

Aboriginal community perceptions and experiences of engagement with schools

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Engagement with Aboriginal communities is often claimed by governments and their institutions as the panacea for improving the lives of Aboriginal peoples, including Aboriginal student outcomes in education. This paper challenges these claims by examining Aboriginal communities' perceptions, experiences and enactments of school engagement that provide critical conditions for these improvements. In the Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project, five local Aboriginal community case studies prioritised community voices through its Aboriginal community-led committee, the Blak Caucus (BC). Community meetings were held and the accompanying research co-designed with the BC to ensure Aboriginal community protocols, accountabilities and data sovereignty featured in the research process. Data was generated from BC facilitated yarns, which were recorded, transcribed and communicated through visual maps to generate discussion within and between community participants. Four themes were constructed through thematic analysis: the importance of understanding local history and context; the criticality of clear, consistent communication; the role of shared spaces in dismantling barriers between schools and communities; and the protocols required to engage with Aboriginal communities. What became clear was that relationships, collective trust and two-way dialogue can provide promising pathways to building power-equal partnerships between New South Wales schools and Aboriginal communities.

Keywords: Aboriginal education, Aboriginal community engagement, Indigenous education, First Nations Australian families and communities, Aboriginal students, policy co-design

Introduction

The focus of this paper is understanding Aboriginal¹ communities' perceptions, experiences and enactments of school engagement to examine the key challenges for communities when engaging with schools, and how community members feel these could be addressed. This research draws on the community engagement strategy in the Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project, a multi-site whole-school reform project operating in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. These schools live within many Countries, Communities and Nations, including Cadigal from Eora Nation; Wiradjuri, meeting place of the Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi and Wailwan peoples; Barkindji and Ngiyampaa peoples living on Wiradjuri Country; Wodi Wodi of the Dharawal Nation; Nganduwal and Minyungbal of the Bundjalung Nation; and the Saltwater Aboriginal people of coastal Sydney, the descendants of whom make up the La Perouse Aboriginal Community. While a central tenet of the CNS project is deepening teachers' understanding of Aboriginal peoples, histories, cultures and communities, building respectful relationships between schools and communities is seen as the key to achieving this (Gower et al., 2021). The project is a joint endeavour involving participating communities, local New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) and a jurisdictional collaborative partnership with eight New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DoE) schools in seven urban, regional, rural and remote NSW communities. This research study is important because Aboriginal community participants designed, collaborated and led aspects of the research process to foreground Aboriginal community knowledges and expertise in the educational and cultural needs of their children.

Too often, Aboriginal community members are overlooked in decision-making at a local school level, disadvantaging Aboriginal students and limiting their success (Burgess & Lowe, 2022). The CNS model takes a localised approach to education where teachers and local Aboriginal leaders, educators and cultural mentors co-decide, design and deliver curricula to shift away from the often transactional approach to engagement by schools. To realise these aspirations, an Aboriginal Community Facilitator was employed to lead the community engagement strategy of the project by forming a working party of Aboriginal community members and cultural mentors from each community called the Blak Caucus². The Blak Caucus (BC), as described in the author positionality statement below, provides critical advice to the schools and CNS research team regarding culturally respectful, ethical and reliable protocols for working with communities. This is considered a significant aspect of the CNS project in assuring confidence in the authenticity and value of the project and is self-driven, governing and operating within a holistic and relational framework.

The CNS project aims to challenge barriers faced by Aboriginal families and communities in developing power-equal relationships with local schools regarding curricula, programs, strategies and policies. Aboriginal communities want principals and schools to integrate into the community rather than remain a separate entity. Consequently, Aboriginal peoples seek accountability for the educational experiences and outcomes of their children. This paper demonstrates that Aboriginal community engagement must be understood and practiced as continuous, community-led and relational beyond current consultative processes where power continues to lie with the institution.

¹ In this paper, we use the term Aboriginal to refer to the first Peoples, Countries and Communities of Australia. Our project is conducted across seven Aboriginal communities in New South Wales, making this the most appropriate and exact terminology to use in this paper. Where appropriate, we also use the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or name specific Aboriginal Country or language. We acknowledge that Aboriginal Countries and cultures are not a monolith and that other terms may be more appropriate in other contexts.

² The terms "our", "us" and "we" are used where relevant as the Blak Caucus is an author collective and the focus of the paper. Together, all authors are a collective of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members and researchers expressing our views about our experiences, communities and families (Lowitja Institute, 2025).

Author positionality statement

The Blak Caucus (BC) is a collective lead author on this paper and speaks from this perspective where relevant. BC members hold invaluable local knowledges in the histories, cultures, protocols and issues in, and often beyond, our local communities. Many of us recall our own and our families' negative experiences in the education system contributing to the ongoing impact and trauma of colonisation; we continue to be frustrated with an inflexible system that often dismisses or trivialises our concerns. We are passionate about the potential of education to generate opportunities for power-equal engagement with broader society and so continue in this work despite the frustrations and setbacks. As the first knowledge holders and teachers of our children, we are aware of what a quality education involves and know that some educators see our cultural ways as a weakness rather than a strength. We draw on our community strength to resist domination and redirect the power, resources and opportunities needed to fulfil our aspirations. At the time of writing, the BC included the following members in participating communities between 2021 and 2024: Aunty Barbara Simms, Deb Coe, Aunty Deb Daley, Uncle Des Barton, Aunty Gayle Ardler, Uncle Hilton Donovan, Jadah Macnamara-Phillips, Aunty Josie King, Aunty Judy Foster, Julie Welsh, Kimm Naden, Kirstin Morris, Lee-Ann Setter, Mahayla Phillips, Melissa Thorne, Minya Harris, Nathan McEwan, Ronaldal Combo, Shallan Foster, Suzi Tsanganis and Aunty Tracey Kingi.

Julie Welsh is a Gomeroi and Muruwari woman with extensive experience in community development and engagement in non-government and government agencies, universities and research projects. She is the Aboriginal Community Facilitator in CNS.

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David Coombes is a settler Australian with English, Irish and Scottish ancestry. His research and teaching focuses on First Nations self-determination in health and education. He is passionate about creating socially just and inclusive public services and institutions, including schools.

Shallan Foster is Head Teacher Aboriginal Learning and Engagement at Matraville Sports High, La Perouse Aboriginal Community member and lead in the CNS project. She is passionate about developing capacity and leadership in Aboriginal students to build genuine self-determination and governance for future generations in the La Perouse community.

Kimm Naden is a proud Gamilaroi and Wiradjuri woman, born in Coonabarabran and raised in Gilgandra. With 30 plus years of experience in education, she is passionate about supporting students to become the best version of themselves at Gilgandra High School.

Keiko Bostwick was born and raised in Puna, Hawai'i, and grew up speaking both 'Ōlelo Hawai'i and English, though she is not of Native Hawaiian descent. She has lived and worked on the unceded lands of the Gadigal/Cadigal, Bedegal/Bidjigal and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples. Trained as a quantitative researcher, her program of research has focused on the role of quantitative methodologies in Aboriginal education research.

Rose Amazan is an Afro-Caribbean woman (she/her) who lives and works on unceded Gadigal/Cadigal and Bedegal/Bidjigal Countries. With over 23 years of experience working with low-socioeconomic

students, Aboriginal communities and schools in Australia and internationally, she is committed to creating equitable and safer environments for marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

Aboriginal education in the Australian context

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to condemn the failure of educational institutions to meet their children's cultural, social and educational needs (Lowe et al., 2019). Communities call for an education system that connects their children to community cultural knowledge, respects and values Indigenous knowledges, and centres the significance of learning on, from and with Country, as well as ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children reach their academic potential in the Western system.

Efforts to decolonise Aboriginal education (Burgess & Lowe, 2022) acknowledge that schooling was designed with an assimilationist agenda which positions Aboriginal learners and communities as deficient, framed as problems to be solved or helpless dependents who need to be saved, and does not question the validity of the colonial system itself (Burgess & Lowe, 2022).

Currently, Australia's formal systems of education promote compliance with the colonial markers of success such as external assessments and rankings. Given these are constructed within a Western hegemonic framework, their very articulation is designed to protect settler privilege and power by maintaining the status quo. A key aim of the CNS project is to challenge assumptions of Western superiority and seek to deliver school reform that positions Aboriginal students' needs, aspirations and futurity as central to educational agendas where decolonising education is everybody's business.

Aboriginal parents have long argued that they can support teachers and school leaders to better understand the histories, concerns and hopes of Aboriginal communities (NSW AECG and NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). Aboriginal families know that when teachers understand local Aboriginal contexts, this fosters more productive and trusting relationships between teachers and Aboriginal students, and community collaboration and engagement can contribute to broader decolonial efforts to reform curriculum and pedagogy (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 254).

Community engagement

Sanders (2003) defines Aboriginal community engagement as "the purposeful act of interaction with schools, either as individuals and/or through local organisations for the purpose of affecting the schools' capacity to engage and support their families to navigate their children's pathway through school" (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 255). Understanding Aboriginal community engagement as an assertion of Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), or as a call for "education sovereignty" (Bishop, 2021), is critical in positioning the role of school-community engagement.

A growing body of literature (cf. Burgess et al., 2022; Gower et al., 2021; Prehn et al., 2025) supports the claim that engagement between Aboriginal communities and schools provides a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal children to achieve their educational potential. For example, when examining Aboriginal student attendance, engagement and retention in remote communities, Guenther et al. (2023) found that strong relationships between school staff and local Aboriginal community members had a positive effect on Aboriginal students' engagement with education. The strength of these relationships rested on schools' respect for and inclusion of community members and Aboriginal staff.

The importance of Aboriginal community engagement in education is now routinely emphasised by governments across Australia in reports and policies noting the key role of Aboriginal communities in lifting Aboriginal educational outcomes (Lowe et al., 2019). The Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration (Education Council, 2019) for example, states that “the development of partnerships and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will greatly improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and benefit all young Australians” (p. 6), clearly linking the act of community engagement to improved outcomes. This highlights how government efforts to engage with Aboriginal communities are based on the “taken-for-granted assumption” that such engagement will lead to higher levels of Aboriginal educational attainment (Shay & Lampert, 2022, p.53-54), but little evidence exists to make this direct cause and effect claim (Lowe et al., 2021).

However, when colonial interpretations of Aboriginal people and education form the basis of school-community engagement, these undermine genuine power-equal partnerships. Often, relatively small Aboriginal community organisations or committees, largely consisting of volunteers, struggle to push back against hegemonic education institutions, relying on goodwill as their only bargaining chip (Burgess & Lowe, 2022). More recently, governments have transferred the onus of accountability onto communities, threatening to withdraw financial and human resources if benchmarks are not met. This therefore results in a significant disconnect between policy statements and the reality of everyday Aboriginal community experiences of “engagement” with schools and other government institutions (Burgess & Lowe, 2022).

In this paper, we argue that there is a need to challenge the underlying assumptions of “common sense” understandings of Aboriginal community engagement and/or partnerships. By examining Aboriginal community engagement in education from the perspective of Aboriginal communities (i.e., as a relationship), we can better understand how to build ongoing iterative partnerships that improve Aboriginal students’ experiences of schooling.

Methodological approach

This paper draws on literature about policy co-design and collaborative governance as it can apply to Aboriginal community engagement in education.

Conceptual lens

The literature on these deliberative and collaborative forms of policy design offers insights into the need for critical awareness when seeking Aboriginal community advice, negotiating new policies or making agreements. Co-design in essence, “involves shared decision-making about the design and implementation of policy” (Dillon, 2021, p. 9). Moreover, co-design in Aboriginal policy contexts in Australia recognises ongoing Aboriginal sovereignty and rights to self-determination.

Co-design, also referred to as co-production, collaborative governance and participatory democracy, points to the following key characteristics for effective implementation (adapted from Dillon, 2021, pp. 22–23):

- Ensuring Aboriginal community members’ independence and representativeness
- Guaranteeing community freedom to debate any issue that is important to them

- Maintaining transparency around the co-design objectives and process
- Holding all parties accountable for the decisions and outcomes agreed upon
- Acknowledging and accounting for the structural power imbalances that exist
- Assurances that co-design will lead to policy actions/changes that are faithful to the decisions made.

A key risk for governments and schools is that if any negotiation process does not meet community expectations, it potentially increases Aboriginal people's distrust of schools and government institutions (Burgess & Lowe, 2022). Significantly, Shay et al. (2023) question the veracity of co-design noting a lack of evidence about "what effective codesign looks like in practice" (p. 81), and how these accountabilities will be ensured.

The Blak Caucus

As a cross-community network, the Blak Caucus (BC) continually guides and builds collective support through inclusive relationships where trust and accountability is everybody's responsibility. BC members have been creating opportunities for teachers and school leaders to engage with local Aboriginal knowledges and peoples, and to reflect on the role of trust in building power-equal relationships. In the data generation and analysis below, BC members participated in the community meetings as community members, in follow up discussions with the research team, and contributed to the construction of the themes including decision-making about the visual maps and quotes that will be used to illustrate these.

Methods and methodology

The CNS project is broadly guided by critical Indigenous methodologies (Lowe et al., 2020), an approach that simultaneously seeks to challenge and disrupt Western ideology and cultural hegemony and position Indigenous voices and community protocols as central to data generation, meaning making and knowledge production (Thorpe et al., 2025). To do this, the research questions for the CNS school-community engagement strategy are:

- What is the role of community engagement in whole-school reform projects like CNS?
- How can school-community relationships be improved from the perspective of Aboriginal communities?

As part of the wider CNS project, a series of community meetings for local Aboriginal community members was organised over 18 months, and the meetings generated data for use in this paper. In some cases, non-Aboriginal staff from the local school were invited to attend by the community (see Table 1). Communities involved in the CNS project were invited to contribute to this paper and BC authorship acknowledges members as significant educational experts and leaders in communities. BC members requested that they participate in the meetings as community members, rather than researchers on the project, so their voices could be included in the data. Thus, to mitigate against potential conflicts of interest, the facilitator at each community meeting was a BC member from another Aboriginal community. CNS researchers were invited to attend the meetings as observers and some communities

also invited members of their school executive. Three questions devised by the BC for the community meetings were as follows.

- What does community engagement mean to you?
- How do you see the relationship between the community and the school?
- How could the relationship between community and schools be improved?

Data generation

Data generation occurred in five communities: two urban, one regional, one rural and one remote community (see Table 1). Each meeting was audio recorded and transcribed using a university approved transcription service. These records were then sent to a researcher and artist, who had previously completed visual maps for the CNS project which the BC approved, to create visual maps of each community meeting. Once all meetings had been conducted, transcripts and visual maps were presented back to the BC members. The additional representation of visual data allowed community members to verify if the visual maps accurately reflected the content and sentiment of the discussions. This was a critical step for validating analysis, especially since the artist is a non-Aboriginal researcher. It was essential to ensure that the visual interpretation of the data was not only accurate but also representative of each community's priorities, values and aspirations, and of the narrative that the community members wanted to share. Table 1 below summarises the data collection process.

Table 1: Data collected in participating communities

Community	Details	Data
Redfern – Urban Cadigal of the Eora Nation Alexandria Park Community School Principal and Deputy Principal invited and attended 1 meeting	Community meetings Attendance Visual Maps	3 15 9; 10
La Perouse – Urban Saltwater Aboriginal people of coastal Sydney, the descendants of whom make up the La Perouse Aboriginal Community Matraville Sports High School Deputy Principal invited and attended 1 meeting	Community meetings Attendance Visual Maps	2 10; 17 5
Gilgandra – Rural The meeting place of the Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi and Wailwan peoples Gilgandra High School	Community meetings Attendance Visual Map	1 7 3
Tweed – Regional Nganduwal and Minyungbal of the Bundjalung Nation Tweed River High School	Community meetings Attendance Visual Maps	1 9 3
Lake Cargelligo – Remote Barkindji and Ngilyampaa peoples living on Wiradjuri Country Lake Cargelligo Central School Principal invited and attended 1 meeting	Community meetings Attendance Visual Maps	1 10 3

The process and function of the visual maps created a “dialogical space” (Zurba et al., 2018) to engage with the data in an innovative and accessible way. This provided an anchor for both vertical (within a

community group) and horizontal conversations (across the community groups) to take place. This dialogic space provides opportunities for diverse, historically marginalised voices to challenge Western interpretations, foreground the importance of relationality and reciprocity, and engage in respectful conversations (Fleuri & Fleuri, 2018). The visual maps facilitated discussions among the BC members and the research team, the BC members and their communities/schools, and, in some instances, BC members and their cultural community practices. This is what Star and Griesemer (1989) refer to as “boundary objects” – an object that facilitates communication between multiple social worlds. Additionally, the use of a boundary object such as a visual map facilitated dialogue and shared learning across the BC members and the research team. As boundary objects, the visual maps gave precedence to Indigenous-generated interpretations about school–community engagement over government policy documents, non-Indigenous teachers and researcher interpretations. This approach signals a commitment to self-determination, reciprocity and Indigenous data sovereignty.

The research project has been approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. HC200310). Substantial conversations between the research team and the BC prior to undertaking the community meetings included clarification of cultural protocols, co-design of research questions for the meetings, nominating BC members to lead the meetings and agreement that each community owned their data which would be returned following the completion of the research.

Data analysis

There were several components of the data analysis for this paper. As a first step, transcripts and audio recordings of each community meeting were analysed and synthesised by the visual artist and then converted to visual maps (examples in Findings and discussion section). These maps were circulated for review by the BC and community members who participated in community meetings. After the visual maps had been circulated, a BC meeting was convened to check, discuss and reflect on the visual maps. Review and discussion of the visual maps occurred over several meetings to ensure the findings honour and support the priorities of the BC members and their communities. This approach aligns with the Lowitja Institute’s Indigenous data governance and sovereignty protocol (2021).

Following the review and validation of transcripts and visual maps by the BC and their community members, the research team conducted a thematic analysis of the data based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) iterative approach where immersion in the data was continual and reflexive. Immersion in both the written and visual data resulted in the generation of initial codes through the lens of the research questions, collated into broad themes about the nature, current state and significance of community engagement, and then reviewed at a subsequent BC meeting.

The visual data supported Kushnir’s (2025) suggestion of “allowing for induction at the start of TA (thematic analysis) ... to capture patterns that otherwise might be missed” (p. 9), as the illustrations of enduring community perceptions and experiences of engagement with schools became clear. Themes were further refined by the research team into categories, and while noting the nuances between the diverse communities, it was agreed by the BC that the common themes across the communities should be the focus of this paper. This supports the collaborative intentions of respectful co-design in the research process, including recognition of participants as knowledge holders and active contributors to meaning making.

The themes presented below are drawn from the three research questions combined, as relational connections were made between the questions and follow up discussions.

Findings and discussion

This section discusses the findings framed by the research questions posed to each community group. Unpacking the concept of community engagement from diverse Aboriginal community perspectives became a central to understanding the complexities involved.

Aboriginal understandings about community engagement

Through discussion and analysis of the data generated across the five participating Aboriginal communities, an understanding of community engagement as an ongoing process of relationship building was revealed. When asked “What does community engagement mean to you?”, community members responded with a variety of characteristics and actions that included trust, respect, feeling comfortable, cultural safety, connecting, saying hello outside the school, understanding family dynamics, caring, acceptance and involvement, openness, transparency, and continuity. These principles or dynamics can be understood as describing the key elements for a strong and mutually satisfying relationship where community engagement is about nurturing and sustaining a relationship between the school and the local Aboriginal community.

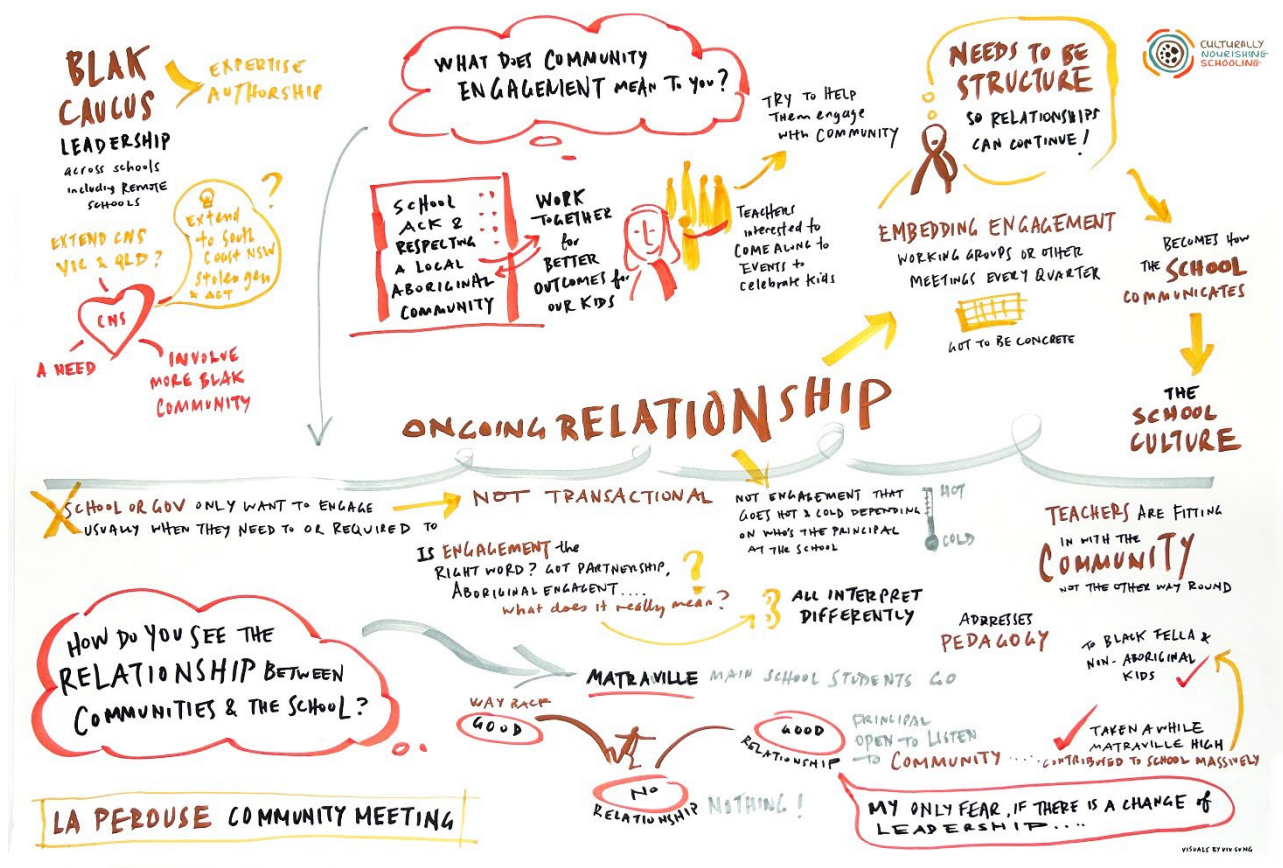
In contrast, schools and government departments tend to see Aboriginal community engagement as an exercise of “consultation” where meetings are convened for specific purposes, and the agenda controlled by schools or the Department of Education (Burgess & Lowe, 2022; Shay et al., 2023). This aligns with the predominant approach currently taken in official community engagement strategies that tend to perpetuate deficit discourses and “saviour” policy solutions (Burgess & Lowe, 2022). Such approaches, even those with seemingly good intentions such as the Commonwealth Government’s Closing the Gap strategy, continue to position Aboriginal people as “less than”. As Shay and Lampert (2022) note:

White or privileged ways of interpreting community engagement ... examine how the problem/solution of community engagement is constructed ... [and] the ways in which it produces “truth” about communities and how their relationships with schools can be imagined. (p.51)

For this paper, we use the term “community engagement” as it is used by community as a relationship-building process rather than a transaction between schools and communities. When community engagement is conceptualised as a relationship process, the potential for power-equal relationships, genuine educational co-design and the building of ongoing relationships emerges. As Odugleh-Kolev and colleagues (2024) note, “A relational perspective does not view community engagement as an isolated point of consultation solely for information-sharing but as a dynamic process of continuous relationship-building with a goal of co-production” (p. 1). When analysing the transcripts from community meetings, four themes were constructed for how the relationship between the local Aboriginal community and the school could be improved: understanding history and context, communication, shared spaces, and having agreed-upon protocols for engagement.

The LaPa Alliance meeting visual map below (Figure 1) highlights the La Perouse Aboriginal Community’s desire for ongoing, structured relationships with schools based on respect for Aboriginal community members.

Figure 1: LaPa Alliance meeting



Understanding historical and current community contexts

Community meetings tended to start with the local historical context about relationships between the community and the school. These discussions often included accounts of events or issues that contributed to ongoing distrust of the school from the community. Several community meetings talked about past government policies that actively excluded Aboriginal people from schooling, removed Aboriginal children from their homes or displaced communities from their Countries (Diplock et al., 2025). For example:

You have to think, too, up to 1972 principals still had the right to reject an Aboriginal child coming to school if there was enough racism in the community ... So, they're things that you're dealing with now. That's the history. (Cultural mentor, Gilgandra)

In this same community, more recent events highlighted an ongoing distrust of government agents more generally:

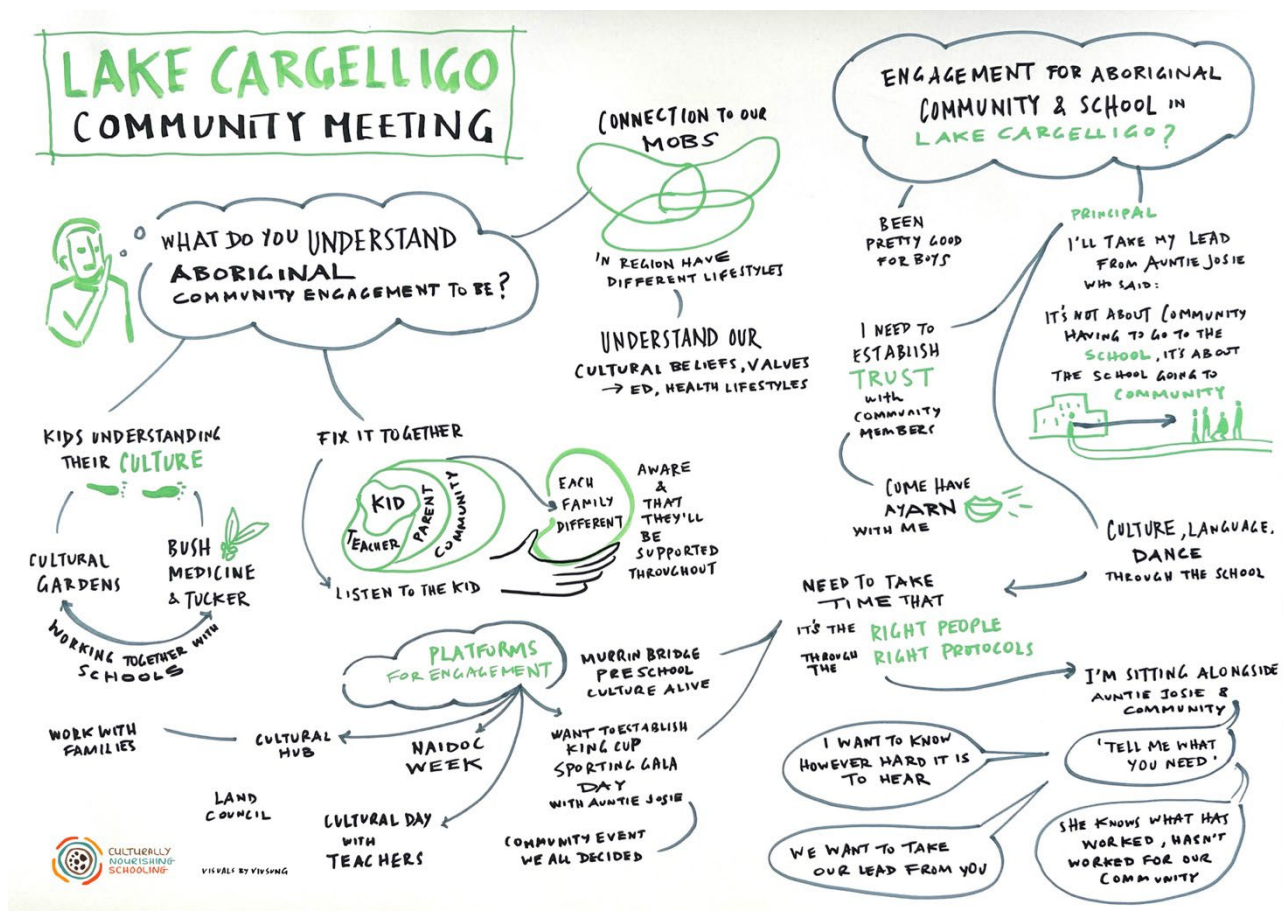
We get our children to walk around in groups so we know they're safe, the bigger ones watching the little fellas, but that's seen as a mob [i.e., a gang], and I've seen in Dubbo where the police are following the kids down the street because they're walking in a mob, but that's their little family group where the big ones have been asked to look after the little fellas ... won't be long and you'll see a few police cars. (Cultural mentor, Gilgandra)

These institutions demonstrate a deep suspicion, misunderstanding and stereotyping of Aboriginal youth warranting “special” attention. This attention can result in disastrous outcomes for these children, including early entry into the criminal justice system.

In the remote community of Lake Cargelligo (see Figure 2), people emphasised the diversity within the Aboriginal community, and the need for teachers and schools to understand the impact this has on young people and the ways their families interact with them:

There’s a lot of different connections within this region. You’ve got Barkindji, you’ve got Wiradjuri, you’ve got Ngiyampaa. Every mob has a different way of looking at their lifestyle, the way they are with their kids. (Community member, Lake Cargelligo)

Figure 2: Lake Cargelligo community meeting



Community members discussed current school contexts. Many noted that the relationships between the school and the communities have improved over time, though they are often dependent on the commitment of individual school leaders:

I've seen over the last 10 years our engagement with schools goes hot and cold, depending on who's the worker there, or who's the principal ... So it's around how do we create, like, working groups or something, where meetings are every quarter ... there needs to be structure there to allow the relationship to continue. (Community member, La Pouse)

Many communities discussed the “revolving door” of Aboriginal education programs over the years. One Lake Cargelligo community member’s statement encapsulates this sentiment, reflecting that “you’ve also seen good programs come into your communities and they work rippers, then they take it away. Why take away something that’s working?”.

Additionally, school/department decisions to introduce or discontinue Aboriginal-specific programs often occurred without community agreement, thus reducing community engagement as a simple consultative tactic at the convenience of the school.

Is there proper consultation on what we need at the schools? ... I’ve seen, over a long time, so many organisations come into our community and set up and they’re doing all this stuff for our young people, but it’s either duplicated or it’s not sustainable or it’s not even proper because we are here now still talking about it, how our young people are still suffering. (Community member, Redfern)

The community member indicates that without genuine consultation and community leadership, initiatives risk duplication and lack of sustainability, and ultimately fail to address the ongoing needs of Aboriginal young people.

The urban community of La Perouse notes that the extra-curricular programs for Aboriginal students are often a distraction from their learning, undermining Aboriginal parents’ high expectations (Sarra et al., 2020) of their children and the school.

A couple of years ago, we worked with the federal government around the Indigenous spending in our area and service delivery ... And as part of the consultation process for us, our community said, “We don’t want these programs run in school hours. From 9 to 3 our kids should be learning and focused on learning” ... The message went back to the service providers but ... the school principal at the time enjoyed the fact that kids were getting taken out and going out of school to different programs ... And parents were saying, “We send our kids from 9 to 3 to learn, not to go to an event” ... we send our kids to school to learn. (Community member, La Perouse)

The failure to act on clearly expressed community priorities reveals a disconnect between consultation and practice, signalling the importance of institutional accountability to the communities’ desire for schools to deliver a high standard of education to their children.

At regional community meeting in Tweed, community members lamented the abolition of Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness (ASSPA) committees, which operated from 1990 to 2005. In this program, Aboriginal parents decided on how funding should be spent on programs for their children, meaning that schools were accountable to Aboriginal parents.

You had a formal committee. I know my school had only a few Aboriginal kids, but we had a hundred percent [of the Aboriginal] parents come. So, we built up resources ... took kids on excursions on other Country and around our own Country, helped with kids going away for sport, lots and lots of things ... parents felt valued then more than they probably do now. So, it was more than just funding ... they knew their contribution and what they wanted was valued by the school. (Community member, Tweed)

This demonstrates that meaningful engagement results in high family and community participation, challenging deficit assumptions that Aboriginal parents are not interested in education. Significantly, the school’s recognition of the importance of cultural connections and community priorities reflects

principles of respect, reciprocity and relational accountability, creating a shared experiences of working together.

Understanding the history of the school–community relationship from an Aboriginal community perspective is critical for schools in building quality relationships with community. School leadership and policies change over time, yet the local community remains relatively constant. Understanding this is an important starting point in facilitating the next three themes.

Communication

The importance of clear, positive and structured communication between the community and the school was another theme that developed from the data when discussing how to build relationships. Community expectations of good communication were different in different contexts. For example (see Figure 3), in the rural Gilgandra, a community member noted:

There's a real communication gap ... you have to communicate in a variety of ways ... a lot of parents or grandparents can't read ... [but] everybody's on Facebook ... We just want to be culturally safe and welcomed, and if our kids are feeling that way when they come home and tell us "school's a good place", then we'll trust that and be more inclined to come in. (Community member, Gilgandra)

This comment indicates that one avenue to improved school–community communication is through their children who will let their parents know how they feel about their school. This supports relationship building between schools and communities, where "word of mouth" (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2009, p. 28) is an important factor in trust.

Figure 3: Gilgandra community meeting



In a different context (see Figure 1), a community leader outlined his idea for a permanent forum to facilitate communication for relationship building and to guarantee that it continues regardless of who is part of the forum:

You can create a forum that has people with a genuine interest, but when the people change, we want to make sure that it continues. So, whether it's like a full succession-type thing where if one principal leaves, or key people leave, they can pass it over as like a handover brief or make sure that the importance of that forum is appreciated by the incoming [personnel] ... But I think any forum needs to be genuinely designed with community because they all look different – you have different stakeholders, different interest groups. (Community member, La Pouse)

This highlights the need for sustainable and community-driven community-engagement forums that embed practices beyond individual personnel and communicate the need for succession planning and knowledge transfer adaptable to local contexts.

Moreover, communicating the purpose of meetings with parents, many of whom feel uncomfortable in a school environment due to their own experiences (Diplock et al., 2025), is highlighted as a simple, yet often overlooked, strategy for building trust.

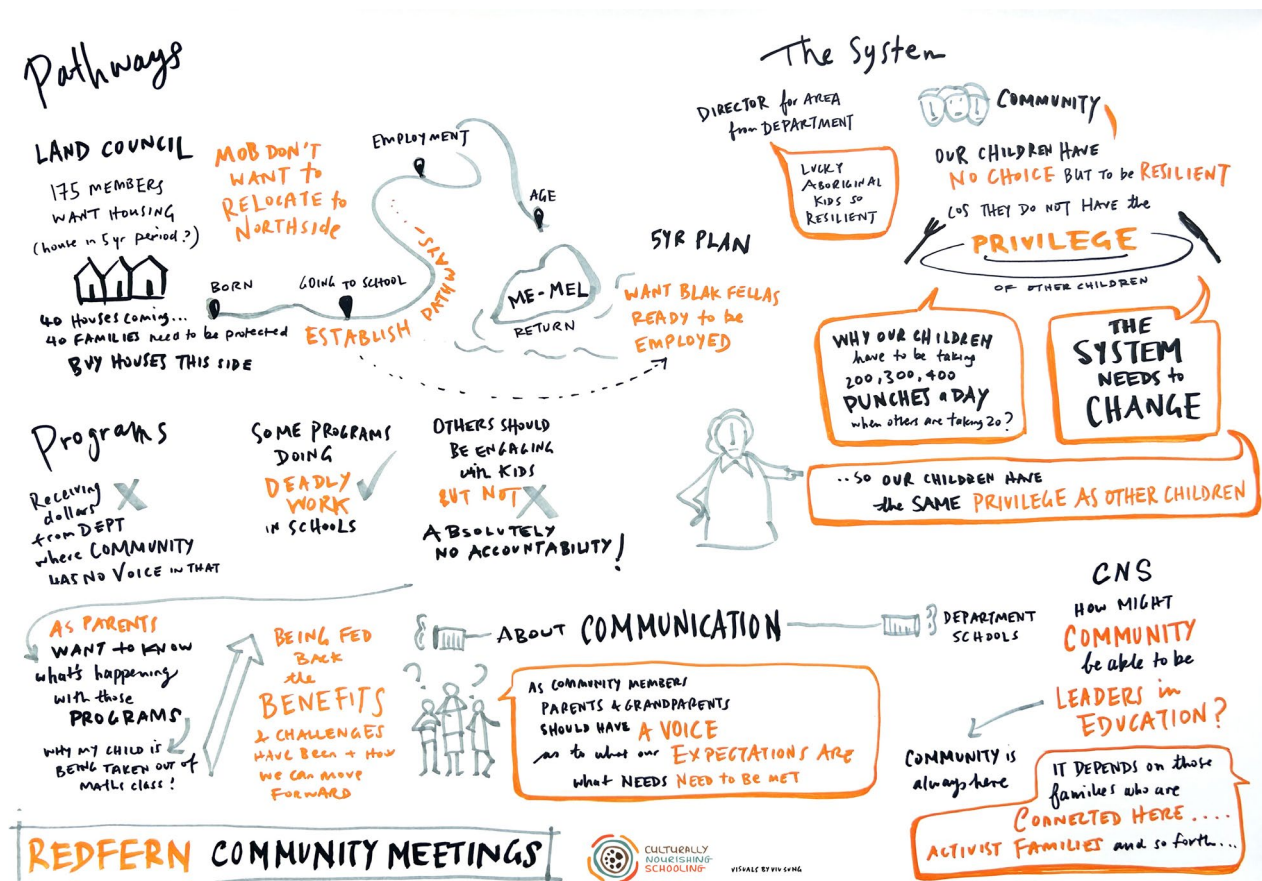
If the parents understand what the purpose of [the meeting] is, well, then they're maybe more inclined to come to the school ... Look at your clientele. Are you working with the grandparents or are you working with kids who may have been those ones who were targeted in schools? And how do you interact with those families and have that empathy to make that space a safe environment,

make it a culturally safe space for them? Take your meeting outside [the school] to build that up.
(Community member, Gilgandra)

This comment highlights the role of intergenerational relationships in Aboriginal families in communicating perceptions and experiences of schooling. This indicates a clear need for communication protocols to be context-specific and historically-informed as well as relational and affective rather than procedural.

In terms of creating a safe environment, a community member in the urban community of Redfern explains the importance of teachers listening instead of dominating the conversation, allowing Aboriginal parents and students the space to articulate their views and ideas: “You need to just say what you need to say. You don’t have to keep on talking – talk, talk, talk, talk ... because you are talking *at* our Aboriginal parents and students.” She went on to say that teachers are often “putting words in their [the students’] mouths. Like, you say, ‘Do you like sports?’. They [the students] just agree but maybe they don’t want to do sports, maybe they want to be a doctor. You’ve got to change your language” (Community member, Redfern). A common experience for Aboriginal students is where teachers limit their expectations of Aboriginal students through stereotypes such as being good at sports or arts. Not only does this limit opportunities, it alienates those students who are not good at either (Captain & Burgess, 2022), thereby undermining their self-worth and potential.

Figure 4: Redfern community meeting



The community discussions also highlighted examples of miscommunication, or an absence of communication, between schools and communities that caused, at best, misunderstandings and, at worst, increased the community's alienation from the school. For example, in Gilgandra when the new security fence and automatic locking gates were built around the school (standard practice for every public school in NSW), the community saw it as another example of how they were excluded from the schooling system.

You've got a big gate there now; how do we get into the school even if we want to? ... yes [Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO)] it's there, every school has it now, but we don't want that to be a barrier for you. From our [the school's] perspective, it's a safety issue and that's why it's there. So, it's basically not to keep the public out or the parents or the community out. It's to keep the kids in. (Community member, Gilgandra)

This sense of exclusion by the community could have been addressed in clear communication from the school about departmental policy and the opportunity used to conduct meaningful discussions about how to address this challenge, building relationships in the process.

In Redfern, a community member noted that parents did not understand how the curriculum works or the departmental policies and procedures that schools are bound by: "[We need] to talk about what actually happens in school, like the protocols of school, all the systems that we are governed by" (Cultural mentor, Redfern). This illustrates how misunderstanding through lack of communication from schools can be aggravated by parents not knowing or understanding school procedures, including how the

curriculum is constructed (Burgess et al., 2022); what might seem to be an unreasonable or discriminatory school practices may be externally imposed accountabilities. These discussions are critical between schools and communities to support relationship building, trust and reciprocity.

Shared spaces

The third theme constructed from the data is the desire to build school–community relationships through utilising shared spaces, either through school staff spending more time in community or the community being welcomed into the school. Again, the suggestions for how to share spaces were different in different contexts and were often tied to historical school–community relationships. For example, in Gilgandra (see Figure 3) there were several recommendations to have more school-related events held outside of the school. Community members noted that the current sign-in procedures at the school make them feel like they are being monitored, something they feel still happens in their community. Outside school activities are often desirable for Aboriginal families to allow them to bypass procedures that make community members feel scrutinised, consequently contributing to the broader experience of distrust.

Because that happens in shops and everything ... even though he's a teacher and I've got my certificate, it doesn't make any difference. If I go in the shop I will be watched around the shop and probably followed as well. So that sort of thing. The kids are getting that in the community as well. And then at school. (Community member, Gilgandra)

Since the school does not feel like a welcoming or safe place for many Aboriginal community members, they recommended holding school events *outside* of school grounds. Community members also suggested displaying students' artwork around the town to break down the artificial division between school and community spaces.

La Perouse highlighted the importance of sharing space both inside the school grounds and in the community. They stated that it would be helpful for the school to be more actively involved with community events and that they would like to see the community have a permanent presence in the school. In contrast, Tweed (see Figure 5) and Lake Cargelligo both made recommendations to have more in-school events that the community could join. However, they also noted that the formalities that come with the school events can deter community members from participating: "I just wonder with all the security around schools now ... whereas in the old days parents could just come through the back gate and come up and have a yarn" (Community member, Tweed).

Figure 5: Tweed Heads community meeting



Building relationships involves learning about each other, and understanding diverse perspectives and experiences through good communication. Additionally, there is a need for mutually agreeable spaces in which positive interactions can take place. By entering each other's spaces, each party gets to know the other, supporting relationship growth. Understanding what shared space looks like depends on the history of the school-community relationships.

Protocols for engagement

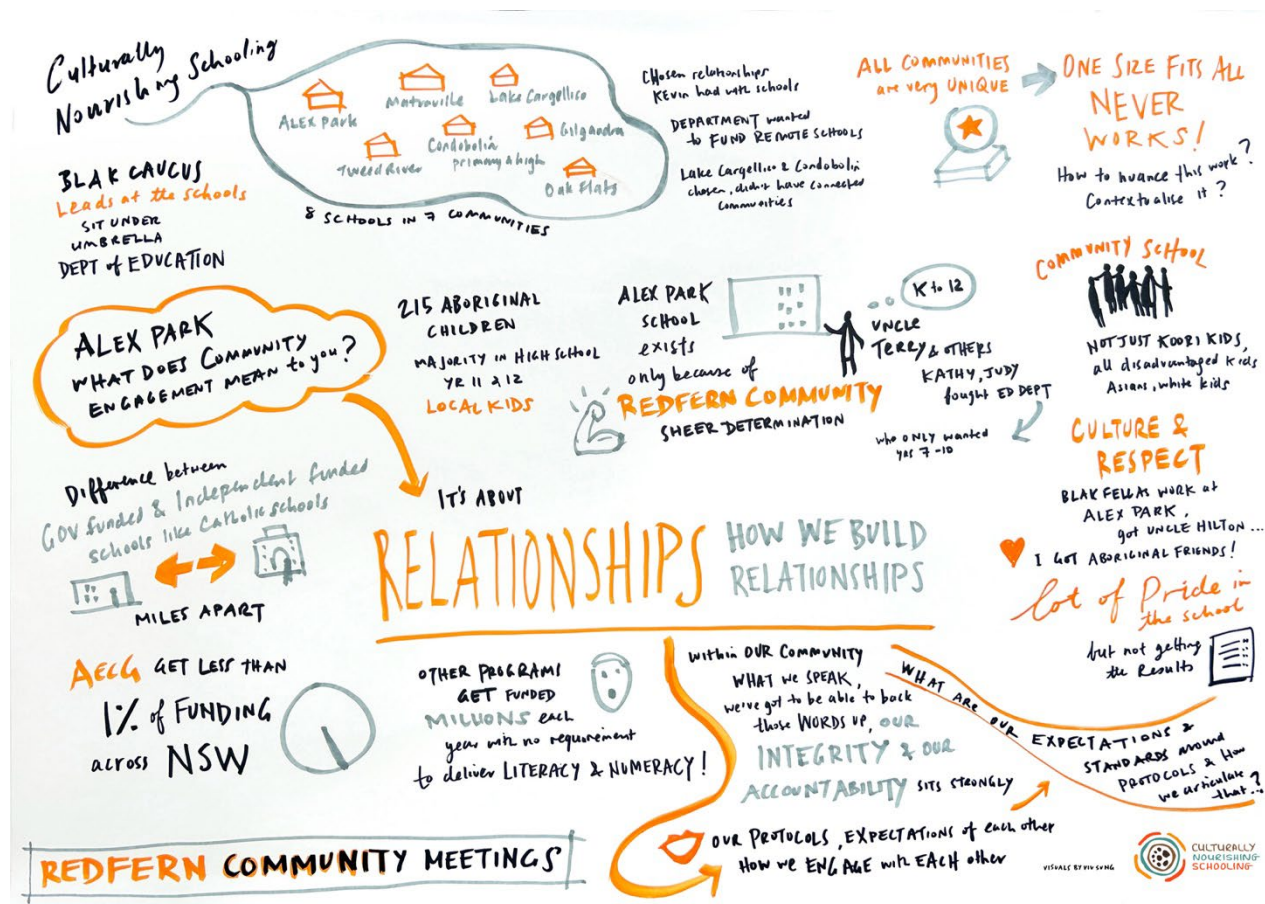
The final theme generated from the data describes community ideas around protocols for engagement in the development of sustainable relationships. This includes protocols within the community itself, as well as protocols for school engagement (see Figure 6). However, it was felt that a more substantial and mutually agreed upon set of protocols for engagement, with a foundation of mutual trust, relationships, respect and reciprocity, needs attention. Protocols were discussed and practiced at all community meetings as these are seen as critical in setting the expectations and flow of the meetings. A Redfern community member (see Figure 6) articulated the importance of protocols as follows:

As an Aboriginal worker and looking at all the deadly³ workers in this room, one of the things that we have is our protocols and how we engage with each other and what our expectations of each other are. So, our integrity and our accountability sits very strongly, within our community and what we speak, we've got to be able to back those words up. And so that's where our integrity

³ Deadly is an Aboriginal English term denoting awesome, great, excellent, etc.

comes from ... we are practising what we preach ... I'm wondering when we think about community engagement, what are our expectations and our standards around our protocols and how we can articulate that ... those standards of engagement with us as the Aboriginal community, we need to articulate that (Community member, Redfern).

Figure 6: Redfern community meeting



The notion that community members have a responsibility to set accountability standards within their own community indicates that engagement is governed by culturally specific rules and expectations, and that these protocols structure relationships, communication and decision-making in community contexts.

Another community member raised the issue of the protocol of respectful listening, noting the frustration he and others feel when trying to engage with schools:

I hear these words. I see these responses from systems. We're born with a responsibility and that responsibility is our living cultures. And when these systems are imposed, like Brother said, I suggest here that people listen actively ... my advice would be to listen. (Community member, Redfern)

Another process suggested for school-community engagement (see Figure 7) was designing a template with engagement protocols for schools that could be applied to different contexts: "That template can look any way you want it to look, you can localise it ... you make it to suit your community and your school and how it's going to work for you and your school or community" (Community member, Redfern).

Figure 7: Redfern community meeting



As communities discussed options such as micro-treaties, local service agreements, alliances and memorandums of understanding, key concerns included whether or not these would be binding and, if so, how; who the agreement would be made with, given the number of local independent Aboriginal organisations; how would this sit with the NSW AECG and DoE Partnership Agreement (2020–2030); and would it just be another process where community did most of the work and still had less say in their children's education than the school. This discussion is detailed in the LaPa Alliance meeting visual map below (Figure 8).

Figure 8: LaPa Alliance meeting



Subsequently, the notion of community engagement morphed into community leadership, and the communities noted that schools need to recognise the existing local community leadership and cultural and educational expertise. This was clearly articulated by one community member in La Perouse:

The CEO or managers of organisations in our community sit at a table together and plan “the LaPa way” within what their organisations bring to moving forward in our community. So pretty much from our visuals, key words that come out very much is leadership, community leadership, leadership within our school, the leadership that sits within the Aboriginal staff, the leadership that’s amongst our kids and the leadership that can’t be ignored, that comes through our parents. It is very much we are calling on something that is community-led, that values the actions being driven by community. So, if you look at community vision, that always comes first. And we want succession beyond the principal. And we’ve said it before—people come and go, but our community stays and we plan for our kids, their kids and their grandkids. Because we want something long-term. (Community member, La Perouse)

This highlights the community’s desire for a locally defined framework, reinforcing that governance emerges from the community context rather than being externally imposed. Significantly, shared and relational leadership and decision-making are critical for attending to sustainable, intergenerational community priorities grounded in self-determination and reciprocity.

Whatever approach each community takes, it was clear that Aboriginal people are tired of the empty promises and systemic failures, believing that if they could drive engagement with schools through a

process of agreed community-led protocols then there is a real chance of improving the educational outcomes of their children.

Conclusion

This research raised a number of interesting, complex and controversial understandings, experiences and perspectives about community views on engagement with schools. What emerged early was that communities and governments institutions have very different views about the term “engagement”. Communities see engagement as a relationship-focused process built on trust and respect compared to the general institution interpretation as a tick-a-box transactional process with a beginning and end.

Community meeting discussions about what community engagement might look like in terms of formalising school–community agreements focused on how to achieve power-equal and respectful relationships, collective trust, and genuine two-way dialogue between schools and communities. Given that power continues to rest with the institution through political, financial, cultural and economic levers, the question remains of how communities can mitigate this power to ensure they are part of decision-making processes, structures and educational futures. The issue of institutional power raises some interesting provocations for governments, if there is to be transformative change or just a continuation of the status quo:

- Is there the political, institutional and cultural will to balance power relationships between communities and schools?
- How can schools be made accountable to communities and how/who will develop the criteria for monitoring and evaluation?
- What are the consequences of continuing failure for the government, schools, and Aboriginal communities and their children?

The failure of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum indicated that significant educational gaps in the general population’s understanding of Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures still exist. As Thorpe et al. (2024) note, “The divisive debate and vilification of Indigenous Australians that preceded the referendum and resulted in a resounding ‘No’ vote, reflects the historical failure of the education system to prepare students for active and informed citizenship” (p. 205).

Given that all Australians engage in education for a good proportion of their childhood, a cohesive Aboriginal curriculum narrative K–12 framework (Burgess et al., 2022) needs to be prioritised if we are to address the challenge of ignorance, misinformation and misconceptions among the general population. Until this occurs, the status quo will be maintained, privilege will remain with the colonial systems that prop up inequalities and the goal of social justice will continue to be a distant dream.

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