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So you want to work with the community? Principles and strategies for school leaders affecting the establishment of Aboriginal language programs

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Abstract

The inclusion of Aboriginal language programs within a school's mainstream curriculum has long been the aspiration of many New South Wales Aboriginal communities. In implementing language programs schools may encounter Aboriginal community resistance to a number of educational, social and political issues. This chapter provides an exemplar for schools to engage with Aboriginal communities when establishing authentic curriculum programs that positively privilege Aboriginal cultural knowledge, languages and histories. It explores the views of eight Aboriginal educators in a central school in remote New South Wales who sought to establish a local Aboriginal community language program. Issues such as contemporary Aboriginal cultural identity, trust, reciprocity and the essential importance of Aboriginal language revitalisation to Aboriginal communities are identified. What clearly emerges from this case study is the critical role of the principal, shared and community leadership in establishing educational relationships to address such issues and concerns, and the capacity of Aboriginal people to challenge ingrained curriculum and pedagogical practices.³

The adoption by the New South Wales (NSW) government of the *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW 2003), strengthened by the *NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy* (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2004), has provided school curriculum and teaching and learning support for the revitalisation of Aboriginal

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languages in the state. Based on key commitments made by the NSW government, Aboriginal communities have sought support from schools, educational systems and higher education institutions in establishing strategies that will assist in the revitalisation of local Aboriginal languages. Indicative outcomes from the early stages of language revitalisation have shown schools to be potent sites for collaborative action between Aboriginal communities and government agencies. Such collaboration both nationally and internationally has shown that effective and sustained school-based language teaching and learning contributes significantly to language revitalisation (Hinton 2001, p. 7; Amery 2003, pp. 153–77).

The successful implementation of Aboriginal language programs in NSW has shown that they are highly dependent on the role of the school-based Aboriginal educators. One of their primary tasks across each phase of the project is forging community–school partnerships among key Aboriginal community members, principals and teachers. Underpinning the success of this relationship is an essential recognition by the school that within the language program there is deep but often fragmented cultural knowledge that embeds powerful links to traditional life. The quality of these relationships, based upon levels of trust, respect and reciprocity, has been identified as an essential element in establishing the tenuous foothold that the language program may have within the school’s curriculum (Lowe & Ash 2006). The desirability of establishing school–community partnerships has long been recognised as a way of overcoming the unacceptably high levels of social and cultural disjuncture between schools and Aboriginal communities (Mellor & Corrigan 2004), and improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students (Erebus 2005). The Review of Aboriginal Education (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group [AECG] & NSW Department of Education & Training [DET] 2004) explicitly cited genuine partnerships between schools and Aboriginal communities as a major reason for higher rates of school attendance, deeper engagement and better learning outcomes for Aboriginal students, as well as ‘significantly improving the quality and scope of services provided by government agencies’ (pp. 205–06).

This chapter, based on the initial year of the establishment of an Aboriginal language program, reports on collaborative research gathered in the establishment of a school program that in itself was a major shift in the direction of the school’s curriculum. It focuses on *school leadership*, exploring its meanings and attributes, as identified through interviews with Aboriginal personnel, to better understand the key concerns and attributes that underpin Aboriginal community–school teaching and learning collaboration.

Building social capital, unleashing community capacity

Recent commonwealth and state policy developments have sought to embed educational program outcomes around social capital in order to empower stronger and more engaged families and communities in the wider Australian community. (Johnson 2003; Keele 2007). There has been a growing acknowledgement that

governments and social agencies need to look at both program delivery and the nature and resilience of the community in which they work if significant disadvantage is to be addressed. The greater the degree of disadvantage of people, the greater the likelihood that program clients would be unable to affect the conceptualisation of project outcomes and strategies, resource allocation and the government expectations on participant roles and responsibilities (Makuwira 2007).

Such tensions are highlighted as governments have sought to impose programs on often-sceptical Aboriginal communities who have awaited the heralded improvements in their social, economic and political worlds. While governments of all persuasions continue to define community capacity in narrow economic development, managerial and welfare terms (Makuwira 2007, p. 130), Aboriginal communities have argued for programs to be receptive to their diverse cultural identities providing Aboriginal people with the confidence to interact across all operational domains and the skills to challenge program goals strategies and outcomes.

Ah Met's (2001) opening address to the Cape York Partnerships Conference raised the paternalistic construct of deficit thinking:

I want to say some words of caution about the concept of 'capacity building' which has become the new buzzword of Aboriginal policy and social policy in general. The problem is that the concept of capacity building comes to be based on the idea that Aboriginal people are inherently incapable or somehow lacking. There is a danger of fostering a hidden bureaucratic racism and prejudice against our people. (cited in Tedmanson 2005, p. 2)

The failure of countless government programs to make any substantial improvement to social and economic realities for Aboriginal communities across Australia has cast a pall over the latest Council of Australian Governments (COAG) review, and has again seen policy makers identifying the need for service deliverers to engage with Aboriginal communities (COAG 2009, p. A.24). The initiation of authentic community capacity projects between agencies and Aboriginal communities within a school has reshaped their focus from economic development to deep collaborations and sustainable policy partnerships. Such partnerships have been seen to enable both schools and communities to better address significant social, political, governance and economic matters. The gaze of these programs has turned from the 'problem' community to the 'problematic' agency, where policies and practices are scrutinised for their ability to engage and empower policy clients.

Howard and Perry (2007), reporting on community capacity programs in NSW schools, noted the positive impact in developing and implementing community capacity building on teachers, students, community leaders and community members alike. However, as noted by Lowe (2007), from an Indigenous perspective, the efficacy of these programs is clearly linked to the degree to which government agencies develop a sustained capacity to engage openly with Aboriginal people to deliver high quality services that suit their needs.

A sojourn: A study of culture and identity

The story of this investigation grew out of an ongoing project with one school in a NSW rural community, remote in distance from cities, resources and infrastructure. The community worked in partnership with the support of the NSW Board of Studies, Aboriginal education workers and a local language teacher in implementing the *Aboriginal languages K–10 Syllabus*.

Since 2000, attempts to establish an Aboriginal language program in the school had proven to be unsuccessful. Negotiations between the school and John,⁴ the Aboriginal language tutor took place over several years before he was willing to participate. His concerns centred on:

- the school's willingness to negotiate with him and the local community
- the need to broaden the base of community language teachers
- the proper provision of funds to support his employment
- his anxiety about upsetting the delicate balance between competing clans and languages in the town.

The language program, which commenced in earnest in 2006, began with discussions between the school, language teacher, Aboriginal teachers and education workers. The critical importance of establishing school teams committed to viable and sustainable community-driven Aboriginal language programs is well documented (Amery 2002, 2003; Lowe 2007; Green & Oppliger 2007). Initial school–community discussions looked to address the complex mix of issues and questions that surround language revitalisation programs, including:

- Which Aboriginal languages would be taught?
- What would be the initial focus of the program (which stage of learning)?
- What was the community expectation of the school? How was the school going to demonstrate its support?
- What role did the Aboriginal teachers have in advocating and driving the program?
- How were the Aboriginal education workers to be involved?
- How was the school going to fund the program, in particular the employment of the language tutor?

Areas of investigation

This project focused on the processes adopted by its Aboriginal educators and their school in establishing a sustainable partnership that would support the implementation of the syllabus. The focused interviews held with Aboriginal teachers, school workers and Aboriginal language teacher reported on the initial phase of this language revitalisation project. This study investigated the views and feelings of those Aboriginal people who were most closely involved in the establishment of the language school-based Aboriginal program in four broad areas (Table 1).

⁴ All personal names used in this paper are fictitious.

Area of investigation	Key focus questions
Respectful relationships	What do Aboriginal people identify as the key elements within respectful relationships between communities and schools?
Valuing Indigenous knowledge	How do schools represent Aboriginal knowledge within the school curriculum ? How is the inclusion of this knowledge negotiated with Aboriginal communities ? To what degree is the authenticity of this knowledge linked to the school and community negotiation ?
Community/parent perceptions of school	What impact would the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge within the school's educational programs have on the community's perception of the school?
Aboriginal programs in mainstream curriculum	Does the inclusion of Indigenous programs within the school's curriculum positively impact on the community's valuing of the school?

Table 1. Areas of investigation.

Interviewing the Aboriginal educators

Interviews were conducted in early Term 2 and Term 4 of 2007, though there were other opportunities to observe the unfolding language project and to discuss issues of the development and implementation of the program. One issue of concern centred on gaining the trust of the school and the community alike. The research participants changed over the course of the three interviews, with the Aboriginal language tutor being part of each interview and one of the two Aboriginal primary teachers participating in two of the interviews.

The direction of each interview was informed by a series of broad questions (Table 1), developed from a review of national and international literature on community-school partnerships. The interviews followed the broad direction of the key focus questions, laced with conversational comment and counterpoints between the interviewees and the researcher. Each interview was transcribed with copies provided to the interviewees. These were discussed informally with the Aboriginal educators over the year and in some cases participants asked that clarifications or additional reflections be added to the transcript. An agreed text was constructed and substituted into the interviews.

The school site

The field site was a K–12 central school located in a small rural town in NSW that draws its enrolment from the immediate township and nearby settlements. A small

number of children travel by bus from several very small settlements within a 50-kilometre radius. The school population fluctuated around 200 students in 2007, with about 120 Kindergarten to Year 6 students and 80 in the secondary school. The overwhelming majority of students (99%) identify as Aboriginal. The town's Aboriginal population is drawn from a number of language groups. At various times there have been tensions within and across these different language groups that has challenged community cohesion.

There's a generalised misconception that all of these Aboriginal communities are the same and they're not. But you see we know that they are somewhat different ... not factions but there are some people with different perceptions. (Rhonda)

The historical relocation of Aboriginal people from diverse language groups was the result of policies of forced removal of Aboriginal people from their country and relocation to Aboriginal reserves or missions across NSW. People from communities as far away as south-west Queensland and the Northern Territory, as well as nearby towns, had been relocated to the town mission. A Shared Responsibility Agreement established in 2003⁵ has forged a significant role for itself within the community. One area of ongoing interest has seen it advocate strongly for the importance of cultural awareness and community involvement in being about sustainable improvements to Aboriginal student outcomes (Jeffries 2006).

Since 1990, as with many rural Australian communities, the township has suffered the consequences of the rationalisation and loss of significant community services such as banking, legal, health, an Aboriginal cultural centre and Aboriginal medical service. During the early 1970s the school's enrolment was approximately 50% Aboriginal. In 2007 the school's Aboriginal enrolment had almost reached 100%, as many of the non-Aboriginal families had left the surrounding area seeking long-term employment stability. This significant change in student demographic is not reflected in strategic curriculum development, with particular regard to the recognition of the role of Aboriginal languages in improving learning outcomes for Aboriginal students, an enhanced view of self identity, and broader school–community engagement.

You look at when we were at school, all the teachers' kids and all the ambulance officers' kids, all the police officers' kids, all the public servants' kids went here. Not only kids from the rest of the town all came here too, and the property owners' kids too and principal's kids went to the school as well. All of a sudden through the 70s and 80s the whole society swung the other way so all these service providers became positions for young up and coming single people ... who don't have the attachment through their children to the school, to the community or to their kids' friends. (John)

5 A joint agreement between the regional council, the Commonwealth and NSW State Governments (signed on August 22, 2003) to establish partnerships and share responsibility for achieving measurable and sustainable improvements for Indigenous people living in the region.

Aboriginal educators

The Aboriginal language tutor

John, in his late 30s, has lived in the town from birth other than when he went travelling to look for work in his early 20s. Since his return John has spent time working with the Aboriginal Elders in the community, learning language, culture and connectedness. He has also worked closely with a well-known non-Aboriginal linguist who had learnt and documented the language from elderly speakers during the 1960s. This information and ongoing access to the linguist has been a significant source of language and cultural knowledge.

Aboriginal teachers

There were two Aboriginal teachers at the school, Rhonda, the assistant principal and Susan, the Year 3 teacher. Both teachers were born in the community and have strong familial links to many students and other Aboriginal workers in the school. Rhonda has strong views concerning broad social issues that impact on the town, the impact of the current school curriculum on Aboriginal student learning and the positive influences of an Aboriginal language program on Aboriginal students and their community. Susan proved to be more circumspect in her views, especially in regard to her role in the development and implementation of the school Aboriginal language program. She was aware of the efforts made by the principal to establish the program, and provided advice on John's employment and on providing the other Aboriginal education workers with opportunities to be actively involved in the program. Both Rhonda and Susan spoke of the levels of disconnection among their teaching colleagues, themselves and the other Aboriginal educators on staff. This accentuated what they saw as an unenviable position of being Aboriginal teachers in the school with the recent history of disconnection between the school and the Aboriginal community.

The Aboriginal education officers and in-school tutors

There were seven Aboriginal educators employed in the school. While the Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) were permanent employees, the in-class tutors were employed on part-time contracts. The AEOs and in-class tutors were employed to support teachers in the classroom. Differences in their employment status and access to benefits such as holiday pay, training and development appeared to cause friction among Aboriginal staff. The principal had hoped that their collective involvement in the Aboriginal language program would assist in moulding them into a more cohesive group as well as supporting John in his role as a language tutor. It was within this staff context that data was collected.

Voices: key themes emerge

The interview transcriptions were initially coded into four key themes that had been drawn from the literature. These themes were further analysed to identify consistent

elements used to describe and illuminate issues raised by the Aboriginal educators. These elements described the Aboriginal educators' relations with Aboriginal parents and the wider town Aboriginal community, their personal and professional relationships, the school's educational programs, the aspirations they had for the successful development of the Aboriginal language program, and their accepted roles in its development and implementation. These were then aggregated for closer content analysis. The identified themes and related elements are described in Table 2.

Themes	Elements (elucidated from interviews)
School leadership	Openness, positive roles and impact, trust, understanding, resources, programs
Aboriginal community school partnerships	History, purpose, respect, challenges, purposeful action, commitment, openness, access
Local Aboriginal language program	Connection, relevance, identity, enjoyment, engagement, community building, ownership, training
Teacher preparedness and engagement	Local cultural understanding, diversity, openness, student and community expectations, resistance, engagement, community connections

Table 2. Themes and Elements.

School leadership

While the full study identified four main themes and elements, the remainder of this chapter will focus on just the first of these, the role of the principal in facilitating, leading, resourcing and opening the school to the establishment of the school-based Aboriginal language program.

Positive role model and effective staff leadership

In a small and increasingly introspective community struck by the long economic downturn brought on by drought, corporate rationalisation and closure of public and private services, the significance of the school principal is as one of the most senior representatives of government in the town, presiding over the largest single enterprise other than the shire council. The influence of this position is extensive and goes well beyond the school. The Aboriginal educators noted the role of principal as being critical to the way in which the town perceived and interacted with the school and the teachers.

Mulford and Johns (2004) reviewed multi-site research on the nature and effectiveness of school leadership. While their findings go beyond this investigation, one of their research questions was pivotal in identifying the capacity of school leaders to positively impact on the in-school learning environment of students, through being

responsive to the needs and aspirations of the broader community within which the students resided.

Many successful leaders in schools serving highly diverse student populations enact practices to promote school quality, equity, and social justice. These practices include building powerful forms of teaching and learning, creating strong communities in school, nurturing the development of educational cultures in families, and expanding the amount of students' social capital valued by the schools. (Mulford & Johns 2004, p. 2)

A key responsibility of the principal is to act as mentor and role model, not just to the school staff, but also to the wider parent and community body (Hughes 2007; Mulford & Johns 2004). Schools have a central role in ensuring parents from low socio-economic communities are actively involved in student learning if they are looking to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students (Lareau & Horvat 1999; Mulford & Johns 2004). This is in line with other research that emphasises the wide range of educational, cultural and social variables that impact on student achievement (Cuttance, Angus, Crowther & Hill 2001)

The Aboriginal educators recognised the pivotal role played by the principal in initiating and managing significant changes, but bemoaned the school's poor management of the substantial human and cultural resources that resided within the group, and the lack of capacity from previous principals to openly engage with the Aboriginal parents. However, both Aboriginal teachers identified a shift in commitment with the new principal's public assurances of changing the entrenched school practices:

but the positive things so far would be the fact that we do have a principal, a principal after so many years who's willing to drive this program, the language program, that's the most positive thing that's come out of it. (Rhonda)

The Aboriginal teachers in particular had quickly developed high expectations of the new principal, seeing in him a capacity to make the types of changes that they believed were necessary to embed the establishment of the languages program. In their eyes the principal had appeared to take a positive position and support community aspirations in supporting the initiation of the language program. Central to this perception was a view that his support demonstrated a level of cultural engagement that had hitherto not been apparent from previous principals. Evidence of this change in support was the increased level of resourcing and the fact that the school had taken steps to timetable the course for inclusion in both the secondary and primary curriculum. However, while this effort was acknowledged, the Aboriginal educators were keenly aware of the levels of negative comment that had emerged from the non-Aboriginal teaching staff. The comment concerning driving the program was also squarely focused on his leadership in securing acceptance of the program from the other teaching staff.

The question of teacher engagement was an issue that became the focus of significant comment from all the Aboriginal educators. They questioned whether the principal

understood the vision and particular leadership required to develop authentic community participation. The Aboriginal staff that were interviewed focused clearly on many teachers' lack of cultural understanding and the need to challenge the school's teaching staff to open their classrooms to parents so that educational partnerships could be established. Several saw that it was only through the development of such relationships that the Aboriginal community could see that the school was seeking an understanding and being responsive to local aspirations by acknowledging local Aboriginal culture and language knowledge.

you'd see the principal more engaged then, then the staff more engaged in what's happening in the school and then the students are more engaged and it needs to trickle throughout the engagement process. It comes with improving their relationships with the community. (Rhonda)

Clearly the Aboriginal staff saw a strong correlation between the actions of the principal in actively supporting Aboriginal community aspirations for the language program, and staff and student engagement. For Rhonda, as one of the Aboriginal teachers, there was a clear link between leadership and improved student engagement and performance.

Many interviewees reported the issue of needing to overcome teacher resistance. The principal was seen to be key in encouraging school staff to establish effective dialogue with Aboriginal parents. They identified a lack of commitment from the class teachers in supporting the language program as symptomatic of a wider divide between the school teaching staff and the town. The establishment of the Aboriginal language program was personal as it spoke of who the staff, students and community were, and how they wanted to be addressed as an Aboriginal community.

The issues of respect and trust figured prominently in many of the conversations with the Aboriginal educators. These were seen as key elements in the establishment of successful relationships with themselves and the wider community. Underpinning these elements were issues of cultural respect for both the language and the culture that was embedded within it. This was manifested in how the school was seen to treat the Aboriginal language tutor. John was held in high regard and any slight on him was seen to reflect on the whole town community. Unequal treatment such as his level of pay, teaching hours and access to employment rights had been the cause of deep concern for John and the other Aboriginal staff.

... It has to be reciprocal – reciprocal respect, reciprocal faith, reciprocal trust. (Rhonda)

... you have to be addressed the same as everybody else, on the same level, so you don't have anybody in the school talking down to you or addressing you and giving you directions as a lesser person; and they speak to you and deal with you on a level that they wish to be dealt with.

... when they respect your knowledge (John)

... value your knowledge (Joan)

... definitely ... recognition (Rhonda)

John acutely felt the impact of these issues and he spoke of them as exposing deeper concerns about the school, its lack of cultural respect and its larger incapacity to engage with the broader community on issues that the Aboriginal educators saw as critical to the establishment of the language program.

An effective attribute of school leadership is the necessity to develop a range of strategies that are seen as genuinely indicating a long-term commitment to work collaboratively to effect changes in the schooling experiences of Aboriginal students. For the participants, these attributes centred on both the personal and institutional, and were captured by comments on the level of real engagement, commitment and trust that the community had in the school's ability or willingness to deliver on the many promises to improve Aboriginal student learning outcomes. Key ideas such as two-way engagement, reciprocity, collaboration, trust and a commitment to work together were used to describe the professional and personal relationships that the Aboriginal educators sought.

Elucidating meanings

The findings of this study indicate a keen understanding of the key role that the principal has in developing and sustaining a positive role model for both the community and school staff. The Aboriginal educators articulated an acute awareness of the importance of the principal in challenging past policies and practices. The hope of the community, as articulated by the Aboriginal education workers, was that the principal's strong support for the Aboriginal language program would provide tangible evidence to others of the importance of the human, social and cultural capital of the local community. Indeed, the findings indicate that effective leadership should be built on the concerted efforts of the school principal to:

- foster a culture-building environment in which students and the community see tangible evidence of the recognition of Aboriginal culture
- facilitate a clear articulation of the school's vision for the development of an educational environment that challenges staff to engage positively with the Aboriginal students, parents and community.

Trust, respect and reciprocity

Notions of trust, respect and reciprocity figured significantly in defining the role of the principal, his own relationships with the non-Aboriginal teaching staff, and the relationship that the teachers had with the Aboriginal community. The interrelated notions of trust, respect and reciprocity are critical in social capital research as they are seen to underpin both the depth and quality of civic connectedness (Putnam 1993).

The issue of leadership and the connection to trust and respect were identified by all the Aboriginal educators as critical to the sustainable advancement of Aboriginal education in their school. 'Initiatives focused on creating or strengthening the internal school community often involve approaches to "moral education" and strive to build trust, respect and a sense of engagement among students and staff' (Schwab & Sutherland 2001, p. 2).

Rhonda and Susan spoke of the need for the principal to engender trusting relationships with the community by following through on the promises made when establishing the school Aboriginal language program. The histories of partially implemented programs, alongside the failure to develop sustainable and culturally engaging ones, has littered Aboriginal education and have often been the cause for the low levels of respect and trust that some schools are held in by Aboriginal parents and communities (NSW AECG & NSW DET 2004).

Trust has been identified as being a key indicator of social cohesion and community wellbeing. Putnam (1993), in his work on social capital, isolated the concept of trust underpinning strong communities and the strength of connections among individuals that are formed and supported by networks; norms of reciprocity. 'Trust is an essential building material which social groups are able to marshal to support their collective civic life to enable them to engage with the wider community' (Beem, cited in Smith 2007, p. 2). It is accepted that schools must develop a capacity to establish relationships with disconnected communities and to challenge the teaching and learning practices that underpin the low levels of social and educational engagement for Aboriginal students.

Those interviewed spoke of the distance that they felt existed between themselves and the rest of the staff, and the isolation between teachers and the Aboriginal community. Van Deth (2003) linked trust, respect and reciprocity within schools to both the personal and social domains of students, staff and parents and, in turn, tied these norms of reciprocity to personal and collective confidence. The capacity for the development of shared values and higher degrees of trust is unlikely to be achieved without significant intervention by effective school leaders. Difficulties in establishing and maintaining trusting relationships between schools and Aboriginal communities are evident by high levels of social disconnection among the values and experiences of many non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal people. This disconnection can be challenged when greater bodies of shared trust and values underpin the relationship.

For Rhonda, the potential of the new relationship evidenced in the principal's actions was that it would affect other school staff and influence their willingness to reach out and seek closer links to the town community. Achieving such links would require the development of linking ties between the local Aboriginal community and school. From Rhonda's perspective, an underpinning assumption for the development of these partnerships was that it would expose deeply flawed school structures and non-responsive school-delivered curriculum. By providing a structure and a focused purpose, a partnership would give teachers and the Aboriginal community the capacity

to challenge those impediments that have deeply separated schools from Aboriginal people. Underpinning these new and purposeful partnerships was a relationship based on increased levels of trust between key stakeholders and government institutions (Stone & Hughes 2001, pp. 3–4). When these conditions are met, effective and reciprocal school–community relationships can be established (NSW DET 1999).

As a teacher I envisage the students learning the language and then teaching their parents and, then hopefully, that will permeate throughout and then you have sort of closeness and everyone has a commonality. (Rhonda)

This case study witnessed a developing synergy of shared values and growing trust among the Aboriginal education workers themselves, and between them and the school, as they collaborated to establish a common program that was valued and respected by both parties. However, issues such as the rates of pay for the tutor had to be addressed before the program could move forward. Though a short-term solution was found, this issue remained unresolved and continued to impact on the capacity of the program.

The partnership provided a mechanism through which these matters could be raised and their importance vented between the language team and the principal. In genuinely seeking sustainable solutions to these key concerns, the school provided stronger evidence that the establishment of the partnership had a real purpose, and was worthy of deeper engagement. The partnership provided a legitimacy and space where serious issues could be raised within a developing framework of openness and genuine trust among team members. This was the new interface of common purpose that could meld school curriculum and community capacity into a powerful force for sustainable educational change.

Recommendations for effective school leadership

This chapter has focused on school leadership, one of the four key themes identified by Aboriginal educators as significant in the meaningful educational engagement required for the establishment of school and Aboriginal community partnerships. This research project has indicated the potential of sustained partnerships to positively impact on the levels of engagement of Aboriginal educators within the teaching and learning domain of schools. The project has found that in developing sustainable community change:

- principals need to be provided with explicit advice and support in the development of real and sustainable school–community educational partnerships that focus on trust building and two-way respect
- schools must be given the highest systemic support to build and sustain effective partnerships with the Aboriginal community
- action plans and strategies should be centred on learning
- professional development should be shaped around the learning needs of Aboriginal students

- systemic advice in protocols and cultural norms in developing purposeful relationships should be available to schools.

A second clear outcome of this study was how strongly committed the Aboriginal educators had become to the establishment of the language program at the school. The clear commitment by the school principal to commence teaching their language had the effect, in their eyes, of compensating for the historical role of schools in enforcing the loss of so many Aboriginal languages. The support of the principal in facilitating the establishment of this cultural program was highly significant, as it had the capacity to draw strong community acclaim for its acknowledgement of long-held aspirations. Schools can play a key role in supporting the revitalisation of Aboriginal community languages through their unambiguous commitment to providing ongoing support for the program. This should include:

- a clear and unequivocal commitment by the school to work with the community on the establishment of culturally appropriate programs
- the development of partnerships with Aboriginal parents and community as high value programs are being developed
- an acknowledgement of the key role of Aboriginal languages and cultural inclusion in curriculum
- strategic development of language, and teaching and learning support to the Aboriginal language teachers which should be built into larger community planning
- co-developing a strategic plan to support integration of negotiated language and cultural programs, including matters such as sustainable funding, teaching, professional support and resourcing.

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