

Seeding Success: Schools That Work for Aboriginal Students

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This article reports on a large mixed methods research project that investigated the conditions of success for Aboriginal school students. The article presents the qualitative case study component of the research. It details the work of four schools identified as successful for Aboriginal students with respect to social and academic outcomes, and showed what was common and contextually different in their relationships with community and their approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. The article shows there were eight common themes that emerged in the analysis of the schools' approaches, and these themes are considered key indicators of the 'seeding success'.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal school students, success factors, curriculum, pedagogy

It is fitting, 30 years after the release of the first Aboriginal Education policy in New South Wales (NSWDE, 1982), to consider what schools can now do to make education work equitably for Aboriginal students. This article reports on an Australian Research Council funded project that set out to find the community, school and classroom conditions that 'seeded success' for Aboriginal students in New South Wales (NSW) schools. The research was a joint undertaking between the University of Western Sydney, the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities and the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate (NSWDEC, 2009).

The research began with a sample group of schools purposefully selected ($N = 52$); those where Aboriginal students were the minority of the total school population, as these are the type of NSW schools that the majority of Aboriginal students in this state attend. Quantitative data across these schools narrowed the focus to four schools that were shown to be successful in enhancing outcomes for their Aboriginal students. Intensive case studies were then conducted in these schools, involving school and classroom observations and interviews with the Aboriginal workers, the principal, teachers and Aboriginal students. Teachers chosen for observations and interviews were those nominated by the school and the Aboriginal community as having the greatest continued success with Aboriginal students. Focus interview groups (four to six) of Aboriginal students were randomly selected.

Analysis of data began in each school as the data were collected, though processes of shared reflection and tri-

angulation. Definitive themes for each school were backward mapped across key concepts of inclusivity, quality teaching, self-concept, motivation and engagement. Finally, cross-case analysis brought together and synthesised themes across the four schools. This article presents the results of this analysis.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Policy and theoretical starting points for the research embraced both Aboriginal Education documents and recent important studies into the kinds of classroom pedagogies that are likely to enhance educational outcomes for students, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The former included the *Aboriginal Education Policy* (NSWDET, 1996), the *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSWDET, 2004), the *Aboriginal Education and Training Policy* (Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, 2008), and the *Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy* (Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, 2009). The latter incorporated the 'authentic instruction' (Newmann & Associates, 1996) productive pedagogies (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) quality teaching movement' (NSWDET, 2004) and the 'visible learning' research of Hattie (2009).

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Methods and School Selection

There was a view in the project that schools should be selected for the case studies where Aboriginal students showed strong involvement in their learning at the same time as they viewed their school and classroom as culturally inclusive environments. Both survey and test data informed the selection process. The survey was designed to measure student views on quality of teaching, their engagement with learning, the building of their self-concept as learners, and their feelings of cultural inclusivity in school and classroom settings. Literacy and numeracy tests were designed to locate schools where Aboriginal students were performing above average in numeracy and reading across all schools in the sample. Comparisons of tests and survey results aimed to locate schools where Aboriginal students showed above average performance in literacy and numeracy, indicated high levels of engagement, and displayed beliefs that their Aboriginal culture was ratified, supported and featured in school and classroom policies, programs and curricula. As a result of a comparative analysis of survey and test scores, two urban and two rural schools were invited to participate in the qualitative component of the study (pseudonyms are given for the schools): Boundary PS (outer urban housing estate), Lakeside PS (urban industrial suburb), Farmland PS (medium sized rural town) and Basin PS (outer suburb of a large regional centre).

The Case Studies

Two Aboriginal researchers and one non-Aboriginal researcher collected the qualitative data. Each researcher had significant and relevant experience in Aboriginal Education. Before entering each school a framework (O'Rourke, 2009) was drawn up that reflected current ideas within the Indigenous education literature both within Australia and overseas. There were three intersecting themes that informed this framework and directed the data gathering processes. The first was to explore the school's policies and practices from a *social justice perspective* (Sarra, 2010). This helped the researchers consider ways that the school recognised that Aboriginal students needed specific and culturally appropriate support across all levels of their schooling experience to achieve educational outcomes. The second was to investigate ways that at both school and classroom levels *culturally inclusive curricula* (Craven, 2011) were implemented. Whole school Aboriginal learning programs and Aboriginal classroom perspectives were of particular interest here. The third theme was to describe ways that teachers employed *culturally differentiated quality teaching* (Donovan, 2009). That is, the specific ways that the NSW pedagogical model was modified to incorporate culturally relevant teaching strategies. Important in this theme were the specific ways that teachers enhanced academic outcomes through recognising and catering for the cultural needs of Aboriginal students.

Seeding Success for Aboriginal Students

As described above, the intensive analysis of data within and across the four case study schools brought forward a synthesis of themes. These highlighted the ways all of the schools mediated success in social and academic outcomes for their Aboriginal students. These themes are:

1. A strong *community relationships* across the whole community (social justice perspective)
2. *Aboriginal cultural spaces* are central to the work of the schools (*culturally inclusive curricula*)
3. *Aboriginal people* are central to the work of the schools (*social justice perspective*)
4. *Aboriginal perspectives and values* are prioritised and embedded in school and classroom curriculum (*culturally inclusive curricula*)
5. Specific focus on *quality teaching* and this is considered *from an Aboriginal perspective* (*culturally differentiated quality teaching*)
6. Conscious shift from a wellbeing community mindset (primarily focused on looking after students' wellbeing), to a *learning community mindset* (building student wellbeing through a serious concentration on learning; *culturally differentiated quality teaching*)
7. *Targeted support* for Aboriginal students (*social justice perspective*)
8. Relationships between teachers and students work towards *Aboriginal students as important, responsible and able to achieve* (*social justice perspective*).

These themes are particularly significant when placed against dedicated work in Aboriginal education over the past two decades. Indeed, they illustrate that there are schools that have seriously taken on board recommendations at community, whole school, classroom and individual levels to encourage success for Aboriginal students. The themes are consistent with what research tells us are the global characteristics of successful schools (Masters, 2004). Importantly also, they are clearly aligned with the findings of the NSW *Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSWDET, 2004, p. 87) with respect to schools that 'work' for Aboriginal students:

Schools that are making a difference for Aboriginal students identified their priority as student achievement by focusing on effective teaching and learning rather than student welfare programs and program funding. These schools typically demonstrated real partnerships with their local Aboriginal community based on shared responsibilities and positive relationships.

While these themes consistently play out across the four schools being investigated, there are important distinctions between their work that reflect priorities and decisions made at the local and community level. These distinctions are reminders that frameworks of

understanding, like those discussed here, are best understood as professional starting points, offering tangible ways for teachers to consider local solutions from within the issues and responses of their own community and the community teaching and learning context. It is to these local solutions by each of the four case study schools that this article now turns.

Boundary PS (Urban)

Summary

Boundary Public School is situated in an entry-level public housing estate. The school is a physically appealing and welcoming learning environment, with Aboriginal studies and an Aboriginal learning room (called the 'Koori Room') at its cultural, curricular and pedagogical heart. Aboriginal students feel valued, supported, strong, and are 'going somewhere' as people and learners. Students at the school are mainly Australians of Aboriginal, Anglo or Pacific Islander backgrounds. Relationships between the community and the school have been strongly developed over significant periods of time. It is worth noting that the current Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO) attended the school when his mother was the previous AEO and this gives a family feel to the critical community work. Furthermore, the school's Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT) also attended the school and is connected to the family. At both personal and cultural points the community work is inextricably connected with learning and this is a defining feature of the schools' work.

Seeding Success at Boundary PS

1. Development of strong community relationships across the whole community (social justice perspective). The research indicated that there is stability in the school's relationship with the Aboriginal community and a growing confidence among parents that the school offers support to their children. This relationship has been a long-term project with the AEO and AERT as central players. Strengthening academic outcomes are connected with continuing community support. The principal argues that Aboriginal students outperform their peers because 'their parents have come to school here, and they want their children to come to school here, which is indicative of the hard work and the dedication that the staff have for Aboriginal education'. This support is reinforced within the Koori Room, which has become a key physical and symbolic site for the community and the school; a place where Aboriginal parents feel comfortable in their school relationships. The AEA notes: 'We are able to get down and dirty with the kids and talk to them.' He talks about how this has removed barriers between school and community: 'That's opened the doors for our parents over a few years, to be comfortable with the school. It's awesome. And I think that's one of the hardest things ... a lot of the parents have had that negative thing themselves.'

2. Aboriginal learning spaces are central (culturally inclusive curricula). Aboriginal spaces are pivotal. As mentioned above, the Koori Room is a focus for Aboriginal learning, community meetings and contact and as a 'hang-out' space for students. Teachers talk about how for Aboriginal students, 'It's like a second home ... they feel at home. They are comfortable to ask for things, they are comfortable to try, they get taught about their culture.' Ex-students from the secondary school across the road regularly visit to borrow resources and books for their projects. The school has worked hard to eliminate the 'annexe mentality'. In another example, there are also plans to move the native plant bush tucker garden from the back of the school and to develop an environmental teaching and learning space in a prominent position. As the principal comments: 'I talked to the AEO about the possibility of ... really showcase this ... put this in a really prominent spot where it has to be maintained, community can see it, not just Aboriginal community, but all of our community can see it.' The significance and impact of decisions such as these are strongly felt by the school staff, and there are concerted efforts to maintain the centrality of learning spaces.

3. Aboriginal perspectives and learning are strongly integrated (culturally inclusive curricula). A critical decision was made to not see Aboriginal education as its own identity, driven by Aboriginal personnel, rather to embed it in the fabric of the school. The school management report was desegregated with each curriculum committee taking responsibility for how Aboriginal students were going to be catered for. As the principal explains: 'They're our three "biggies": literacy and numeracy and student engagement and retention, and within that Aboriginal education is woven in those three.' This decision encouraged all teachers to take greater ownership over Aboriginal curriculum and learning, and forged closer relationships with the community: '[Teachers] having a really good understanding of the curriculum and also too the Aboriginal perspective. It's really important that they need to know in terms of the history ... and the yarning that comes from the community [Principal].' Students talked about how this shift impacted their classroom relationships and learning outcomes:

It makes us feel confident after we've just done something that's just on our ancestors and I feel good ... it makes you feel good that you can share it with non-Aboriginal people and show them the way the old people used to do it.

Student data strongly affirmed the school's decisions.

4. Focus on Accelerated Literacy and Quality Teaching (culturally differentiated quality teaching). Accelerated Literacy is adopted as a whole school focus with strong professional development for all staff. Classroom observations indicate that all students in all stages accept and

are benefitting from this approach. Teachers appreciate that they are trained, can observe each other and receive support for programming. They say it typifies the support they receive across all syllabus areas. There is also a strong push towards the NSW model of Quality Teaching (QT). A deputy principal has a QT role with no student welfare work and a particular focus on the dimensions of intellectual quality and quality learning environment. Student data about learning is particularly compelling:

... teachers helped us change because they have a good understanding of us and they share the same feelings with us and so they help us learn more ... they've pushed me to learn ... if I hadn't had those teachers I wouldn't be like how I am now ... the learning strategies and the way the teachers help us learn ... they never back down and they help us with things, not only at school but with our home.

In interviews teachers talk about high expectations, cultural connectedness, active learning and explicit approaches to learning: all elements of QT.

5. Conscious shift from a wellbeing community mindset to a learning community mindset (culturally differentiated quality teaching). All staff members acknowledge that this has been one of the school's greatest achievements. The AEO makes this clear:

We just really tried to change the attitude of trying to get the kids here, and just well disciplined and well behaved all the time. We don't have to worry about that anymore ... now we can move to the academic.

You're not involved so much in behaviour anymore?

No. It's very rare ... those consistent kids really been putting in massive efforts over the years, and they've been rewarded ... you can sit back and realise you've gone from that behaviour to welfare issues, to what you have to worry about now is academic.

There is a strong view in the school that their achievements are about effort, consistency, cohesion and collaboration:

... we just go about our business, roll our sleeves up and the proof is when you look at our NAPLAN results that we're doing the right thing, a cohesive and collaborative and connected community — we must be doing something right. (Principal)

6. Aboriginal students are important for the school (social justice perspective). Aboriginal students are central in the culture, curriculum and pedagogy of the school and there are many outstanding role models. Critically, for social and academic outcomes, interview data revealed that the Aboriginal students 'get' that they are important and believe they can be successful. The principal observes that they are 'academically great, fabulous ... we're talking about bands seven, eight NAPLAN ... articulate students,

enthusiastic, wanting to come to school.' Aboriginal students at Boundary explain their success: 'The Aboriginal kids are special ... because they get school help with their culture, and most of them are very intelligent because they like to listen and learn.' The evidence suggests that the interplay of self-concept and inclusivity catalyses high levels of student engagement.

Because I'm Aboriginal, I always think to myself, 'I'm Aboriginal, that's who I am and I'm doing such a good thing for culture and I'm showing my ancestors when they're looking over me, looking after me.' And they must be really proud of me because I'm a high achiever ... (Student)

Inspiring words to summarise the success at Boundary PS.

Lakeside PS (Urban)

Summary

Lakeside Public School is located in a small suburb of a large city. Students are predominantly Australians of Anglo and Aboriginal backgrounds (the latter in the minority). Given the small number of Aboriginal students enrolled, there is no Aboriginal Education Officer, but there is a strong top-down forging of links between the school and Aboriginal families, with the school connecting directly with the community. There is an inviting physical environment, with community planted gardens and art spaces that reflect the principal's strong leadership model of connecting with Aboriginal students' families and facilitating conditions for community ownership of enduring cultural and environmental projects within the school grounds. There is a welcoming learning environment that prioritises literacy and numeracy within the QT framework. Student identity is situated within ideas surrounding enjoyment of learning for itself and as part of learning for life. It is evident at Lakeside that 'It is cool to be an Aboriginal student'.

Seeding Success at Lakeside PS

1. Development of strong community relationships across the whole community (social justice perspective). The school has a long-term approach to relationship building with Aboriginal community. The focus is on authentic equal relationships, with active participation in joint projects. These projects include Aboriginal art installations (e.g., mosaics, totem pole, bush tucker gardens) that have central places in the school: 'There's that big Aboriginal flag and we put all our handprints on it from all the school' (Student). There are also curriculum and pedagogy initiatives. While the principal initially took responsibility as there is no AEO, teachers increasingly take on community relationship building roles with a focus on learning:

We spend quite a bit of time building relationship with the families ... getting to know each other, talking to the mums ... sitting down, having a chat, learning to trust one another. It started off with me but now with the individual education programs the parents have the meetings with the teachers more because they are really working with the teachers. (Principal)

The importance of community at all levels of the school's operations is recognised. As one teacher observes, 'If you were to ask me what was the most important thing that I think makes a difference I would say relationships with those families'.

2. Tradition of values education (social justice perspective). A strong values-based education with a focus on diversity is a core feature. This feature is based on the view that students need to be equipped with values to enable them to face future challenges and to live healthy and satisfying lives. The promotion of mutual respect between staff and students fosters engagement and resilience. A teacher shows how this is strongly integrated: 'It is that cooperation, the respect — it's so engrained in what we do — and not separate subjects, but in all our lessons and the kids are just used to it. They have been bought up with it and I think that has made a very big difference.'

Community and school mutual respect are considered cornerstones of positive school–community partnerships. The principal expands on how values education and community building are inextricably linked. 'Over the years I've seen the curriculum develop. The values education developed very, very strongly. The relationship with parents developed so that we have a culture of respect over the time'. The flow through to the classrooms is strongly felt: 'I think with our living values ... the respect and the peace and the harmony, that all comes through. Every year they do it and you think "They must get sick of it", but it's so worth it because it comes out in the kids' (Teacher).

3. Lifelong education skills (not just for assessment) (culturally differentiated quality teaching). Processes of lifelong learning and the intrinsic value of learning are emphasised. The rationale is that this has potential to support the development of Aboriginal students participating more fully in their lives. There is a classroom focus on students becoming critical learners and more strongly involved in the processes of their learning. A teacher explains this with an Aboriginal student in her class:

I think that's helped him to realise that he is not just regurgitating answers, he's being a good student ... he thought that just knowing facts was being a good student ... trying to get him to analyse information and explain why he has done things and not just give me the right answer because that's not all that is important in life. It's the process ...

Another teacher describes similar classroom processes as a long project, giving students 'strategies to use in other classes ... building up those ... having self-discipline.'

She justifies approaches that help Aboriginal students make future learning decisions: 'I know I need to do this in this situation. This is what will be best. I will be able to do the work or learn best if I do [this].'

4. Quality teaching elements with an Aboriginal perspective (culturally differentiated quality teaching). Aligned with the perspective on lifelong learning is the school-wide focus on Quality Teaching. There is a belief that a strong QT-based pedagogy can support opportunities for individual students to excel. Elements of relevance, autonomy and engagement are highlighted with a clear integration of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum ('huge perspective of Aboriginality' [Principal]). Interview data highlighted the interrelationship of cultural relevance, high expectations and engagement: 'It is giving them opportunities to really excel ... something that represents them and their culture, they get involved ... and making sure that whatever we do, all the work is excellent. I mean our mission is about lifelong learning' (Principal).

Teachers talk of explicit classroom discussions making learning explicit and visible, raising expectations and 'giving them a stepladder before just sending them off'. There is arguably a significant impact on student self-concept: 'Once they're achieving they're going "Whoa ... Oh yes I can do this after all" after me going "You can do this. You can do this. I know you can do this". But sometimes they have to believe it themselves.'

Interviews reveal students have a clear view of what this means for them: 'They help us learn. They're just good teachers.'

5. Teaching for difference (culturally differentiated quality teaching). There is evidence that the school has considered what might make a difference for Aboriginal students in classrooms. Individualised high expectations are communicated explicitly to students through individual learning programs and classroom discussions. This is explained by a teacher: 'I always take them through their work first and say, "This is what we are going to do" and "This is what I would expect" and ... talk through each question and have lots of discussions.' In some classes this involves working with students to set high but achievable goals: 'I try and achieve with them ... to care about the results that they get, for them to start to go "Right, that's the goal, I'm [going to] try and achieve that"' (Teacher). These approaches encourage Aboriginal students through learning focused on the needs and abilities of each student: 'We're all really excited about the aim that all children can achieve high expectations, but ... you have different expectations and differentiating is important, you've got to differentiate' (Teacher).

6. Individual student and teacher relationships (social justice perspective). At Lakeside it is 'cool' to be an Aboriginal student: 'the most important thing for us is that they are accepted for who they are and they are proud

of that they are at this school' (Principal). There is an authentic approach to appreciating the broader out-of-school context of each child and the implications this has for teaching and learning. This might involve knowing what students do on the weekends: 'How did you go at the beach? Was it good fun?' Aboriginal students benefit through acknowledgment of out-of-school experiences and successes. It entails appreciating the importance of developing positive classroom learning environments with negotiated control: 'You can't have a successful classroom these days and be strict because the children don't have any importance and control over what is happening — it won't work' (Teacher). Critical importance is placed on quality pedagogical relationships, as a teacher explains:

You have to connect ... build a relationship with that child, care about them as your teacher ... not friendship like, it is a particular way you do that as a teacher. If you want to be a good teacher [for Aboriginal students], number one that child has to know that you actually care.

Basin PS (Regional)

Summary

Basin Public School is in an outer suburb of a large regional centre. The school nestles between public housing and a new release housing estate, and has a 'country feel on the edge of the city'. Its student population is mainly Anglo and Aboriginal Australians (the latter 10%). There are strongly established community relationships through the long-term AEO, as well as through core non-Aboriginal staff members who have presence within the school through their commitment to the Aboriginal community and their needs. Traditional and contemporary values combine to provide a strong Aboriginal cultural presence throughout the school context. Aboriginal perspectives are consciously integrated into whole school programs as a specific inclusive strategy across the whole school community. The school is a place where effort and achievement are recognised and rewarded, and where Aboriginal students are integrated as part of the whole school yet enabled to maintain their individuality and cultures.

Seeding Success at Basin PS

1. Development of strong community relationships across the whole community (social justice perspective). This is a long-term school project. The dedicated work by the long-serving AEO ('just outstanding, she liaises so well with the community and if you need anything, she's always first on the doorstep to try and sort out issues' [Principal]) and key teachers to build community relations stands out. This is supported by an open door policy for Aboriginal parents:

She [Principal, AEO] makes that clear to everybody that the door was always open and if you've got an issue, don't be out in the community whinging about it ... once they're in, they

realise the place is such a warm ... it's just comfortable and they come back. (Teacher)

Community members are directly involved in the implementation of Aboriginal perspectives. Events unite Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community: homework centre, midnight basketball competition, and community days. During community events the AEO encourages Aboriginal community and non-Aboriginal teachers: 'I said, "So don't stand back and watch 'cause they'll pick it up", and ... yeah that's exactly what they did. Yeah, they mingled' (AEO, describing a school-organised community day).

2. Integration of Aboriginal programs (culturally inclusive curricula). A defining difference between Basin and other schools is that it works hard to include all community and strenuously avoids segregating students on cultural bases. It is a strongly justified policy. Programs (e.g., NAIDOC, art, sport, mathematics, transition) are planned to include Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students:

If we get money into school, we'll do it very quietly, if it's specific Aboriginal money. So we don't make a big song and dance about it, about the Aboriginal kids being called out and getting additional anything ... so long as you're pulling kids out and highlighting the differences, you can't possibly keep and maintain that level playing field. (Principal)

This should not be interpreted that Aboriginal students are not strongly supported through targeted programs or expected to just fit in with dominant Western cultural values. It is also not about specific Aboriginal funding not flowing through to Aboriginal students. Rather it is about implementing these programs sensitively and in ways that value, respect and nurture all students, irrespective of cultural background.

The AEO is a key driver of policies that are inclusive of all students, as a teacher explains.

That's probably where she [AEO] fights her biggest battle. She tries her darnedest to run programs that aren't just for Indigenous kids. She wants the balance for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ... The kids are so accepting of each other. At the end of the day they don't isolate our Indigenous kids and non-Indigenous kids, so there's a really good bond and relationship that leads from [AEO] and her expectations of 'It's not just for Aboriginal kids, this is for everyone'.

3. Powerful Aboriginal studies with community support (culturally inclusive curricula). Building powerful Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum is another long-term project. There is a view that Aboriginal perspectives are not to be trivialised and the AEO helps drive this position. 'You know everyone thinks, "Oh you know we can do a bit of cultural or dot painting in there." It's just they kind of know me well enough now that it doesn't go down well with me.' Important topics like Sorry Day, Reconciliation

and Stolen Generations are central to the curriculum. Importantly, the Aboriginal community is heavily involved and helps students to connect with traditional and current values:

Aboriginal role models talking to the kids about their job, and how they used literacy and numeracy in their job. They're Aboriginal people working in the community; some of our Elders just come in and talk about their life, and their dreaming stories ... what had happened with their parents if they were part of the stolen generation. (Teacher)

Students comment favourably on these: 'We'd get special Aboriginal people coming into school, and they teach us how to dance. And they talk about the culture.' When needed, the school has initiated specific cultural projects targeting disengaged senior students.

4. Elements of quality teaching in classrooms (culturally differentiated quality teaching). Interviews with teachers focused on pedagogical strategies consistent with Quality Teaching. Intellectual quality, connectedness ('make it relative and meaningful'), feedback ('being praised for every minor victory, and for being given feedback that would allow her to improve'), intrinsic motivation ('I think a kid should be learning because they want to learn and I try and instil that in kids just the responsibility of learning is on them') and autonomy ('the kids become involved in their own learning and in the learning of others') are prominent themes. They also talk of the importance of active and authentic learning. This supports the whole school focus on developing responsible learners and citizens. Inclusive classroom discourses are commonly mentioned: 'I say to my kids all the time, the things I value most are honesty and bravery.' There is evidence of how this impacts on students. They talk about: 'Be honest and brave. Yeah, and like respect'; 'Cause then if you do harder stuff, then learn more better'; 'They give us positive comments in our books, when we get them marked, when we get them back like there's comments on there, how good we are, or what we have to work on.'

5. Variety of support structures for Aboriginal students (social justice perspective). There is a sense that Aboriginal students are not allowed to 'fall through the cracks'. A variety of targeted programs support Aboriginal students throughout their schooling: Kindergarten transition, tutors, aides, Accelerated Literacy, talks by elders. The principal evaluates:

The group that did Year 3 NAPLAN this year have had significant interventions since kindergarten ... really good support and encouragement ... they've either had an Aboriginal tutor in the room, or they've had some kind of intervention program to support and to encourage them ... has made a big difference.

Support is considered the responsibility of the whole school community, and the AEO is clear on this. 'That's

why our kids do well. Teachers being accountable. Parents being accountable. The principal being accountable. Everyone has to be accountable for these Aboriginal students.' Support programs offer opportunities for Aboriginal people to put back into the community and become more skilled themselves:

A couple of young girls (ex-students) said we want to help out, and I said, 'Good, I'll set you up', trained them to work on an individual program with an Indigenous student and then they put it up on their résumé. That happens all the time ... it's sort of halfway between employment. (Teacher)

6. Focus on developing relationships and giving responsibility to Aboriginal learners (social justice perspective). Concerted efforts are in place to build Aboriginal students as leaders and learners and students seem to benefit.

In the top end [senior classes] I think our Aboriginal kids enjoy responsibility, and I think that's something that I think we do well here — make them responsible for their own learning. They seem to be able to meet our expectations. It's a given in this school, it's just as common for an Aboriginal student to rise to a leadership position as anybody else. It's just part of the school culture. (Principal)

Aboriginal students feel confident to achieve educational goals ('... the biggest thing, I want them to be responsible for themselves and be responsible for their learning' [Teacher]). It's particularly inspiring when the students 'get' what is happening in their school, as expressed by students in the focus groups:

... having satisfaction, 'cause you've got good marks ... so we learn better ... when we get to high school we can be smarter ... It is a very good school, because they help us out. The school is very active. Basin is the best school, because when we get stuck the teachers look out for us.

Farmland PS (Regional)

Summary

Farmland Public School serves a rural town (3,000 people) an hour's drive from a large regional centre. Students are mainly Aboriginal (25%) and Anglo Australians, and from mixed SES backgrounds. Linking students across cultural and social backgrounds is a feature of the school's work. The school is characterised by its attractive, environmentally sensitive grounds, its calm atmosphere and focus on learning. There is strong community support for its programs and a central environmental curriculum role provided by the Aboriginal Education Officer. This curriculum helps to unite the different cultural and social groups in the community. Aboriginal students are the focus of the school's approaches to teaching and learning, are firmly integrated into all aspects of school life and established as important members of the mainstream school community. Quality Teaching with an Aboriginal

perspective is a feature of classrooms. Excellent role models exist for the Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal community is very supportive of the school and keen for their children to 'get on with it' and succeed in their learning.

Seeding Success at Farmland

1. Entrenched stable positive community relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (social justice perspective). Ongoing, stable relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and all students characterise the school. This is attributed to multigenerational Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families growing together and working in the local community. An inclusive school environment and partnerships between Aboriginal parents and the school benefit Aboriginal students through the shared high value of school within the community. Relationships with education and the school are critical.

... a magnificent example of what can be done when you have a cross-section of the community in one school ... this school is where the Aboriginal community definitely values education ... they see education as valuable for working in and being able to live in this modern world. (Principal)

Interviews with Aboriginal people confirm that stability in community is an important condition for school relationships: 'My earliest memories were all my family members working and active ... friends and family members employed and active members of the community' (AEO). Continuity, expectations and success are frequently mentioned: 'It's not something new ... That's part of what it is. It's a continual learning, all based on good relationships and 'they can be anything' (Teacher).

2. Bicultural adaptation (culturally inclusive curricula). The school sees the importance of equipping Aboriginal students for the modern world without losing their culture ('maintain that ability to be themselves ... they can adapt to the situations without losing their culture' [AEO]). The apparent recognition of this by the Aboriginal community seems to contribute to high attendance figures for Aboriginal students, together with communication of the importance of school through Aboriginal families. Mutual respect between the school and the Aboriginal community is integral to this: 'I think one of the remarkable things about the Aboriginal community is that they want our school to teach the children, so that they're equipped for this modern world and can keep their cultural learnings too' (Principal).

Students appreciate an everyday recognition of cultural inclusivity:

On Monday morning two people, two Aboriginal people, stand up on the stage and do a Welcome to Country.

Why do you think it's important?

Because it's all giving, all issues that are Aboriginal and just welcoming them in there. (Student)

Inclusive relationships are seen to be typical of the school's daily work and the AEO talks about this: 'Kids come to school with that expectation that they can still learn, and as part of a group'.

3. Aboriginal staff roles (social justice perspective). Positive Aboriginal staff role models are viewed as a critical step towards Aboriginal student success. Aboriginal staff provide extra support to encourage high achieving Aboriginal students attain their goals, building Aboriginal student pride in their educational achievement and educational aspirations: '[The AEO] he's done a lot of programming, making sure that their learning plans are shaped for them and that we are working on their own personal goals and they've got an interest at the school and at home' (Teacher). The AEO appreciates that he works as part of a team of Aboriginal people: 'We've got two teachers' aides ... my sister's the relieving assistant principal, the groundsman. We've got a few Aboriginals on staff. It's a really good chance to really help the kids ... extra support in whatever area they might want.'

The central work of the AEO in the environmental program provides opportunities for students to combine relationships and learning: 'He teaches us ... if we were out gardening he'd teach us what fruits would look like when they're just coming out of the ground ... he teaches us things about the garden and how to plant. And he lets us plant some plants.' (Students).

4. Quality Teaching Indigenous Program (QTIP) (culturally differentiated quality teaching). There is a long-term commitment to professional development through the QT framework, and the AEO is heavily involved in this program. This has successfully enhanced Aboriginal student outcomes. While high intellectual quality of lessons is seen as fundamental for Aboriginal student engagement and achievement (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2007) there is a recognition that teachers need to carefully consider the nature of questioning, the variety in activities, active learning, explicit instructions, and modelling. High expectations are critical. The AEO is aware of the need to engage the learners through active and authentic learning: '... constant engagement, make sure things are engaging, exciting. A lot of the boys here, you know, your typical boys, want things loud and fast ... they want things to grab their attention, and they want things with guts in it.' Classroom communication about learning is a cornerstone of the changes in classroom pedagogy:

They constantly talk to the kids: 'Look I know that you're capable of doing this, I'll help you to do it, let's do it together, let's find a way of you achieving these results' ... they're good communicators basically, they're just good at being people persons. (AEO)

5. Movement from targeted support to integrated support (culturally inclusive curricula). Interviews revealed that a key to improved outcomes was a movement from supporting Aboriginal students individually to bringing them into the curriculum and pedagogy in an integrated way ('it comes back to not putting one group over another' [Teacher]). A core driver of this movement was an expectation that there would be equity of high achievement across both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The concerted emphasis on QT for Aboriginal student engagement reported above is critical ('we do focus on quality teaching and that constant engagement that gets all Aboriginal students quite involved because we're focussing on activities that involve technology and really keep them on the ball' [Teacher]). The AEO attended this school and has seen this positive change first hand:

It's basically Aboriginal education or education that better suits Aboriginal students ... A one in all sort of policy to see where we are today ... when I was a student back then I probably couldn't have imagined how far we've changed. And some of the teachers that taught me when I was a student here, I can see a change in their approach too.

Themes of pedagogical change through Aboriginal education and QT are dominant in the school.

6. Sustained successful Aboriginal student achievement (culturally differentiated quality teaching). The importance of interrelated foundations centring on quality pedagogy, high expectations and support is identified. Aboriginal students are considered a credit to themselves, with sustained academic achievement and potential to do well in further education.

Overall they're all achieving well. These kids — despite the fact that they don't see me much in their rooms are still a real credit to themselves. I'm sort of making opportunities available to them.

What would you say were the greatest successes here?

Probably sustained achievement. We've churned out a few doctors. Pretty good HSC results. (AEO)

Teachers and students understand the significance of strong pedagogical relationships built on trust and respect across all cultural and social groups. A teacher comments on this: 'The successes have been more with the confidence with the children and feeling happy to contribute and to have their say and feel valued. I feel that they feel valued and that is reflected in the way they do the work and the way they relate with the teachers.'

The Aboriginal students are important, integrated into all aspects of the community and are focused on their learning. As one Aboriginal remarks: 'This school is a wonderful place.'

Summary — Seeding Success for Aboriginal Students in the Case Study Schools

The case studies highlight how each of the four schools respond differently to the challenge of bringing forward enhanced social and academic outcomes for their minority groups of Aboriginal students. Nonetheless, analysis of data and themes across the four schools do show that within these different approaches are a number of common conditions that might suggest an emerging framework. This framework of eight themes was described as an introduction to the school summaries. It is now rejoined as a summary of the qualitative data in the research.

1. All schools have strongly developed *community relationships*. In all cases this has been a dedicated and long-term project with strong commitment from AEOs, principals and teachers. The different approaches by AEOs (but with similar results) is of particular interest in the case studies, and this has been highlighted throughout.
2. Each of the four schools promoted *Aboriginal spaces* as central to their work. This is through dedicated learning spaces like the Koori Room at Boundary, the community projects at Basin, and the environmental focus at Farmland. It is clear in each context that Aboriginal education is prioritised in the physical school and classroom environment.
3. In all schools *Aboriginal people are important in community relationships*, student relationships, curriculum and pedagogy.
4. Points 2 and 3 above are extended into classroom curriculum where *Aboriginal perspectives and values are prioritised and embedded*. Perspectives address powerful ideas and often involve Aboriginal community. The work of Basin is a particularly informative example of community involvement in the curriculum. There is a strong sense of integration within the curricular work of the schools.
5. The influence of ideas around *quality teaching* emerges as a key theme. Each context had a specific focus on quality teaching and this is considered from an *Aboriginal perspective*. Schools like Farmland have ongoing commitments to the Indigenous QT project and others work more broadly in the DEC's QT framework. Accelerated Literacy is used at Boundary and Basin.
6. Case studies showed that there are clear and strong priorities around *schools as learning communities*. While the movement away from a wellbeing approach is apparent at some schools (e.g., Boundary), at others it appears learning is strongly embedded in the long-term project of the school. Lakeside is an important example.
7. Closely aligned with the development of learning communities is the *targeted support provided for*

Aboriginal students. This support ranges across Aboriginal tutors, the work of AEOs, Aboriginal learning spaces, community involvement and specifically designed individual programs. Moreover, support is extensively focused so that it works for both the academically needy and able Aboriginal students. At Basin there is a determination that support does not threaten cultural inclusivity.

8. As both a process and an outcome, Aboriginal students in all of the four schools are involved in *focused and meaningful relationships* with workers and teachers that work towards helping them see themselves as important, responsible and able to achieve. This involves creativity and dedication on all sides of the school community.

Conclusion

This article acknowledges that the conditions of school success for Aboriginal students are complex equations. They involve the interplay of cultural forces on individual dispositions and decisions as they interact with wider policies, and contextually driven conditions, curricula and pedagogies. The case studies suggest that there is evidence to suggest that schools can make a difference for Aboriginal students and the article offers future directions for school communities to consider as they work on their own approaches to enhanced social and academic outcomes. To return to the framing of the case studies, these outcomes reflect the interrelated workings of a socially just, culturally inclusive and culturally differentiated curriculum. The *social justice* plays out in approaches designed to advantage all students, particularly those not advantaged in school and classroom processes. *Cultural inclusivity* means Aboriginal Studies is a dedicated focus at each school. *Cultural differentiation* involves a careful consideration of what good teaching looks like for Aboriginal students.

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