

The impact and effects of attempts to implement leadership for reading ‘both ways’: A case study in an Indigenous school

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Abstract

A ‘both ways’ leadership model underpins the design, implementation and research phases of the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities project (PALLIC). The project was developed by Griffith University in partnership with the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) to provide support to Principals as they lead reading improvement in Indigenous schools. This paper reports on the approaches undertaken by one school located in a very remote Australian community as it begins to apply a literacy leadership learning blueprint introduced in the project. We draw on interview data from the principal, teachers and Indigenous community leaders to describe the impacts and effects associated with combining mainstream and Indigenous cultural knowledge and experiences as the foundation for meaningful literacy learning programmes for Indigenous children. In so doing, we offer some commentary on the merit of the blueprint as a way to connect leadership work with the improvement of student learning.

Keywords: *Leadership capacity building; partnerships; Indigenous communities; conditions for learning; learning to read*

Introduction

This article focuses on a leadership development programme ‘Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities’ (referred to as PALLIC). This programme is deliberate in its intent to create a leadership partnership between school professionals and local Indigenous people for the purpose of student reading improvement. The term ‘*both ways leadership*’ is used in order to explore the notion that for schools in Indigenous communities, leadership actions ought to emanate from two directions, the school and the community, rather than just from the school. The article begins with a literature review providing the rationale for our approach to leadership. This review covers leadership for learning in a general sense and then specifically for Indigenous Communities as ‘both ways’ leadership. This is followed by the Leadership for Learning Blueprint (Dempster, 2009) which underpins the PALLIC project. Next we present one of the PALLIC schools as a case study to discuss the extent to which this blueprint with its ‘unique’ leadership partnership impacts on leadership and learning practice inside and outside the school as well as on reading improvement. Then we discuss the case study findings against the literature to explore issues of building leadership capacity, partnerships and overall effects on children learning to read. It is recognised from the outset that this is very challenging work. We now turn to the literature base which informs our study.

Literature review: Leadership for learning

There has been a steady flow of empirical research on leadership and its connection to student learning over many years (Day & Sammons, 2013; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). Hallinger (2011) provides a comprehensive review of 40 years of empirical research on the topic but in doing so indicates that more attention is necessary in “respect to linking leadership practices to different contexts” (p. 135). This need to understand leadership in particular contexts has been taken up by Day et al. (2010) through their study of patterns of leadership across high improvement schools. However, literature linked to the context of leadership in Indigenous settings is less visible.

The need to view leadership for learning work as belonging to a wider group of leaders, not just the principal, is a key message in the work of Day et al. (2010) and Bishop, O’Sullivan and Berryman (2010). This is particularly important in contexts where there is a high turnover of school leaders because schools become vulnerable with the frequency of change in school principals. However, Day et al. make no mention of leadership needing to involve community leaders.

Furthering the need for leadership actions to move beyond principals, Lovett (2009, p. 20) poses three questions:

- To what extent do parent and teacher relationships with children promote or inhibit their education?
- To what extent do home-school partnerships foster student learning?
- In what ways does the school’s community enable its children to learn?

Bishop and Glynn (1999) suggest shared leadership necessitates finding common ground with partners retaining their identities yet being able to bring what they know to share with others. In this way, the ideas of both teachers and parents can be respected and valued and expertise shared.

Hallinger (2011) maintains more work is needed to uncover the “conditions which have bearing on whether and how to share leadership” (p. 136). Southworth (2009) advocates the importance of leaders modelling, monitoring and using dialogue to show their concern for improving students’ life chances through learning. Such a distributed and relational agenda is what the PALLIC programme attempts to satisfy, with its Leadership for Learning Blueprint highlighting the conditions and strategies required by schools if they are to work as leadership partners with their communities to raise student achievement. Trust is a key element of distributed leadership (Bishop, O’Sullivan, & Berryman, 2010; Day et al., 2010). Trust encompasses interpersonal respect, personal regard for others, role competence and personal integrity, all of which need to be realised and supported rather than left to chance.

To summarise, leadership for learning refers to leadership activities across a range of dimensions that directly or indirectly influence learning outcomes for students.

We now move our leadership literature review to the context of Indigenous environments to argue the need for leadership ‘both ways’. We respond to the notion that leaders can be found and nurtured in the community to support the school and children’s learning at home as well as at school.

‘Both ways’ leadership

The concept of ‘both ways’ leadership was first articulated in research with Indigenous community members (Taylor, 2003). It is based on the notion that leadership for student achievement in schools with high Indigenous enrolments must connect with and include parents and community members in decisions about their children’s education. Connections do not mean informing parents about what they can do to help their children’s learning but rather signal an invitational approach which recognises that teachers and parents have wisdom and knowledge they can share with one another for the benefit of students’ learning. The essence of ‘*both ways’ leadership*’ is the creation of an *intercultural* space, where both cultures (home and school) are linked, listening and learning from each other. Frawley and Fasoli (2012) suggest:

Indigenous education should be viewed as an intercultural system that functions well when there is respect and appreciation for different cultures and when they are allowed to flourish with creativity and dignity. (p. 310)

Attention to the frequency and quality of culturally responsive conversations matters if Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are to understand each others’ cultural knowledge. Taylor (2003) describes an intercultural space as one in which two distinct cultures meet, retain their distinctive integrity and difference yet blend together. Priest, King, Nangala, Nungurrayi Brown and Nangala (2008) add to Taylor’s definition saying: “An ideal ‘both ways’ environment places equal value and respect on *quality practices* from both ... Non-Aboriginal and ... Aboriginal cultures” (p. 118).

Concern for equal value counters the unconscious dominance of mainstream culture. ‘Both ways’ is an anti-mainstream approach which indicates a sharing of power, information and leadership between the two, and *not*, as McConvell (2000) argues, coming one way from the *whitefella* to the *blackfella*. Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White (1992) offer a visual metaphor which reinforces the co-creation of the new space “where a river of water from the sea [one cultural knowledge] and a river of water from the land [another cultural knowledge] mutually engulf each other as they flow together into a common lagoon and become one” (p. 158).

Furthermore, Frawley and Fasoli (2012) argue that “educational leaders who continually move and interact within intercultural educational spaces have the opportunity to create the openings for real engagement and dialogue between and among educators, community members, parents, children and educational administrators” (p. 317).

New Zealand research reported by Berryman and Bateman (2008) also features discussion of an anti-mainstream approach. They suggest space, boundaries and time are issues to consider when seeking to establish effective partnerships between mainstream and Indigenous cultures so that each is valued. They maintain space is about “clarifying the terms under which the parties come together and engage” (p. 26). Understanding boundaries “requires ongoing attention to the distinctions between groups ... [and] appreciation of these distinctions enables mutually respected boundaries to be defined without pretence” (p. 26) establishing the respectful platform which is needed for relationships to be built and engagements emerge. The issue of time is about “allocating, taking or expanding time in order to ensure that important processes are acknowledged, completed properly, and accorded the time that they deserve” (p. 26). To this end, they advocate meetings which follow Indigenous cultural protocols or ways of engagement to create the space for conversations about how best to work together to enhance children’s learning.

To summarise, ‘both ways’ leadership is a hybrid form of leadership which values both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural knowledge based on reciprocity. The next section introduces the PALLIC blueprint.

The PALLIC Leadership for Learning Blueprint

Eight dimensions of the PALLIC blueprint (Figure 1) were drawn from selected research literature (Leithwood et al., 2006; MacBeath & Dempster, 2009; Masters, 2009; Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008; Robinson, 2007). Together they signal actions which are required to ensure students learn and achieve at school. We contend they are just as applicable when working with Indigenous communities as they are in other settings. The crucial difference lies in understanding how they can be applied ‘both ways’ in an intercultural space.

The core of the framework concerns the moral purpose of schooling, bringing to the fore the need to improve student learning and performance. This is depicted as the inner ring, the prize or bull’s eye. Surrounding the inner circle are two further circles or dimensions. These signify the need for a strong evidence base to drive professional conversations about learning. The project calls such conversations ‘disciplined dialogue’, indicating a preference for a structured and deliberate format to ensure that conversations relate specifically to the moral purpose of schooling. The remaining dimensions spring out from this central core indicating the areas for which professional conversations are needed to progress children’s learning. The top position is given to the dimension of active participation in professional development for teachers, principal and Indigenous Leadership Partners. The next dimension relates to the conditions which support that learning, enabling relationships to be reciprocal, learner-to-learner, trusting and respectful.

MacBeath and Dempster (2009) argue that attention to the conditions supporting learning matters and requires celebration, persistence, patience and regular review. The curriculum and teaching focus recognises the need for conversations around curriculum and teaching, planning, implementation and review. Community expertise is recognised through partnerships and community involvement in the life of the school. The final dimension, leadership, emphasises a need for leadership work to be viewed and promoted as a shared activity,

Leading Learning – A Framework

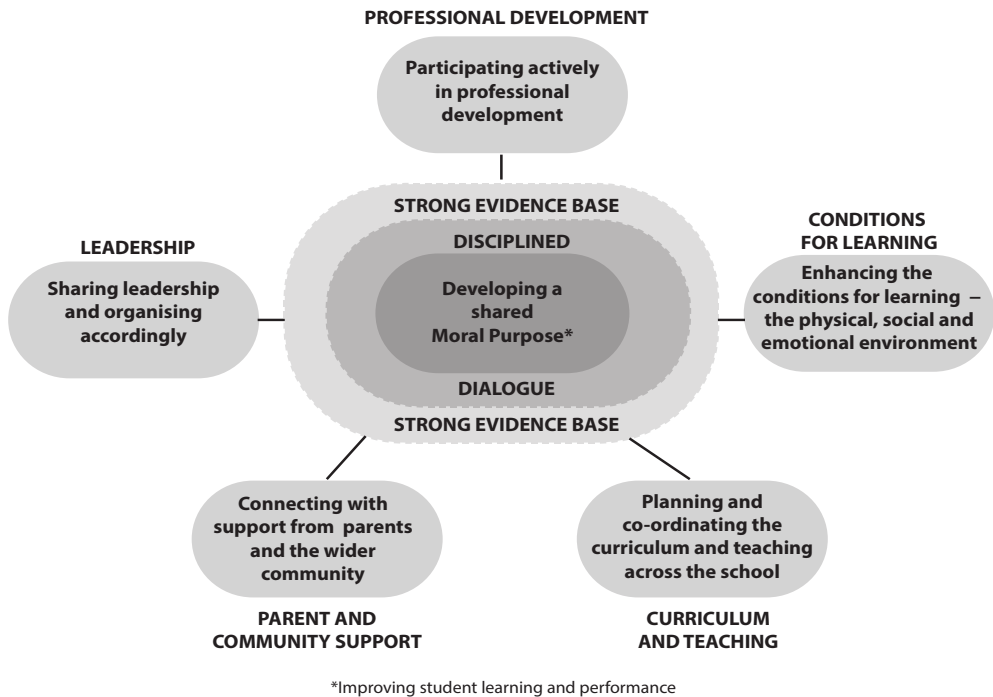


Figure 1. Leadership for literacy learning blueprint

accessible to those who have expertise and a will to make a difference to the lives of young people through learning opportunities. We now place the blueprint in the real-life context of a case study school.

The Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) project

Forty-eight schools in three Australian States and Territories participated in the project during 2011 and 2012. It consisted of a professional development programme of five modules to support a principal and two Indigenous Leadership Partners from each participating school. Module learning was followed up by leaders' learning on-the-job with on-site literacy leadership mentors. The interrelated elements of reading were referred to during the programme as the Big Six, namely: oral language; phonological awareness; phonemic awareness; fluency; vocabulary; and comprehension.

The professional development modules included exposure to the Leadership for Learning Blueprint (Dempster, 2012) to highlight the important leadership dimensions to be addressed by participants as they worked to improve student learning and performance. We feature a single case study from the PALLIC project to further the argument that the success or otherwise of leadership actions needs to be understood with the particular context in mind. We highlight the extent to which the intentions of the PALLIC project were taken up and where less-than-hoped-for effects were observed and why.

A case study school

The case study is of a remote Indigenous community school with a high staff turnover. It is one of eight schools in the PALLIC project which agreed to a site visit by two researchers. Data for this discussion are drawn from

interviews with the principal, teachers and Indigenous Leadership Partners detailing the practical actions they had taken to improve children’s reading abilities at home and school. For the purposes of the project, Indigenous Leadership Partners were defined as community members who worked with the school to enhance students’ learning and achievement. Each group of participants had a tailored set of interview questions aligned with the project’s three research questions, namely:

- What are the necessary leadership capabilities and practices to link the work of leadership teams to Indigenous student literacy learning and achievement? What works and why?
- What actions do principals and leadership teams need to take to form productive partnerships with Indigenous school-community leaders, parents and families over the teaching of reading? What works and why?
- What are the overall effects of the actions of leadership teams, parent and family partnerships on Indigenous children’s learning and achievement in reading?

The interview data are presented and discussed in relation to five of the dimensions of the blueprint (Figure 1) beginning with Parent and Community Support for learning.

Linking the interview data to the leadership blueprint dimensions

Dimension: ‘Parent and Community Support’

The blueprint’s dimension ‘Parent and Community Support’ for learning was a focus area for this case study school. The school’s principal was deliberate in her work to foster relationships with the community and gain their support. As a result, connections with parents and the wider community were reported as strengthening.

The creation of a formal Indigenous Leadership Partner position, advocated in the PALLIC project, emphasised the importance of Indigenous leaders working with the school to raise literacy achievement and supplemented the principal’s ongoing work. The designated Indigenous Leadership Partner worked at the school and in the community on matters related to children’s learning. She chaired the school’s Governing Council and was engaged in shared decision making with the principal. The value of this partnership for both the principal and the Indigenous Leadership Partners was evident in the interviews and was demonstrated in practice when we sat in the principal’s office noticing there were two desks – one for the principal and the other for Indigenous Leadership Partners. Similarly, Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) worked alongside teachers in the classrooms demonstrating parent and community support for their children and the work of the school.

The principal described the strength of the home, school and community partnership by saying:

People come to us constantly for support on matters of importance. I might have 30 community people coming in to see me about something in a day.

Likewise parents went to the principal with their ideas. The principal revealed in her interview they often said things like “*oh you should try this ... or you should do this ... or how about?*”

The parents and community members appeared comfortable and confident coming and going in the school which was a positive indicator of the principal’s flexibility and welcoming attitude. The principal told us her mission was to ensure the school was ‘a family-friendly place’ and it was. For example, a cot was set up near the administrative assistant’s desk to support this young mother to continue working after her baby was born. Further evidence of parents and families coming into the school was the informal presence of mothers and pre-school-age children reading the captions accompanying photographs of children on the walls in the school office and outside classrooms. Similarly, mothers could be found sitting in the staffroom reading picture books to their pre-schoolers. These examples show the strong connection that existed between home and school and the value

that parents placed on the school's programme. That the mothers came to the school of their own accord was a healthy indicator that they felt welcome at any time and did not have to wait for formal invitations.

To promote the family-friendly environment, the principal told us she had cautioned the teachers to be flexible and to give parents time, saying:

...things don't always happen to schedule here ... you take opportunities as they arise and moreover, until there's a really good relationship, a trusting relationship between parents and a teacher, things may not happen. People have to get to know you ... People have to know that you are really interested in their kids and their families. They have to see you out there.

This strong relationship was apparent beyond the school's gates. For example, the principal said that when staff go to the shop, "a lot of people who are sitting out the front of the shop, walk up and say 'hello' to the staff". Greeting one another was seen as an important part of relationship building. Another example was the principal's insistence that teachers walk rather than drive to school in order to maximise opportunities for informal talks with parents and children beyond the school. The following advice was offered to new staff by the principal:

If you are going to come out here you might as well get to know everyone. Don't hide in your house. You don't just have to hang out with whitefellas. Get out there. Get known. Be part of the community, learn the language, interact with people, learn how to communicate with them. Make it the best experience you possibly can because you've left your family somewhere else and the community will take you on.

Such empathy meant the parents and the children regarded the school as an integral part of their community. One illustration of this was when the children and their parents noticed the principal painting the administration block at the weekend and volunteered their help. Involvement of families in the painting created a strong sense of pride which extended into further enhancement projects (e.g. traditional art panels for the walls outside the classrooms). Similarly, major landscaping projects added to the community's pride in the school with the addition of rainwater tanks, paving, grass and gardens and security lighting. In fact, the school had the only patch of green grass in the community which was an added reason for everyone to see the school as a special place. These changes created excitement in the community and the staff believed they had a positive impact on student attendance. The principal informed us that some local women had organised an evening celebration with singing and dancing to mark the completion of the painting project, signalling their appreciation of the principal's initiative to improve the school's facilities.

The weekly assembly was held outside the shop where parents congregated. Items were displayed to show parents the progress children were making. Following assemblies, a cup of tea was provided and parents were encouraged to move to the school for an Open Reading session on the grass or in classrooms. Community members showed their support of the children's learning by sharing in celebrations of success. One initiative, to bring parents to the school's library for the library open night, had not been deemed a success due to limited attendance but it was hoped that the refurbishment of the library would work to attract more interest from the community.

In summary, the dimension 'Parent and Community Support' was realised at the school through the principal making time to value community connections. Getting parents into the school to talk with the principal and celebrate learning were first steps in the development of deeper and stronger connections between home and school to promote children's learning.

Dimension: 'Leadership'

The second of the blueprint's dimensions, 'Leadership', was evident in the way leadership was shared with the Indigenous Leadership Partner. Leadership was not just the preserve of the school's principal. The Governing

Council provided a ‘sounding board’ as well as advice around school improvement initiatives. The principal, along with the Council, was working hard to build relationships to connect the school with the community. We were told that the council was ‘a little bit disturbed that their kids were so far behind’ and wanted all children reading at age-appropriate levels. That the Council members were concerned about the children’s reading levels was evidence of the shared vision between the school and community and a positive indicator of the growing strength of the home-school and community connection.

It was clear from our interview with the principal that she saw the value of working with and through an Indigenous community member who was respected by the community. That role was described by the principal as:

She’s the Aboriginal version of me. She line manages all the AEWs [Aboriginal Education Workers] in our school, runs meetings between parents and teachers, listens to what parents are saying and lets the teacher know.

In matters of behaviour support, the Indigenous Leadership Partners typically work with the principal and parent to resolve issues. One mother, on being asked, had sat in the classroom to encourage her child to support positive behaviour. The teacher recalled asking the parent “*can you sit in this class for a while please and just, help out?*”

In the interview with teachers, mention was made of the value of the Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) in classrooms. The AEWs’ knowledge of the children’s first language was a particular asset. The teachers explained that they often missed occurrences of subtle teasing amongst the children due to their lack of knowledge of children’s first language. The AEWs were also valued for their contribution to the classroom culture and in scaffolding children’s learning. The sporadic attendance of the AEWs, however, meant that some classrooms either did not receive consistent help from their allocated AEW or did not have an AEW.

In summary, it was apparent that the community was responding favourably to strategies which created leadership opportunities for Indigenous people albeit involvement of a small number. Opportunities for shared leadership served as signals that Indigenous People’s expertise mattered to the school.

Dimension: ‘Professional Development’

The professional learning tools and resources provided for principals in the PALLIC project were used to foster teachers’ professional development. The principal was actively involved alongside teachers, and subsequently modelled ideas and teaching strategies in the classroom and provided hands-on support. The teachers recalled having a one-day workshop on the reading Big Six which had equipped them to scope the literacy content to be taught at each year level and “*develop a set cycle that just rolls on and flows on*”. They indicated appreciation of their principal’s ongoing efforts to observe and support their teaching, which was not possible with delivery from an outside presenter. They admitted that they were yet to map a learning/teaching sequence but acknowledged “*that’s probably something we should do*”. These accounts indicated a growing confidence in the Big Six, albeit acknowledging there was a lot more work to do to embed the Big Six in the school.

The dimension ‘Professional Development’ included the principal and Indigenous Leadership Partners as active learners. Both were part of the module presentations in the PALLIC programme and responsible for the follow-up work in schools to implement the Big Six. This marked another important shift because the principal and the Indigenous Leadership Partners focused on ways they could work together to raise community support for student learning.

Dimension: ‘Conditions for Learning’

The major issue the school faced was the children’s non-attendance or spasmodic attendance at school. The principal and teachers believed that if the children were to make learning gains at school, regular attendance was required. This meant the children needed to come to school regularly, come to school on time and stay at school all day. Despite parents leaving the decision whether to attend school up to children, the school had made

considerable gains in improving school attendance. One school strategy to encourage attendance was to break the school day into four sections and offer incentives for attendance. The children could then earn points towards time in the swimming pool or sports area after school. This strategy seemed to appeal to some of the children.

A second strategy involved the installation of a new sound system with speakers directed towards the community. Loud music was played in the morning to wake the children and signal school was open. An attendance and wellbeing coordinator went into the community each morning to encourage the children in the streets to come to school and to remind children of the time. Once the school day had commenced, she collected information about attendance. Absences were followed up with home visits and concerns communicated to families. A morning bus run assisted to collect students. Other strategies included the provision of breakfast for children in need and aligning the opening hours of the local shop with school opening time so that children had the opportunity to arrive fed and ready for the school day. Members of the community were also addressing the issue of school attendance by sending the children to school if they found them in the community during school time. However, the school was conscious that responsibility for attending school rested with individual children so it was with them that they concentrated most of their actions.

To sum up the progress made with the dimension ‘Conditions for Learning’, it can be said that strategies to involve parents in solving important issues such as school attendance are making a difference. There is now a *community commitment to ensure the children go to school*.

Dimension: ‘Curriculum and Teaching’

The importance of school-wide documentation to provide an anchor for class programme design, teaching, and assessment was particularly important for a school with a constant staff turnover. A strategic plan had been developed that made reading a priority and a literacy plan instigated, framed around the Big Six reading components. The literacy plan had clarified teacher expectations and was a first step in ensuring consistency in teaching approaches. A curriculum scope and sequence was being developed with established clear standards and targets for children’s achievement.

We asked teachers about the impact of the literacy plan on work in classrooms. They said:

We’re planning to improve peer benchmarking by at least one level next year ... we have a set goal for sight words the kids have learnt at each stage ... we’re trying to model reading more within the community and in the classroom ... so change the culture so the kids don’t see reading as an intrusion. It’s just something we do to develop our general skills, our English and communication skills ... We’re working on material that we can put out there, into the community, on a regular basis as something that is valued ... The plan sets minimum targets to support learning.

The Big Six was mentioned as a focus by the teachers who commented “*it reminds us to focus on these particular aspects and constitutes a well-rounded literacy programme*”. Another said, “*it includes such things as oral language that in the past have not been a focus*”.

In relation to assessment, the teachers said:

We are now testing the same thing ... The same style of tests, rather than being a hotch-potch, all over the place kind of testing. I think this gives us a bigger insight.

Teachers used the results of tests to “*inform programmes and find the learning gaps*”. One teacher explained:

We’re doing a literacy profile on each student so that, as the kids progress through the school, records will be added to and available to the next year’s teacher.

When asked how they taught reading, the teachers said “*role modelling is important*”. They sought opportunities, which included families, for reading to be modelled beyond the classroom. Reading was fostered in the community through the *Books in Homes* programme, sponsored by the local mining company. The programme provided books for children to take home and share with family members. To encourage the use of English by everyone in the community, large panels with lists of words were displayed in the school and outside the shop. Next to each English word, the phonetic spelling of a spoken word from the community’s oral first language was displayed.

Teachers admitted to a difficulty in providing appropriate texts to match children’s interests. The difficulty, they pointed out, was because “*some of the students are fifteen years old and just beginning to read and there is nothing appropriate for them to read*”. The problem of shame for these mature-aged students attempting to read material designed for the early years of schooling perpetuated avoidance behaviours which the teachers indicated was problematic.

The community and the school acknowledged the need to privilege traditional ways of learning in the school’s programme. Therefore, the staff were encouraged to accommodate traditional ways of learning in their pedagogical approaches. These included opportunities for children to watch, listen and talk with adults from the community who modelled cultural ways of doing things. Teachers identified that there was a cultural pattern amongst children of reluctance to answer direct questions, and had learnt to look for and interpret non-verbal cues and responses (head nods and eyebrow lifts) when they interacted with them. Likewise, they observed that Indigenous children were physical risk takers in their community and in their outdoor play at school but not within the classrooms. For example, children were reluctant to provide answers verbally or in written form in case the answer was wrong. If wrong, they would ‘lose face’ amongst their peers. Teachers were employing strategies to encourage risk taking. These included allowing children to use an eraser to ‘fix up mistakes’.

Cultural traditions, planned cooperatively with community members, were a central feature of the school programme. Examples of these included a dance competition, bush trips, damper making, roo (kangaroo) tail cooking, and painting. Recognition of the Indigenous setting was also noted when we encountered one teacher who was creating personalised reading material in the children’s first language based on the children’s community experiences.

All of the teachers were very aware that the language of school was not the children’s first language. In one classroom we noted the teacher had created a programme to enter the ‘pidgin sound system’ on the electronic whiteboard. We observed children working independently with this programme mimicking the sounds of their first language. Thus, the importance of maintaining both languages was being made explicit in one classroom programme and was another indicator of the growing links between home and school.

An extremely powerful message about language difference was the principal’s view that the teachers had a language deficit, not the children. She said:

We don’t have the language to bring children’s knowledge out ... we always talk about what kids bring to school but when we don’t have the language, it’s really hard to acknowledge what they bring to school and it just gets lost ... so unfortunate.

The importance of speaking the language of the community was realised by the principal who spoke their language. We could see clear gains from her ability to communicate, in terms of the community’s willingness to participate in the life of the school evidenced with her presence, reassurance and translation assistance whilst we conducted the research interviews.

Public recognition of success was a key feature of the classroom programmes. The weekly assemblies were occasions for the children to demonstrate their reading and writing abilities. Inside the classroom, children’s successes were further acknowledged on charts with stickers attached to their desks or the classroom walls to recognise achievement gains.

In summarising the impact of attention to the dimension ‘Curriculum and Teaching’, it can be said that efforts to create clarity of intent through planning and assessment documents matter. Also important are ways to invite Indigenous input into what is taught, as well as utilising cultural ways of learning. A focus on each of these dimensions has the potential to make a ‘both ways’ leadership approach an appealing mode of leading in Indigenous school communities.

Discussion

We now discuss the data gathered from the case study school alongside the literature in order to respond to the three research questions about leadership capacity building, partnerships and overall effects on the children’s learning to read outlined earlier.

Leadership capacity building

Ongoing leadership capacity building in the teaching of reading is required for principals and others in leadership roles. At the case study school, much of the work to improve Indigenous student literacy learning and development currently resides with the school principal. Unless leadership is distributed and staff and community capacity is built, the school remains dependent on the principal and vulnerable if the principal leaves. In literacy learning, Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley and Parkhill (2011) highlight the importance of principals being “openly passionate about raising students’ literacy development” and providing “tangible support for all staff, particularly in the form of whole-school professional development in literacy” (p. 61). Likewise, Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) argue that when principals engage in professional learning alongside teachers, it impacts on teachers who then see that the learning is a priority area. Fletcher et al. (2011) specify particular actions principals can take. These include monitoring achievement levels through the application of school-wide standardised assessments, and developing a school-wide environment where there is a commitment to professional learning, trust between teachers, and a focus on student achievement. The case study principal demonstrated these actions in her work but, in addition, was a visible presence in the classroom. Her visits to observe children reading, provide feedback to children and teachers alike, and to model teaching practices, supported teachers in their literacy teaching and children in their learning.

A role frequently designed to support teachers in school literacy programmes is that of the literacy coordinator. At the time of the interview, this role was vacant due to staff turnover but the principal was hoping that one staff member would agree to undertake this role the following year. It was noted that this person would need professional development to support their coaching role with other teachers. Again, this situation highlighted the leadership responsibility resting on the principal’s shoulders.

Increasing the number and capacity of Indigenous leaders in schools is also highly desirable. Skilled Indigenous leaders have the potential to maintain connections and relationships between the school and community, ensure strategies and programmes continue, and share their knowledge of what works and why when frequent staff turnover may otherwise stall initiatives. Frawley and Fasoli (2012) argued that this is important for stability, capacity building and succession planning. PALLIC’s requirement for each participating school in the project to bring one or two Indigenous community members to the professional development modules and to name them ‘Indigenous Leadership Partners’ is a start in what will require ongoing work for ‘both ways’ leadership to take hold.

Productive partnerships between home and school

Partnerships between schools and their communities are considered worthwhile (deFur, 2012; Muller & Associates, 2012; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Despite being in agreement with this intent, Auerbach (2009) laments that school principals

talk the talk of engaging parents as partners in education but in practice they typically manage parent involvement in conventional ways that support the school agenda and contain parent participation, acting as a buffer rather than a bridge to the community. (p. 10)

Referring again to a New Zealand school context, Berryman and Bateman (2008) advocate three Treaty of Waitangi principles – namely partnership, protection and participation – when thinking about ways to engage parents in students’ learning. They maintain that partnership reinforces the need to respond to issues of power sharing and decision making. The principle of protection signals the need to acknowledge and value Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical values, whilst participation provides equity of access to resources and services. Similarly these principles clearly resonate with Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Teddy’s (2009) call for sense-making and knowledge-generating processes belonging to the culture the education system marginalises.

Actions to form productive partnerships with Indigenous school communities require a concerted concentration on relationship building. In this regard, the case study principal saw community connections as vital and was willing to respond to community needs during the school day as well as initiate contacts herself or liaise with others through the Indigenous Leadership Partner. Her stance is reinforced by Lester (2011), in the context of very remote communities but not fully Indigenous Communities, who claims “relationship building may be an important precursor to success, because key stakeholders can withdraw their support and thereby block innovation” (p. 85). Therefore, the principal’s visibility and proactive involvement with the community match Auerbach’s (2009) call for “walking the walk” rather than just resorting to rhetoric (p. 25).

The principal’s actions to improve school attendance are further indicators of the commitment to improve student learning and achievement. The importance of work to combat the problem of infrequent school attendance is captured by Ehrich et al. (2010) who “attribute Indigenous students’ poor attendance and/or participation rates at school to their poor literacy outcomes” (p. 132). More telling was the research evidence which established “a positive relationship between the acquisition of phonological awareness (and early literacy skills) and the number of class sessions attended per child” (p. 146).

Creating a need to read is important if communities are to work with the school. The use of Indigenous Leadership Partners as conduits with the community is one strategy which is working, albeit in small steps. Likewise, within classrooms the small number of Aboriginal Education Workers is building the capacity of the Indigenous community to share in children’s learning of reading. Principals and Indigenous Leadership Partners will need to continue their work in boundary spanning (Timperley, 2005) to ensure that ‘both ways’ leadership develops.

Overall effects

The overall effect of the ‘both ways’ approach to leading literacy learning in the case study school, although still in its early development, is that the approach itself is affirming for the school’s community. The case study principal’s open door to the school’s community has helped to make the school a focal point in the community, a place for their children to learn and for parents and community members to contribute and celebrate achievements. Time spent ‘yarning’ with parents about how to improve their children’s literacy learning is, according to Flückiger, Diamond and Jones (2012), crucial:

[Indigenous] Children and their parents have for too long been given the ‘story line’ that ‘they’ must remain unheard and suppressed at the margins of school, unable to voice their ‘we’. (p. 54)

Instead the ‘both ways’ leadership intent is to signal that the community voice is important and to build intercultural spaces that allow dialogue to occur. Hernandez and Kose (2012) say intercultural sensitivity needs to be included in principal preparation, practice and research. The ‘both ways’ leadership approach is one way that doors can be opened to share expertise and engage in meaningful decision making about how best to help

children learn at school. Schools need to work ‘with’ not ‘on’ parents if they are to satisfy their goal of helping children learn and achieve.

Conclusion

The case study school demonstrates one way in which a ‘both ways’ approach shows how mainstream and Indigenous cultural knowledge and experiences can serve as the foundation to guide and develop meaningful literacy learning programmes. Whilst we acknowledge that the practices and actions of this school and its community are context-specific, it is hoped that they serve as illustrative examples of how a literacy leadership learning blueprint may guide more inter-culturally responsive work in schools.

The literacy leadership learning blueprint was found to provide a useful way to frame and connect leadership work with the improvement of student learning and to frame and direct discussions with teachers and Indigenous community members. We propose that the evidence to support the work being done in each of the dimensions of the blueprint should be drawn into disciplined dialogue between the school and community to identify what further actions might be deemed necessary. We argue that action on capacity building and distributing leadership across the school and community should be a priority. This is necessary to ensure that the history of the reading improvement work apparent in this case study is not lost due to staff instability. The role of Indigenous Leadership Partners as holders of this knowledge and budding experts in practice are crucial as they are likely to be the stable presence in the community.

Whilst much has been written about leadership for learning in theory, there is little written about its practice because this depends on principals applying their knowledge, thinking, education and innovation to the uniqueness of their contexts. Our case study of the challenging leadership work to improve reading outcomes in one remote Indigenous school in Australia makes a contribution to the literature on practical aspects of leadership for learning. In so doing, it responds to a call to identify how leaders and their work can make a difference to learning outcomes – ‘what works’ and ‘how it works’ in specific settings, at specific points in a ‘school improvement journey’ and across different cultures. We see this as a first step in a broader research agenda to identify how leaders and their work can continue to make a difference to learning outcomes in remote Indigenous communities.

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