terms 2 – 4 in 2012. The data were analysed using a contextualised critical framework developed out of critical theory and Indigenous research literature and analysed using a coding matrix within NVivo. This electronic database was used to analyse complex matrix themes that emerged both from the literature and the participant data.

Findings

An analysis of participant narratives revealed that successful and purposeful engagement between Aboriginal people and schools is not only possible but seen to be of significant benefit to teachers and schools, and more generally to each Aboriginal community. This analysis identified the key underlying relational attributes of authentic engagement between schools and Aboriginal people. The research facilitated discussion on teacher's beliefs and attitudes and how these implicitly impacted on how they constructed their interactions with students, the choice of curriculum and their pedagogic practices. Thirdly, the findings helped to unpack the complexity of each community's engagement with their local schools and in doing so, identified a small number of noteworthy instances of authentic two-way engagement with teachers and parents that were genuine in their purpose and intent in supporting the educational aspirations and outcomes of Aboriginal students.

The data chapters within the research text iteratively explore the relational status of current and historical relationships between Aboriginal families and schools. The first of these chapters examines how the notion of Aboriginality is continually interpreted and reconstructed by teachers and schools and how these 'interpretations' have been seen by communities as being misrepresentative of their epistemic knowledge, their histories and socio-cultural aspirations. It was shown that the educative processes of schooling have minimalized Aboriginal presence, aggregated a generalised notion of 'Indigenous' knowledge within classroom discourse and supported school practices that has had the effect of denying epistemic legitimacy and cultural identity to Aboriginal students and their families.

The early analytical data chapters of the thesis positioned an understanding of the key themes that settled out of a discussion on schooling and epistemic misappropriation of Aboriginal students. This was followed with a series of detailed participant discussions that focused on each community's struggle to be heard through the exercise of agentic action that grew out of their resistance to a perceived indifference and/or opposition to schools. Parent or community resistance has been misread by these schools as either the actions of an ignorant, uncaring and/or emasculated community and not the deliberative actions of people seeking to exert whatever influence they can muster to highlight and/or affect a change in practices they saw as negatively effecting student engagement and achievement. Yet, within the backdrop of these long histories of conflict, there were moments when local discourses of collaboration were heard between Aboriginal people and a small number of teachers. In this research, these interactions were closely situated within the efforts of principals; a small handful of teachers, and parents in establishing a school based local language and cultural program.

The language workers and community members saw the opportunity this brought in that they were able to project local epistemic and ontological knowledge into the classroom through these programs. Further, their establishment was seen to directly impact teaching staff as they were both exposed to this knowledge, and witnessed its powerful influence on students' engagement with the school, their learning and their sense of identity. These programs were linked to community aspirations in that they legitimated their connections to Country by providing a greater clarity to their demands for cultural and ontological recognition through immersing students in a rich experience of language and culture. The establishment of these programs provided an example of a community's agency in being able to influence the schools in establishing these educational programs.

This analysis of community agency and resistance was followed with a discussion on community empowerment through the articulation of their unique standpoint positions. The analysis found that these standpoint positions were critical in understanding why and how each Aboriginal community fashioned their responses to the demands and opportunities that came out of their relationships with schools. This analysis saw how these standpoint positions underpinned these

possibilities, the form of the relationships, their function and influence on long-term success through establishing authentic community and school partnerships.

These findings, which facilitated an understanding on how these community standpoint positions were exercised in relation to their interactions with teachers and schools, also highlighted the relationship between successful engagement and explicit school and community leadership. It was seen that leadership was critical in driving those changes that were necessary to shift school and teacher practices and for programs that enhanced student engagement. The research demonstrated that both community and school leadership were foundational elements of genuine and sustained collaboration. These findings were synthesised into the four overarching conclusions. These are:

1. That these Aboriginal communities' unique histories and experiences deeply impacted on their understanding and experiences of schools and schooling. Further, that community capacity to successfully negotiate their engagement with schools is clearly linked to the exercise of their own conceptualised standpoint position. Though these standpoints were seen to be unique, complex and constantly evolving, they were also deeply rooted in each community's colonial experiences and their historical relationships with schools and teachers.

2. That there were examples within each site of teachers who demonstrated that they were interested in affecting closer relationships with Aboriginal communities. It was found that these teachers sought to develop a strong two-way relationship with Aboriginal people, and that these relationships had significant influence on their knowledge and understanding of the community in which they worked. It was seen that these interactions are highly prized within Aboriginal communities as they provide a two-way conduit and advocacy for families and students. These relationships have been shown to be instructive in unpacking the dynamics of their impact on teacher knowledge and practice.

3. A third finding which focused on the paucity of teacher knowledge about Aboriginal communities, their histories and their cultural knowledge, highlighted that teachers' had a limited understanding of the centrality of Aboriginal culture to community well-being. Evidence pointed to the importance of teachers understanding this connection, its influence on their own relationships with students and parents and their pedagogic practices.

4. A fourth key finding was the importance of schools first acknowledging and then looking to deliver local language and cultural programs that lead to real cultural and language outcomes for students. This finding reported on an apparent association between the implementation of community approved language and cultural programs, student engagement and genuine robust community and school partnerships.

These findings provided some support for the proposition that authentic engagement between Aboriginal people and schools can affect teachers' professional knowledge about Aboriginal students and their communities. The analysis developed both a nuanced understanding of how authentic and successful relationships were framed, but also of the existence of an enduring and

hard-to-shift social contestation between schools and Aboriginal communities which manifested itself in the high levels of cultural dissonance between many in these Aboriginal communities and these schools.

In summary, it was surmised that the greater the propensity for engagement, the greater the opportunity for individuals and groups to interact, and the deeper the level of engagement that took place between them. This was explained in considerable detail in the intense interactions and negotiations that occurred at cultural interface between Aboriginal parents and schools. These interactions were seen to be highly productive, personal, knowledge-focused and dynamic in the manner in which they formed and were structured and how in turn they situated the establishment of contextual, localised and self-regulated acts of engagement.

Though some community members did comment that they saw little evidence of teacher change, others spoke of their experience of witnessing deep enduring changes that occurred when teachers were able to develop subtle but enduring relationships with Aboriginal people. It was shown that there were examples in each research site that demonstrated the educative and relational potential of authentic engagement between teachers and Aboriginal people. It was clear that these relationships brought staff and community members into a relational trajectory that underpinned productive interactions and significant educative collaborations.

Conclusions

This study had as its primary purpose to identify and understand the issues surrounding the socio-cultural dissonance between schools and Aboriginal families, an issue that has come to be one of the key elements of control exerted over Indigenous people. A second issue seen to be at play within each school was its pivotal role in supporting the state's long term efforts to further the assimilation of community through curriculum and practice (McConnochie & Nolan, 2006) that continues to deny the sovereign and cultural status of Aboriginal peoples (Reynolds, 2005). This research pivoted on exploring the consequence of colonial blindness to Aboriginal peoples cultural connectedness to their Country, and the importance of this to their identity, well-being and social resilience.

Overall, the research exemplified the depth of socio-cultural dissonance and a general lack of understanding of the real and ongoing impacts of the colonising experiences on community, its consequent effect in fashioning and supporting the formation of localised standpoints and how these positions constructed community's interactions to schools. It also demonstrated that successful cultural engagement rests on its authenticity – in particular, in its conceptualisation, genuineness and cross-cultural support for its inclusion within the school. As such, the research illustrated how purposeful community and school engagement must be focused and built on trust, respect, reciprocity and cultural understanding. The research identified that the key to initiating

genuine engagement is that it is two-way in that it provides communities with a direct channel to advocate on the delivery of education to their children. Lastly, it provided evidence that authentic engagement is built on appreciating the standpoint positions of Aboriginal communities, and in understanding that these positions are uniquely developed out of their experiences and their acts of agency and resistance to their oppression. It was seen that the achievement of this understanding had a lasting impact on teachers' pedagogic practices that underpinned effective learning relationships with Aboriginal student.

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