

Agency and leadership by Indigenous education workers for family-school-community engagement

Greer Johnson and Bev Flückiger

Griffith University, Mt Gravatt Campus, Messines Ridge Road, Mt Gravatt, 4122, Australia,
email: g.johnson@griffith.edu.au

This paper presents a single-site case study to explicate some of the issues that relate to developing a genuine and successful role for Indigenous education workers (IEWs) especially those who reside in remote Australian communities. It draws attention to the lost opportunities for agency and leadership in culturally relevant literacy teaching with families, schools and community. The study employs a social justice framework to explore a theory of intended change resultant from the inclusion of IEWs in a professional learning coalition of school leaders, teachers, and Indigenous elders with university researchers throughout an 18-month project. This evidence of intended change focuses on the IEWs' display of agency in leading families and community in the production of culturally relevant story texts to support children's reading inside and outside school. The paper contributes to a scant body of literature highlighting the valuable work conducted by IEWs, and justifies more meaningful employment and formal leadership roles in schools and in the community. This work lays the foundation for further research involving IEWs' leadership in producing culturally relevant criteria for measuring change in children's literacy outcomes and change in family-community engagement in children's reading.

Keywords: Indigenous education workers, family-school-community engagement, positioning theory, leading literacy learning, inclusive professional learning

Introduction

The work of Indigenous education workers (henceforth IEWs) employed in remote schools and communities is central to improving education outcomes for Indigenous children in a culturally sensitive manner (Price et al., 2017). It is well documented that although the work of IEWs is complex, in that it is essential to decolonising and promoting Indigenous culture and knowledge in primary schools, it remains largely undervalued by systems and schools (Peacock & Prehn, 2019). Since the inception of the IEW role in the 1950s, the status quo has meant that Indigenous people perform low-paid contract work with opaque job descriptions centred on assisting mostly non-Indigenous school leaders and teachers to deliver standard Western curricula and manage children's behaviour. Some IEWs have described the situation as comparable to working under a "silent apartheid", whereby they are expected to attend to all matters related to Indigenous culture, inside and outside schools (Rose, 2012). This paper responds to the question, How might IEWs become more central in leading families, school and community to support literacy education in remote Indigenous communities?

We argue that, to date, the IEW role remains one of “invisible leadership”: invisible to systems and schools, but not necessarily to IEWs, Indigenous parents/families and community. IEWs have reported disappointment that their work is so often devalued with little likelihood of formal recognition and promotion (Price et al., 2017). In 2021 there remain few opportunities for IEWs to move from the periphery of involvement in core business for Indigenous education. This paper takes a single case study approach in a bid to build greater awareness of the strong capabilities of IEWs to demonstrate the untapped potential for IEWs’ agency and leadership to impact Indigenous education through engagement with Indigenous families and community. There is no intention, however, to argue that the case delivers generalisable findings. Rather, the positive findings demonstrate what might be possible in similar contexts. The case study is generated from the processes and outcomes of a recently completed university-school-family-community partnership that included community elders, school leaders, teachers and IEWs employed at three Education Queensland Indigenous state schools. All three schools engaged in an 18-month professional learning and research program, facilitated by the authors from Griffith University. The professional learning program began with off-site, face-to face workshops in Far North Queensland exploring theories and practices related to shared leadership for learning literacy through family-school-community engagement. Discussion of how these topics related to particular school practices underpinned the school’s co-design and implementation of a school-based action plan, intended to engage families, schools and community at each of the schools in supporting children’s reading in the early years. However, by the conclusion of the project, just one of the schools was at the point of showing how, when afforded opportunities for participation in an inclusive model of professional learning incorporating planning and implementing a place-based initiative, Indigenous educators demonstrated agency and leadership central in leading families, school and community to support literacy education in remote Indigenous communities.

We turn now to a brief critical overview of key national policies intent on guiding Indigenous education for better outcomes.

Australian Indigenous education policy direction

For some time, key national policy directions for Australian Indigenous education have been agreed by all jurisdictions through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood.

In his analysis of three key policy documents developed by the Australian Government during the period from 1989 to 1991, Gunstone (2013) explained that their collective focus was on addressing educational disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people (p. 76). In examining the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (DEET, 1989), the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991* (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000) and the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), he pointed out that, ironically, “Commonwealth governments have significantly contributed to this disparity between documents and outcomes in Indigenous education” (p. 79). Yet neither the Keating Labor government’s focus on symbolism, nor the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government’s efforts at practical reconciliation produced the positive changes promised by 2001.

In more recent times, the broader directions of the Indigenous policy environment are supported by more specific objectives in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), an intergovernmental agreement endorsed by COAG (2008). Also known as the Closing the Gap agenda, this is a partnership between all levels of government to work with Indigenous communities to achieve the target of closing

the gap in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people. Progress towards the Closing the Gap targets is measured by a set of indicators known as the Closing the Gap or NIRA indicators. In December 2007, COAG agreed to a partnership between all levels of government to work *with* Indigenous communities to achieve the target of closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

The most recent endorsement of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (Education Council, 2015) sustains the Education Council's commitment to disrupting Indigenous disadvantage. All education ministers commit to:

- utilising the strategy's principles and priority areas to inform the development and implementation of both local and systemic-level actions
- identifying areas where collaborative action between or across governments, in consultation with the non-government sector, is required to complement local efforts
- stating that this strategy is a living document. New national collaborative actions may emerge as priorities evolve and work is completed.

Education ministers agree that the following principles should underpin the approach taken by all education systems and providers to achieve the strategy's vision:

- **Achieve potential:** High expectations are held for, and by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
- **Equity:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are able to access the same educational opportunities and achieve the same education outcomes as other Australians.
- **Accountability:** Education systems and educators are accountable, transparent and responsive.
- **Cultural recognition:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's histories, values, languages and cultures are acknowledged and respected.
- **Relationships:** Meaningful relationships value community cultural knowledge, wisdom and expertise, and demonstrate trust and respect.
- **Partnerships:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged in decision-making, planning, delivery and evaluation of early childhood, schooling and higher education services at local, sector and national levels.
- **Local approaches:** Educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are accelerated through local approaches for unique and diverse communities.
- **Quality:** Policies, practices, programs and partnerships are inclusive of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families, and are informed by knowledge, evidence and research.

In 2018, Kefu rightly confirmed the ongoing disconnect between policy rhetoric and practice and highlighted "the need for strengthening the support mechanisms for learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in the Australian primary education system to support the

implementation of existing education policies” (p. 260). This statement begs the question about the nature of the disconnect, its degree, the perpetrators of it and the impact on Indigenous education. Despite successive attempts to legislate to improve conditions for Indigenous education, outcomes—especially those in remote communities—are lagging behind those of non-Indigenous peers Australia wide. In July 2020 the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and all Australian governments reformed the Closing the Gap agreement. A key change in this document is the move from partnership with Indigenous communities to “unprecedented responsibility, power and funding to improve health and education outcomes” driven by Indigenous communities (“Indigenous ready to take initiatives”, 2020, n.p.). This document offers the potential move from just supporting policy makers and educationalists (Kefu, 2018) to learn more about Indigenous education, to enabling the conditions for Indigenous people to agentively lead policy and practice. The 12th *Closing the Gap Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020) was disappointing in that, once again, few of the targets had been met. In response, Australia’s Prime Minister promised a new \$1 billion dollar “implementation plan” to close the gap in health, education, justice and employment by 2031. The newly appointed SNAICC (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care) – National Voice for our Children chief executive, First Nations woman Catherine Liddle, has signalled that an Indigenous perspective is key to generating and meeting targets. The 2021 National Agreement on Closing the Gap has sought to reset the targets through listening to more than 4,000 Indigenous people throughout the process of revising the 2020 targets. Many Australians agree that listening to Indigenous people in target-setting and initiatives should have happened before the original 2008 agreement was implemented.

From policy to practice

A scan of the literature for evidence-based practice intent on improving Indigenous literacy learning outcomes through the collaboration of some combination of family, schools, and community and Indigenous education workers was undertaken in several databases for peer-reviewed materials, mainly journal articles published over the last 15 years. In accord with the intent of current Indigenous policy, the scan focused on empirical research providing evidence of an emerging trend to include Indigenous people in the education of Indigenous children.

Examples of inclusive practice

From the scan of the literature, we have selected four projects that provide evidence of impact on literacy program development and implementation when Indigenous education workers take up opportunities to display agency and leadership. These projects evidence, to some extent, recent attempts to listen to and include Indigenous perspectives and practices on educating Indigenous children.

Priest and colleagues (2008) warned that too many educational initiatives take a deficit approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities: a key factor known to impede progress of schools and disenfranchised families partnering to improve children’s learning outcomes. In a deficit approach the potential learning opportunities and existing accomplishments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities are ignored in favour of imposing strategies and initiatives that aim to fix the perceived shortfalls. Beresford et al. (2012) show the need for collaboration built on open dialogue and interaction between Western mainstream values and Indigenous beliefs and worldviews.

Our review revealed four examples of programs delivered since 2008 that suggest an emerging trend in alternative, strengths-based home-school collaborations supporting Indigenous education in reading: all

have been designed to address educational disadvantage endured by Indigenous communities. Such a trend assumes that learning should be culturally responsive in that it is characterised by a genuine attempt on the part of systems to empower Indigenous families, elders and communities to have a collective voice in how, what, where and with whom their children learn from in the early years. More specifically, all four projects demonstrate instances of developing a genuine and successful role for empowering Indigenous education workers (IEWs).

First, Bridging the Gap is a long-term project that encourages Indigenous families to use a home book-reading program to support kindergarten children's reading. The project was implemented in Western Sydney by Aboriginal education assistants (AEAs) from the Indigenous Catholic Education Unit within the Catholic Schools Office, Parramatta Diocese, New South Wales, with 22 children and their families in terms 2 and 3 of their first school year. The program was developed in 2008 in partnership with AEAs and parents.

This program challenged the way Indigenous children have been taught to read at school. Each fortnight for 20 weeks, an AEA visited parents'/carers' homes and worked through the reading materials with them. An evaluation confirmed children's reading progress: "Children were involved in pre- and post-testing and at post-test, the children's mean reading age was higher than their mean chronological age, and there were increases in listening comprehension, phonemic awareness and receptive language" (Freeman & Bochner, 2008, p. 9). Especially relevant to our study is the finding that the project also had a positive impact on the role of the AEAs within the Indigenous Education Unit. The Indigenous staff were instrumental in incorporating Indigenous ways of learning in the production and implementation of reading materials that assisted literacy learning of Indigenous children in the first year at school.

Second, the 18-month Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) professional learning program for school leaders began in 2011, funded under the newly established Closing the Gap strategy (see Johnson et al., 2014). PALLIC, like its predecessor Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL), was an evidence-based approach to reading practices using the Big 6 (Konza, 2011) and the concept of leadership for learning (Leithwood et al., 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008; MacBeath & Dempster, 2009; Masters, 2009; Robinson, 2007; Robinson et al., 2009). Key features of PALLIC included an attempt to use professional learning to build capacity for school principals working with Indigenous leadership partners from the community to develop whole-school plans to strengthen "both ways" teaching of reading across 46 Indigenous primary schools in Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

A key finding from the evaluation study (Johnson et al., 2014) was that the role of the Indigenous Leadership Partner (ILP) is essential to changing the way Indigenous children experience learning to read in standard Australian English in culturally relevant ways. The evaluation suggested that more thought needs to be given to sustainable resourcing of the ILP role, so that it is officially part of the school's leadership and governance structure, with recognisable status to motivate families to input into reading initiatives and support children's reading families. Further, more time should be allocated to further develop ILPs' leadership and literacy capabilities so that any two-way initiative that the school and community decides to implement has the best chance of success inside classrooms and out into homes and community.

Third, the Parents and Learning (PaL) program aims to build capacity in Indigenous families by supporting parents to engage in the shared reading of books with their young children. Originally developed in 2001 by the Napranum Preschool PaL Group, a group of interested Indigenous parents and

the preschool director, PaL has since been implemented in a range of remote Indigenous centres across Australia.

The PaL program consists of a high-quality storybook and a related educational activity that are delivered to the home each week by tutors (parents in the community) who explain to parents/caregivers with children enrolled in the program how to use the book and activity and its connections to school learning. Children in kindergarten (3 to 4 years) start on level 1 of PaL and move on to level 2 in prep (4 to 5 years), which is their first year of school. Within PaL, parents are recognised as their child's first and most influential teacher with valued knowledge of their children's reading behaviour.

A study of PaL (Flückiger et al., 2012; Klieve & Flückiger, 2015) found that there were identifiable differences between parents and children who had participated in PaL and those who had not. These differences related to literacy progress, attendance at school, parents' engagement in literacy with their children and parents' self-reported involvement in aspects of community leadership. Mothers explained that they felt empowered when they were shown value and respect as key participants in their child's education.

A fourth program, *Creating Books in Communities*, was implemented with seven pilot communities including culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families in a remote area of Western Australia. Recently, Barratt-Pugh and Haig (2020) evaluated the program and found that the success of the project was traceable, at least in part, to the sustainable partnership model used, whereby a service provider (local library), community representative and an artist worked alongside families (mothers and children) for a sustained period to produce culturally relevant, bilingual reading books. The involvement of families and children is an important driver for the program. A key outcome of the program was changes in the participants' literacy practices, especially in the opportunities afforded for mothers and children to write and read bilingual texts together. Although the evaluators found this to be a sustainable model, further evidence of success is dependent on the ongoing capacity for library staff, local artist/s and local families, some of whom are IEWs, to sustain their input.

The four initiatives discussed above are pertinent to the project reported in this paper focused on Australian Indigenous communities, as they share a foundational vision enacted through community and professional learning programs and workshops. All initiatives aim to empower Indigenous educators, parents/carers and children to collaborate with community organisations and/or schools to create sustainable conditions for supporting children's reading.

Theoretical framing of the study

At the heart of change to improve learning outcomes for vulnerable children is a strengths-based approach to collaboration. This includes the need for systems and policy makers to be more sensitive and responsive to the cultural beliefs and child-rearing practices of Indigenous families and communities, and the need to build continuities as children transition across home, care and educational settings. The underlying cultural values and attitudes that inform child-rearing practices in Indigenous homes, however, may often be unseen and unexplained (Geia et al., 2011), so there is a need to find ways to build cross-cultural understandings as a prerequisite for policy reform. The lack of understanding about the potential incongruence between the dominant Western cultural assumptions of early childhood education settings in Australia and the cultures of Indigenous families and groups may lead to non-Indigenous educators undermining Indigenous family and culture, and to general racism in early childhood settings (Grace & Trudgett, 2012). A re-evaluation of the underlying assumptions driving

many policy-to-practice initiatives signals the need for new approaches that facilitate place-based, strengths-based understandings and reform. It also requires a critical re-evaluation of the theories underpinning what might seem to be positive initiatives.

Central to the study reported here is the arduously debated understandings of social justice in education that, in its broadest form, challenges the injustices inherent in many areas of education from the more conventional perspective of unequal distribution of resources: goods and services (Rawls, 1990). In seeking out an alternative approach to social justice applicable to educational research, Gewirtz (1998) saw the value of combining Iris Young's (1990) model of social *injustice* when people are freed from the "five faces of oppression" – exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (p. 470) – with the more familiar distributional and relational dimensions of social justice. Gewirtz (1998) reconception of social justice poses salient questions for research and practice in educational research. One question is particularly pertinent to our project. She asks, "How does education policy contribute to the promotion, respect, care and mutuality or produce powerlessness (for education workers and students)" (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 382).

We have applied Gewirtz's (1998) theory of social justice as a rationale for the processes we have taken in forming coalitions between schools, families, and communities and Indigenous education workers for educating Indigenous children in a culturally relevant manner.

We see Young's five faces of oppression as readily identifiable in the history of Australian settlement on Indigenous land and the ensuing discordant Indigenous education policy and practice to the present. At the heart of the discord is the powerlessness that Indigenous families and Indigenous education staff in remote Australian schools, in particular, have in the education of their children.

Our theoretical frame for social justice and intended change is explicated in a comparison of Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 presents the status quo in which Australian Indigenous families and Indigenous educators, who are often also family members living in their communities, currently occupy a space as "boundary spanners" (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Their work as connectors between schools and family and community is complex. On the one hand, the primary work of IEWs is to motivate a two-way exchange between families and school. However, too often their work is constrained in that "their efforts to help parents understand and navigate schools can default to assimilating them into the dominant culture norms, expectations, and behaviours, thereby inadvertently re-inscribing asymmetric power dynamics and constraining parent voice and leadership" (Ishimaru et al., 2016, p. 852).

In other words, without recognisable power and agency, IEWs risk becoming "institutional agents" that become implicit in the reproduction of inequality or social norms of schooling Indigenous children (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). The dilemma is how to empower IEWs to be central in building capacity for Indigenous family-school-community coalitions for learning to thrive.

Figure 1 displays the social injustice in that IEWs have a deep understanding of the community in which they live, yet they have little opportunity to attain formal educational qualifications and are afforded little power to decide how the children in these communities learn (Funnell, 2012). The teachers that they assist in general have limited knowledge of the community and the ways children learn, and are often new white graduates from middle-class, metropolitan backgrounds who do not intend to reside in a community for more than a few years (Hall, 2013). Within remote Indigenous communities, families and Indigenous staff often speak several Indigenous languages along with creole (Wigglesworth, 2020) and stay long-term, with deep cultural knowledge and insight in community ways of learning (Funnell, 2012).

Although many have had negative experiences themselves (Kearney et al., 2014), and disengagement from school is an on-going concern (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020; Dawes et al., 2017), they hold high expectations for their children's success at school, despite many starting with limited knowledge of Standard Australian English (SAE) (Peacock et al., 2020).

Figure 1. The status quo

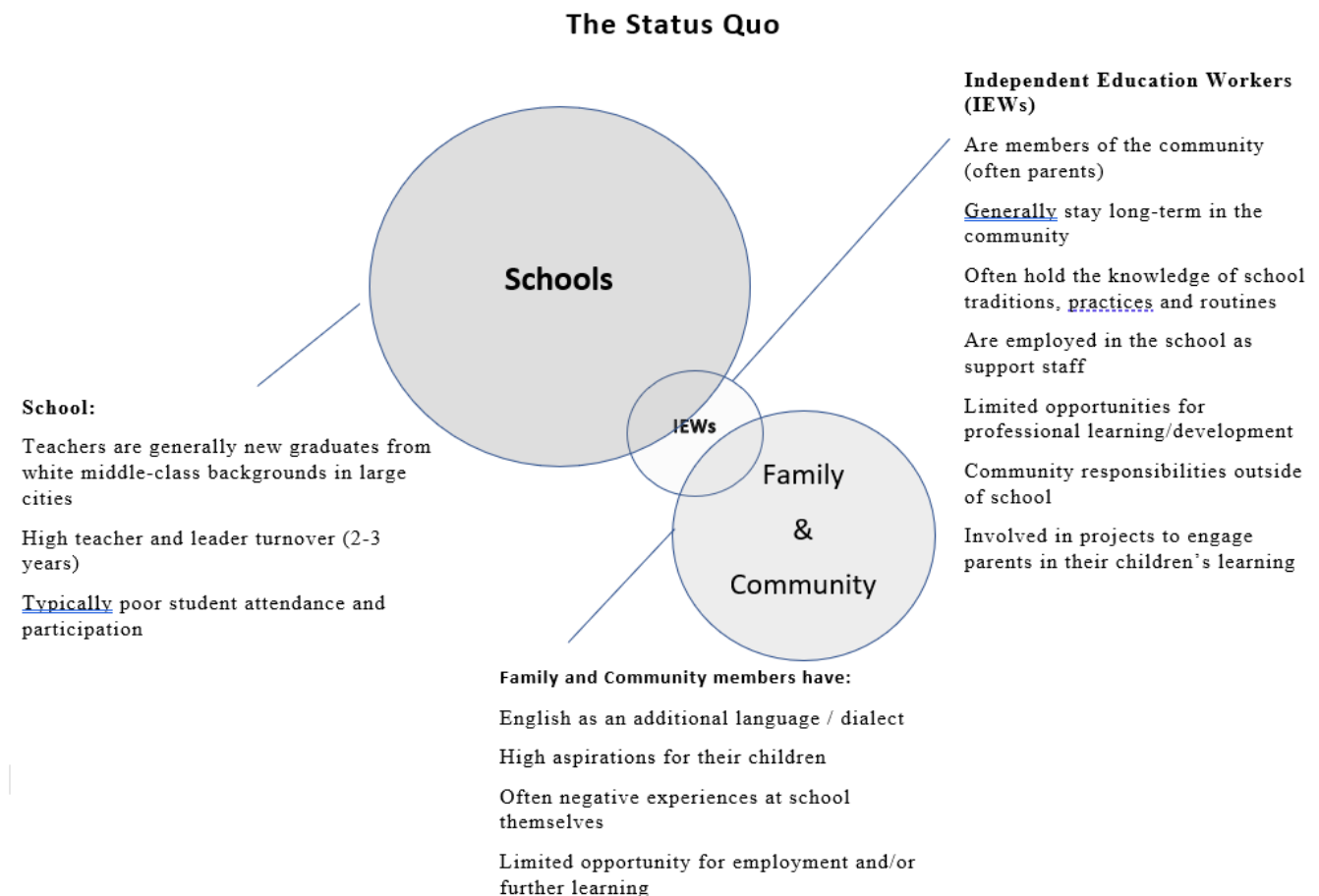


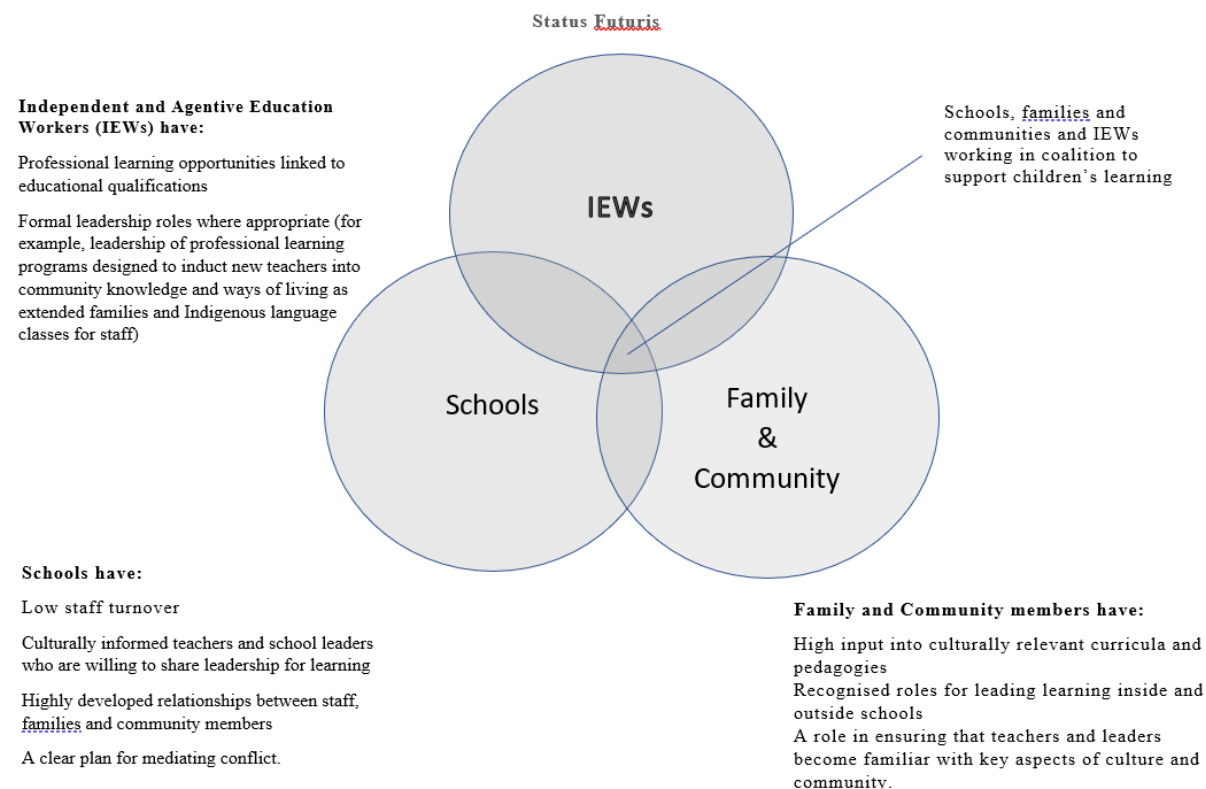
Figure 2 represents a theoretical blueprint for a social justice approach to Indigenous family-school-community engagement. The blueprint challenges the status quo and seeks to empower IEWs and families to engage on equal terms with schools. It reinterprets an imperial model (Figure 1) with more “collective, relational, or reciprocal cultural brokering approaches which [contrast] with individualistic, unilateral or unidirectional strategies” (Ishimaru et al., 2016, p. 853).

A social justice approach moves away from a deficit view of IEWs and Indigenous family engagement with schools to a strengths-based approach whereby school, families and community share their respective knowledge to work as coalitions for collective impact on children's educational outcomes. It positions IEWs, family and community members as leaders who are central to the decision-making in relation to culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy (Funnell, 2012), and promotes greater

understanding and collaboration between classroom teachers, IEWs and community, both inside and outside school (Kearney et al., 2014).

Lowe (2017) argues that dual or collaborative leadership between school and community is critical in driving the changes necessary to shift school and teacher practices and impact positively on teachers' knowledge of local culture and community. However, before this change can be realised, a vehicle for sharing respective knowledges is paramount. This project has designed an inclusive professional learning program shared by Indigenous leaders, school leaders, IEWs, teachers and community to challenge the status quo as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 2. Status futuris



Context of the study

The study was approved by the Griffith University Ethics Committee and commenced with a period of extensive consultation with the Queensland Department of Education and the Griffith University Council of Elders to determine how best to approach research in the three communities with primary schools identified by the Department of Education for the focus of the study. Two of these communities are located in remote areas of Queensland and the third in a suburb of a large regional city. It is well known that relationship building is critical in working with Indigenous communities (Hunt, 2013). Initial contact with these communities was followed by on-site visits to begin building rapport with school leaders, community members, families and IEWs.

The consultation and rapport-building phase resulted in coalitions being formed in each school comprised variously of Indigenous elders, school leaders, staff, IEWs and families who agreed to

participate in a professional learning program designed to, in the longer term, facilitate family-school-community engagement and leadership in children's reading. As many Indigenous families have English as a second or subsequent language, literacy was recognised as a barrier for some who might otherwise like to join the program. The program fostered:

1. critical reflection on the status quo of school engagement with families in the respective schools
2. sharing ideas and practices about leadership possibilities for supporting family-school-community engagement
3. planning and implementing participatory action research.

A central part of the professional learning program was for the coalitions to learn to work collaboratively and to become acquainted with the latest research in family and school community engagement and literacy learning plans. The intended outcome of the professional learning program was the coalition's co-designed action plan to engage with families to support children's reading. The cohorts were asked to plan their action initiative in response to the following questions:

- What are we going to do?
- Why are we going to do it?
- How are we going to do it?
- Who is going to do it?
- When is it going to be done?
- What will be the outcome?

The next section explores the data analysis. All names used in the analysis of data collected during the workshops are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of persons and places.

Data analysis

The professional learning program generated data from each of the three coalitions in the study. All three co-designed action plans intended to strengthen children's reading through family, school and community support. However, we take one case to analyse as it demonstrates how IEWs became more central in leading families, school and community to support literacy education in a remote Indigenous community.

More specifically, we examine the action plan and the transcription of a video record of the final professional learning workshop where the subject coalition presented their report and then invited discussion from the other two coalition members present and the researchers.

We apply two analytic methods to interpret the data as successive links in a "genre chain" (Fairclough, 2013; Johnson et al., 2005). First, we examine the action plan (see Figure 3) as a document produced by the school leader during several workshops that took place as the group of school leaders, family and community members met to analyse their data about Indigenous children's literacy and to determine the

action or initiative warranted to strengthen children's reading. In examining the document, we focus on the "roles" assigned to the actors in accordance with the nominated *action.

This analytic methodology is appropriate because it focuses attention on measuring the efficacy of the professional learning program as an appropriate process for enabling IEWs' agency and leadership roles in designing and implementing literacy resources they see as appropriate for Indigenous children. The hypothesis is that as the schools and community continue to collect data, they will be in a position to measure the relationship between the input of Indigenous staff in professional learning and the success of the literacy targets they set.

Figure 3. Action plan (with all names removed)

ACTION PLAN						
Dandaloo State School						
Aims:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To engage families and community to participate in and support literacy learning for students in the Early Years. To improve students' literacy outcomes in the Early Years. 						
Informing data:						
Early Start (Literacy Continuum), PM Benchmarks, Band Scaling, Student Attendance						
Focus:						
Student and family engagement [with the school] in reading and writing.						
*Action:						
To facilitate a process of text co-creation between students and family members, prioritising family interests, for the purpose of improving student literacy outcomes and improving support for Literacy Learning in Community.						

	What are we going to do? (Note: Please document each step in this plan using photos, drawings, etc.)	Why are we going to do it?	How are we going to do it?	Who is going to do it?	When is it going to be done?	What will be the outcome?
1	Train 4 IEWs to use the app Book Creator, and protocols around file	To build capability in IEWs and other staff to lead and facilitate	Training sessions early in the year, followed by regular catchup sessions,	Trainers (staff): Staff including, Head IEW, Head of	Start of Term 2	IEWs can articulate and demonstrate process of book co-creation

	upload and storage	book co-creation between students and families	possibly during weekly IEW training sessions	Curriculum, IT personnel Trainees 4 IEWs		
2	IEWs facilitate book co-creation session with a (sample) student from their class, and a close family member	See above	IEWs select 1 student, approach parent for permission and schedule a book co-creation session at school	Participating IEWs and staff	Mid Term 2	IEWs facilitate a book co-creation session for a student in their class
3	IEWs save and upload the book, book is edited by and published by designated person	To build a library of co-created books	Books are airdropped to a teacher iPad, then teachers upload them to a designated OneDrive / Sharepoint folder Books are printed and published through Flipsnack	Uploaders: Participating IEWs Participating teachers Designated editor/publisher Head of Curriculum IT personnel	Mid Term 2	Approx 5 x books published
4	Promote project using physical/virtual books and experiences of sample students	Promotion will attract more participants and grow the project	Posters containing Flipsnack codes placed around community Promote at school assembly, in classrooms and on the Facebook page	Teachers, IEWs, school leaders	Mid Term 2	More interest from parents and students in participating in book creation
5	IEWs repeat steps 2-3 with broader range of students				Late Term 2	
6	Gather data and feedback on project to inform next steps	Determine impact of project	Qualitative feedback Quantitative data (reading / attendance) Tracking data on access to books (downloaded)	HOC, teachers, IEWs	End Term 2	We have a robust dataset to measure project impact

The action plan includes assigned roles for four IEWs (some of whom are parents and relatives of children at the school), Indigenous elders working at the school, Head of Literacy Curriculum, Principal, teachers, and IT staff member/s. IEWs are positioned as central to leading steps 2, 3 and 5 of the plan. The IEWs, together with Indigenous elders, take teachers, children and some parents on-country as part of the project. Although the school takes charge of steps 4 and 6 (promoting the books to families and community at school and collecting evidence of change and impact of the project: children's reading, attendance at school, family reading at home), IEWs are also expected to share these tasks through interaction with community inside and outside school.

Second, we examine a transcript selected from a video-recorded, off-site, day-long workshop attended by members of the three coalitions of family, school and community participants and the researchers/authors. The purpose of the meeting, scheduled towards the end of the action plan implementation period, was to provide an opportunity for the three family-school-community coalitions to come together and present their stories of what they had accomplished, their perspectives of the enablers and constraints in progressing the action plan, and an indication of future ideas for planning a second cycle. It was generally reported by all three coalitions that progress was slowed down. A common cause was the impact of Sorry Business following several deaths in the Indigenous communities. The 45-minute/28-page transcript represents the audio track of case presentation with discussion, facilitated by a teacher-leader from Dandaloo School.

Our analytic approach is adapted from positioning theory first developed by Davies and Harrè (1990), whose contribution provided a useful way of differentiating between the concept of "role" and that of "positioning", in that the latter "helps focus attention on dynamic aspects of encounters in contrast to the way in which the use of 'role' serves to highlight static, formal and ritualistic aspects" (p. 1). They apply this form of analysis to interactional events such as conversations between individuals, paying close attention to what the actors say and do to position themselves and others, and to accept and resist positioning by others. More recent work builds on Davies and Harrè's positioning theory to develop new ways of understanding the discursive interactions of groups in a work-related activity (Clifton, 2014; Hirvonin, 2013; 2016). Hirvonin (2016), who applied the concepts to joint decision-making episodes of management board meetings, explained:

Social positioning refers to the discursive positioning among group members, whereas *task positioning* is something that occurs specifically in a small group setting as group members simultaneously position the nature and objectives of the group work itself. (pp. 1-2, emphasis added)

Our analytic aims in examining the talk-in-interaction during the presentation are to show:

- (i) How, during the presentation, the facilitator positions the Head IEW (Luella) as having expert knowledge that is integral to the "in-real-time" task of telling of a credible story about what has been achieved.
- (ii) How, within the detailed account of what happened in the past implementation of the action plan, the IEWs (Luella and colleagues) are positioned as co-leaders with school leaders, working as a coalition.

The following layered analysis supports our key finding that the IEWs are integral to leading intended change, at least in the shorter term, in working in a coalition of family, school and community in supporting Indigenous children's reading.

(i) The facilitator begins the presentation by introducing her team members who are also present at the meeting: the principal and one of the IEWs (Luella) from the school community. From the start of the presentation, Luella is positioned by the facilitator/presenter as a co-presenter on the basis that she has expert knowledge about the history and context of the school and cultural knowledge about the actions taken during the project and, therefore, would do a better job of delivering an authentic account of the work completed. Luella has lived in the community for a long time and is continuously employed by the school, whereas most other IEWs are employed on a casual basis. The presenter has held a teaching post in the school for three years. Luella's resistance to the facilitator's first attempt at positioning her to become involved in the task of co-telling the story is accepted cordially by the presenter and all others present. Luella is left to decide.

Facilitator: We're [the principal, Luella an IEW, and Edna, a head of literacy] from Dandaloo State School. I don't know if, Luella, you want to talk a little bit about the school. You've obviously been there the longest.

Luella: [No].

Facilitator: No? [laughs and continues to describe the school]

Subsequent attempts at similar positioning throughout the presentation become increasingly successful as the facilitator continues gently to position Luella as a knowledgeable colleague from whom she seeks clarification on various topics. Each time this happens, Luella accepts the positioning either by validating what the presenter asks in a one-word agreement ("yeah") or, finally, by adding a longer commentary. After telling the story of the school context, the facilitator moves on to explain the focus of their project.

Facilitator: So basically, our community project [as set out in the action plan] was to facilitate a process of a text [book] co-creation between students and family members.

One of the books produced is about gathering honey, referred to as "sugarbagging". When the facilitator is asked by someone at the presentation to explain what is meant by the term "sugarbag", she asks Luella to respond. In her lengthy response, Luella then positions herself as a cultural knowledge expert on gathering bush tucker, using a photo of the excursion that shows an elder explaining the sugarbagging process to the children.

Female 1: What do you mean, how they find the sugarbag?

Facilitator: So they ...

Luella: Sugarbag is [honey].

Facilitator: You'll [addressing Luella in a very friendly manner] know more than me. I'll probably mess it up if I tell it [laughs].

Female 1: Sugarbag to me is a bag ...

Female 2: Yeah.

Facilitator: Okay.

Luella: Honey.

Facilitator: Honey.

Luella: It's honey. Honey in the tree. So how we know is when we go out there and we see little bees flying around. You've got to look very hard. And if you see bees flying around. You look under the pillows ... with the wax like that. Yeah. We go up and put our ears there.

Female 1: You can hear them?

Luella: Yeah, then you can hear them.

Male 1: Are they the honey bees?

Female 2: Yeah, the honey bees.

Male 1: Not the ones that sting.

Female 3: No. No they don't sting.

Female 1: So they're native bees?

Female 3: No, no, they're a native bee. Yeah the little black ones.

Luella: No they're the little small ones ...

This first phase of the analysis shows how Luella has been "task positioned" (Hirvonin, 2016) by the facilitator as co-teller of the story and, although initially she resisted that positioning, she gradually takes it up by playing to her strengths.

(ii) Throughout the presentation, the facilitator refers several times to how, during the implementation of the action plan, the IEWs – most of whom were not at this presentation – have led stages of the project. For example, the facilitator begins:

So it [the project] wasn't really about us [the school staff] just creating the books with the kids, it was about the families and the kids creating it together and having IEWs facilitate that process ...

So we've got our first book that we created. I'll show you this one, and I'll go into the process about how it was created. *The Cycad Tree*. ... I was talking to Michael and Robert [young Indigenous men from the community who work in the school as IEWs] before. So Robert created this [book] with the students and then that same class went ahead and worked on some books with their families as well. So they created it [*Sugarbag*] – they wrote it down. The kids did the artwork on there. Then I supported Robert and the kids in putting [it] into Book Creator [software program]. The end goal is – we've done it in the community before where we link the books using QR codes, put them up at the shops. Some parents really enjoy that. You can go out on home visits as well and show them and click them, show the book. We're also hoping to turn them into hard copies. They're a bit easier to share for families that can't access the QR codes.

... quite beautiful. So once we had that book ready to go and it was very cool to show the kids, the year 5s had an open day and they invited in families and friends to come in and the

goal was to get their input in creating a bush tucker story. So this was the day. You can see [referring to a photo] a few teachers in there [and] a few community members.

Yeah [laughs]. So we had a few stories come out of that. I've got a couple of copies here if you want to pass them around. But they're just some of the bush tucker – so basically [the story writing process] it's quite open. The students and their families they could pick whatever bush tucker they wanted or something they knew about and, yeah, just write about. There weren't very strict guidelines as to what to do. It was very open. Just trying to get anything down that we could use and make the process enjoyable. We wanted the first one to be enjoyable and the families to talk about it and come back. So ... this was a sugarbag bush tucker story.

When the facilitator talks about future plans for sustaining the project, she continues to tell the story of IEW agency and leadership. The following extract from the transcript combined the two topics for analysis: (i) the leadership displayed by an IEW in the telling/presentation, and (ii) the story of IEW agency in initiating tasks that would result in more books being co-created by families to support children's reading.

Facilitator: Actions moving forward ... did you [Luella] want to talk about your book that you're working on?

Luella: Yeah. I'm still working on a book with Auntie Ruby's stories, yeah, and with some language names. Yeah.

Female 1: What's the book going to be about?

Luella: It's about when she was a young girl going fishing with her grandmother.

Female 1: Great.

Luella: Yeah.

Female 1: Okay. Who will do the illustrations in the book?

Luella: I might get her [Aunty Rachel's] grandchildren to do that. Yeah.

Female 1: Now, when we talked last time there was some talk about catching oral stories and being able to share the spoken language as well alongside the written language, is that still something that you're thinking in the future you will try and do?

Luella: Yeah.

Female 1: Yes.

Luella: Yeah, got my cousin lined up for that. But he's busy at the moment.

Female 1: When the time is right.

Luella: Yeah, when the time is right. Yeah.

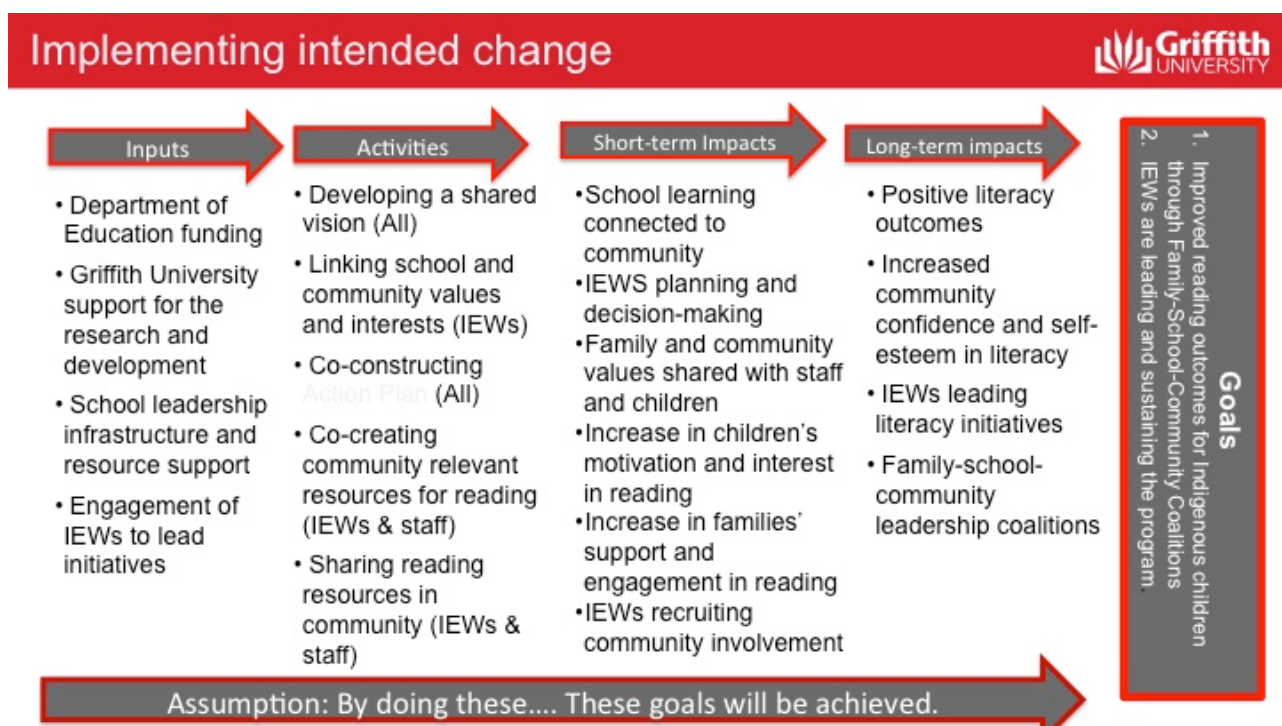
It is important to note that, although all three coalitions at the meeting reinforced the anecdotal evidence that children and families are very interested in making and using the texts, there has not been enough time during the project to gather data on changes to children's literacy.

Findings and discussion

The analyses have demonstrated how action implementation firmly position IEWs in Dandaloo School as central to the aim of sharing leadership for supporting Indigenous children's reading with those in formal school leadership positions, over the longer term. The IEWs were pivotal to initiating, planning and implementing culturally responsive reading and writing activities, and they also took the lead in recruiting and involving families and community in a sustainable plan for the co-creation of more texts to be read by families. Most of the evidence we have provided in this paper looks at the production of the texts and not at measured outcomes of student reading connected to the texts. In the longer term, a measure of change in children's literacy can flow from the initial work of the IEWs.

However, the analyses have revealed an appetite for IEW-led school literacy learning being connected to community values and interests, and staff engagement in learning more about Indigenous values and culture. It was evident that some children are becoming motivated to read through the connection to country and use of arts-based methods, especially through the illustration of their own stories and those written by others in the community. Figure 4 demonstrates how the project has gone some way towards IEWs leading in the literacy program through inputs, activities and short-term impacts. It will take further programs to evidence long-term impacts, such as sustainability and improved reading outcomes for Indigenous children through family-school-community coalitions.

Figure 4. A theory of change



While these findings represent only one school of three in the study, a larger scale research and development project is warranted to determine:

- observable/measurable change in perspectives and engagement practices that participating Indigenous elders, school leaders, families, community and Indigenous staff bring to a project aiming to strengthen school, family and community relations to support children's reading
- more effective/authentic levels of school engagement with disadvantaged families and community that achieve a shared priority goal for improving student outcomes
- measurable improvement in student outcomes in reading levels related to benchmarks agreed to by school and community
- if the outcomes of a full evaluation could have implications for policy reform in family-school-community engagement related to Indigenous children's learning.

Finally, it is important to note that similar initiatives in Indigenous schools and communities need to have flexible timelines because of the very real challenges in sustaining such initiatives that participants at the three communities reported during their presentation of progress and outcomes.

Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant move away from the status quo of IEWs' work as ancillary (as shown in Figure 1), towards a repositioned leadership status for non-positional leaders. This example challenged the status quo through the education system's agreement to support a study whereby school leaders collaborated with Indigenous families and IEWs in a professional learning program that included co-designing a place-based action plan to build capability for Indigenous parents and families to support children's reading and leading parts of the implementation of the plan according to their strengths, literacy teaching skills and connections with community. It demonstrates the strong capabilities of IEWs to co-lead literacy education in their school and community, and illustrates how one school successfully went about positioning IEWs to become more central in leading families, school and community to support literacy education in remote Indigenous communities. Of greater significance, though, is the energetic agency displayed by the IEWs throughout the program.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Queensland, the traditional owners of the land, and elders both past and present. We also wish to acknowledge and thank the Indigenous families and communities referred to in this report. Their generosity in sharing their stories with us is very much appreciated.

We thank the Queensland Department of Education and its officers, including school leaders, for their trust in us to undertake this research and development with three Indigenous state schools and their families and communities.

References

- Barratt-Pugh, C., & Haig, Y. (2020). Creating books in communities: A book making program with families in a remote community in Western Australia. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *48*, 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00975-z>
- Beresford, Q., Partington, G., & Gower, G. (Eds.). (2012). *Reform and resistance in Aboriginal education* (2nd ed.). University of Western Australia Press.
- Clifton, J. (2014). Small stories, positioning, and the discursive construction of leader identity in business meetings. *Leadership*, *10*, 99–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013504428>
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2020). *Closing the gap report 2020*. Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. (2000). *Reconciliation, Australia's challenge: Final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Council of Australian Governments (COAG). (2008). *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA)*. National_Indigenous_Reform_Agreement_Nov_12.docx (federalfinancialrelations.gov.au)
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *20*, 46–63.
- Dawes, G., Davidson, A., Walden, E., & Isaacs, S. (2017). Keeping on country: Understanding and responding to crime and recidivism in remote Indigenous communities. *Australian Psychologist*, *52*, 306–315.
- Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). (1989). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy*. Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Education Council. (2015). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education strategy*. Retrieved June 1, 2020, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/natsi_educationstrategy_v3.pdf
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Flückiger, B., Diamond, P., & Jones, W. (2012). Yarning space: Leading literacy learning through family/school partnerships. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood Education*, *37*(3), 53–59.
- Freeman, L., & Bochner, S. (2008). Bridging the gap: Improving literacy outcomes for Indigenous students. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, *4*(3), 9–16.
- Funnell, R. (2013). Indigenous education workers: A special case of educational assistant. In R. Jorgensen, P. Sullivan & P. Grootenboer (Eds.), *Pedagogies to enhance learning for Indigenous students: Evidence-based practice* (pp. 45–60). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4021-84-5_3
- Geia, L. K., Hayes, B., & Usher, K. (2013). Yarning/Aboriginal storytelling: Towards an understanding of an Indigenous perspective and its implications for research practice. *Contemporary Nurse*, *46*(1), 13–17.
- Gewirtz, S. (1998). Conceptualizing social justice in education: Mapping the territory. *Journal of Education Policy*, *13*(4), 469–484. <https://doi-org.10.1080/0268093980130402>
- Grace, R., & Trudgett, M. (2012). It's not rocket science: The perspectives of Indigenous early childhood workers on supporting the engagement of Indigenous families in early childhood settings. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *37*(2), 10–18.
- Gunstone, G. (2013). Indigenous education 1991–2000: Documents, outcomes and governments. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, *41*(2), 75–84.
- Hall, L. (2013). The “come and go” syndrome of teachers in remote Indigenous schools: Listening to the perspectives of Indigenous teachers about what helps teachers to stay and what makes them go. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, *41*(2), 187–195.
- Hirvonen, P. (2013). Positioning in an inter-professional team meeting: Examining positioning theory as a methodological tool for micro-cultural group studies. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *9*, 100–114.

- Hirvonen, P. (2016). Positioning theory and small-group interaction: Social and task positioning in the context of joint decision-making. *Sage Open*, 6(3), 1–15.
- Hunt, J. (2013). *Engaging with Indigenous Australia – Exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*. Issues paper no. 5. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Indigenous ready to take initiatives to close the gap. (2020, July 16). *The Australian*, n.p.
- Ishimaru, A. M., Torres, K. E., Salvador, J. E., Lott II, J., Williams, D. M. C., & Tran, C. (2016). Reinforcing deficit, journeying toward equity: Cultural brokering in family engagement initiatives. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 850–882.
- Johnson, G., Clarke, S., & Dempster, N. (2005). The discursive (re)construction of parents in school texts. *Language and Education*, 19(5), 380–399.
- Johnson, G., Dempster, N., McKenzie, L., Klieve, H., Flückiger, B., Lovett, S., Riley, T., & Webster, A. (2014). *Principals as literacy leaders with Indigenous communities: Leading reading “both ways”*. Australian Primary Principals Association.
- Kearney, E., McIntosh, L., Perry, B., Dockett, S., & Clayton, K. (2014). Building positive relationships with Indigenous children, families and communities: Learning at the cultural interface. *Critical Studies in Education*, 55(3), 338–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2014.914963>
- Kefu, M. W. (2018). From rhetoric to learning: Bridging the disconnect between policy and teaching practice around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in the Australian primary education system. *Coolabah*, 24 & 25, 260–273.
- Klieve, H., & Flückiger, B. (2015). Towards an evidence base: Determining the impact of community-based literacy programs in remote Indigenous communities. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40(2), 89–98.
- Konza, D. (2011). *Supporting oral language and reading development in the early years*. Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). *Seven strong claims about successful leadership*. National College for School Leadership.
- Lowe, K. (2017). Walanbaa warramildanha: The impact of authentic Aboriginal community and school engagement on teachers’ professional knowledge. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44, 35–54.
- MacBeath, J., & Dempster, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Connecting leadership and learning*. Routledge.
- Masters, G. (2009). *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools*. ACER.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2008). *Ten steps to equity in education*. <http://www.oecd.org/publications/Policybriefs>
- Peacock, H., & Prehn, J. (2019). The importance of Aboriginal education workers for decolonising and promoting culture in primary schools: An analysis of the longitudinal study of Indigenous children (LSIC). *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(1), 196–202. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2019.13>
- Peacock, H., Prehn, J., Guerzoni, M., Aitken, W., & Andersen, C. (2020). Upholding heightened expectations of Indigenous children? Parents do, teachers do not. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(2), 331–339. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2020.28>
- Price, A., Jackson-Barrett, E., Gower, G., & Herrington, J. (2017). Understanding the complex work of Aboriginal education workers in schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 48(1), 93–105.
- Priest, K., King, S., Nangala, I., Brown, W. N., & Nangala, M. (2008). Warrki jarrinjaku “working together everyone and listening”: Growing together as leaders for Aboriginal children in remote central Australia. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16(1), 117–130.

- Rawls, J. (1972). *A theory of justice*. Clarendon Press.
- Robinson, V. M. J. (2007). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works*. Australian Council for Educational Leaders.
- Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. Best evidence synthesis iteration*. Ministry of Education.
- Rose, M. (2012). The “silent apartheid” as the practitioner’s blindspot. In K. Price (Ed.), *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education: An introduction for the teaching profession* (pp. 64–80). Cambridge University Press.
- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. (1991). *Recommendations*.
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/national/vol5/5.html#Heading5>
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1995). Social capital and the social reproduction of inequality: The formation of informational networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68, 116–135.
- Wigglesworth, G. (2020). Remote Indigenous education and translanguaging. *TESOL in Context*, 29(1), 95–113.
- Young, I. M. (1990). Five faces of oppression. In I. M. Young (Ed.), *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.

About the authors

Greer Johnson is Professor Emeritus at Griffith University. Her research focuses on leadership for literacy learning. Her work involves partnerships with school leaders, teachers and community members working collaboratively to ensure all children have a range of opportunities to enhance school, home and community literacies.

Bev Flückiger is an Adjunct Professor at Griffith University. Her research interests focus on improving the life chances of children described as disadvantaged in Australian society and ensuring that all children have the opportunity to engage in learning, exercise agency, and experience success.

Please cite this article as:

Johnson, G., & Flückiger, B. (2022). Agency and leadership by Indigenous education workers for family-school-community engagement. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 51(2). DOI 10.55146/ajie.v51i2.59



Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN: 2049-7784.