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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVING RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of socially just leadership has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years as integral for tackling issues of disadvantage and inequality across education and schooling systems. However, there are still remaining questions about what these leadership practices look like in the everyday work of school leaders. This chapter draws on a research project to embed Indigenous perspectives in schools as an example of socially just leadership. The links between Indigenous communities and schools are a key focus area for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This project sought to bring Indigenous community members into classrooms in six schools in New South Wales, Australia. Community

members were recruited to work with teachers as co-constructors of learning activities that explicitly value and work with Indigenous perspectives. This chapter outlines the positive outcomes from this project as well as challenges faced by schools, teachers, principals, and community members as part of this culturally responsive work. The practices of community members, teachers, and principals are theorized using the notion of culturally responsive leadership. The chapter argues for an approach to leadership that is grounded in culturally responsive understandings to improve the educational outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous students and the cultural understanding and awareness of non-Indigenous students, to better promote reconciliation. This chapter provides a concrete example of powerful leadership practices that are working towards equity and social justice for their schools and communities. While the cases are specifically from the Australian context, they are relevant for a variety of schooling contexts and leadership practices.

Keywords: Culturally responsive leadership; Indigenous education; school leadership; school community relations; social justice

INTRODUCTION

> *'So, we've got to be in charge of what correctly gets put out there to the students from community perspectives, and family, individual perspectives, into the classroom, rather than being delivered by a non-Indigenous person.' (Indigenous community member)*[1]

The importance of socially just leadership has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years as integral for tackling issues of disadvantage and inequality across education and schooling systems (e.g. Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Lopez, 2016; MacDonald, 2024). However, there are remaining questions about what these leadership practices look like and consist of in the everyday work of school leaders and teachers. The above quote highlights an enduring issue for educators wishing to incorporate Indigenous[2] perspectives into schools and classrooms. Indigenous communities have typically been marginalized and excluded from having a direct voice and involvement in the teaching of Indigenous perspectives even though it has been mandated as a compulsory element in Australian Education (AITSL, 2011). Furthermore, many non-Indigenous teachers and educators feel underprepared to teach this content, knowledges, and perspectives in their classrooms (Lowe & Galstaun,

2020; Santoro, 2007). Implementing the introduction of Indigenous perspectives at scale across an education system requires culturally responsive leadership and needs examples of practices that are having positive effects on school community relations and for Indigenous students and communities.

This chapter draws on a research project designed to embed Indigenous perspectives in schools and classrooms in New South Wales, Australia, as an example of socially just leadership practices. With the links between Indigenous communities and schools being a key focus area for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students, this project sought to bring Indigenous community members into classrooms in six primary schools. Indigenous community members were recruited to work with teachers as co-constructors of learning activities that explicitly value and work with Indigenous perspectives, to go beyond simple, stereotypical behaviour support roles that have historically been a feature of such relationships.

In this chapter, I[3] outline some positive outcomes from this project as well as the challenges faced by schools, teachers, principals, and community members as part of this culturally responsive work. The practices of community members, teachers, and principals are understood using the notion of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018). In doing so, I argue for an approach to leadership that is grounded in culturally responsive understandings to improve the educational outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous students and the cultural understanding and awareness of non-Indigenous students, to better promote reconciliation. This chapter provides a concrete example of powerful leadership practices that are working towards the goals of equity and social justice for their schools and communities. While the cases are specifically from the Australian context, they are relevant for a variety of schooling contexts and leadership practices.

In the first section of the chapter, I provide a background to the study through a brief examination of some of the pertinent research and literature related to leadership for social justice and equity, and then more specifically culturally responsive leadership. The notion of culturally responsive leadership is used to understand the data and frame the importance of these ideas for how to build socially justice leadership practices that are informed by understanding and mutual respect. In the next section, I explain and detail the research processes and details of the research project before moving into the main findings from the interview data which have been divided up into responses from the key participant groups: community members, teachers, and school principals. I then make sense of these findings through the notion of culturally responsive leadership and reflect on the research project as a whole and its implications for future research.

LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

It has been generally accepted that school leadership plays a central role in creating an environment where high quality teaching and learning can take place. Therefore, the emphasis on much of the research into educational leadership has been on identifying 'best practice' and the links between leadership and student outcomes. While I am cognisant of the important work that has been done in this area, and that improving student learning is a core business of schools, in terms of tackling issues of equity, these approaches have not largely focused on the complexities of leadership for social justice and equity, nor how one might overcome the challenges of leadership in disadvantaged schools and communities. For example, in the 'Gonski 2.0' review (Department of Education & Training, 2018), school leadership was promoted as a key element of improving Australia's education system but what was missing was a central focus on equity and how leadership can support equity as a goal.

Research into leadership and equity/social justice reveals that school leaders must have an explicit focus on these issues for schools to be more socially just. It is not just the responsibility of school leaders in disadvantaged areas to address these issues; it needs to be a focus for all schools (see Connell, 1993; Niesche, 2017; Salwell, 2013). This also requires an understanding and acknowledgement that schools can be sites of injustice (see Brooks, 2012) and that rather than an over-emphasis on leadership models, standards, and goals narrowly defined concepts of 'good' leadership, school leaders should focus on the purpose of leadership. Research from Niesche and Keddie (2012, 2016) has indicated that school leadership that engages with an ethics of leadership for social justice can have transformative potential for students in disadvantaged schools and communities. Principals in these case studies from Australia and England worked as advocates for their students and communities, had social justice as explicit purpose to their daily practice and school missions, worked against deficit understandings of students, practiced a range of leadership styles and approaches that served to improve equity for their schools, recognized racism and exclusion, and created solutions to alleviate poverty and disadvantage. These key aims of leadership practice are also evident in research beyond Australia (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Brooks, 2012; Normore, 2009; Theoharis, 2010).

Research into leadership that is culturally appropriate and responsive has shown the possibilities and potential to be transformative (see Horsford et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lopez, 2016). In the Australian context, the work as a part of Chris Sarra's Stronger and Smarter Institute (http://strongersmarter.com.au; see also Sarra, 2011) has shown the value of this work for leadership in both Indigenous education and for diverse and disadvantaged communities. This work is about challenging issues that disadvantage some groups of

students and seeking out approaches to alleviate poverty, racism, and other forms of disadvantage and inequity. The notion of the 'socially just school' (Smyth et al., 2014) is also one that fosters a range of principles through which schools can benefit and advance the outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through fostering issues around school culture, school/community relations, socially critical pedagogy, curriculum, and leadership. These ideas are focused on speaking back to deficit discourses of students, addressing disengagement from schooling, giving students voice and agency, having high expectations of students, embracing diversity, and tackling myths and stereotypes around disadvantage. These are all core areas in which school leaders can actively make a difference to students' lives.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOLING

The Australian education system's problems of inequity are perhaps most salient for Australian Indigenous people. Considering the Australian Federal Government's 2023 report on the 'Closing the Gap' policy, it is evident that the Government's intentions to reduce educational disadvantage among Indigenous students in comparison to non-Indigenous students continue to fail (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). Historically in Australia, there have been a vast array of policies, reports, and research documenting little sustainable success. It is therefore imperative that avenues are found to help Indigenous students feel a positive self-identity which will arguably improve their participation and retention in education and school outcomes (Beresford & Partington, 2003). The project on which this chapter reports aims to contribute to these outcomes.

Some of the obstacles Indigenous students experience in school which affect educational outcomes are racism and negative stereotyping of Indigenous peoples which has been portrayed in the media (Beresford & Partington, 2003) and the lack of culturally responsive schooling. This has been a consequence of discriminatory policies in Australia since colonization which have led to perceptions of schooling being a 'white man's process' (Beresford & Partington, 2003). It has been argued that academic and family support have an enormous influence on educational achievement for Indigenous students (Downey & Hart, 2000). Increasing representation of Indigenous people in teaching positions can have a profound flow on effect on the aspirations and performance of Indigenous students (Downey & Hart, 2000). It has been suggested that future teachers should endeavour to understand Aboriginal cultural protocols of their students, their students' home and family background, and seek to develop good relations with their students' families to see these results turn around (Beresford & Partington, 2003, p. 161).

There has been increasing recognition over recent years of the significance of culturally responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in supporting learning outcomes for disadvantaged learners. This research emphasizes 'culturally appropriate' teaching and learning that is respectful of students' background and relevant to their experiences (Bishop, 2003; Keddie, 2012; Klenowski, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004). Valuing marginalized students' culture is seen to be particularly important in disrupting (the mainstream) exclusionary and discriminatory practices that tend to undermine these students' performance. Unfortunately, attempts at valuing marginalized cultures in schools and classrooms continue to deploy superficial and tokenistic understandings – as in one off celebrations such as multicultural days, that can lead to a further 'othering' of these students. The significance of moving beyond such superficial understandings through a more critical approach to culture is now well recognized. This approach is about educators eschewing fixed notions of culture to engage contextually with marginalized knowledge and experiences towards creating more meaningful and relevant learning encounters for marginalized students, and indeed for all students (Keddie et al., 2013; Nakata, 2007). Important recent research into Aboriginal voices (Burgess & Lowe, 2019; Moodie et al., 2021), and culturally nourishing schools and leadership (Lowe et al., 2021) is similarly aligned with these ideas.

Khalifa's culturally responsive school leadership approach offers great value here, albeit from a US perspective. Khalifa describes cultural responsiveness as a necessary component of effective school leadership (Khalifa, 2018). Khalifa writes that: 'If cultural responsiveness is to be present and sustainable in school, it must foremost and consistently be promoted by school leaders; and, culturally responsive school leadership is characterized by:

1. Being critically self-reflective
2. Developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula
3. Promoting inclusive, anti-oppressive school contexts
4. Engaging students' Indigenous community contexts' (Khalifa, 2018, p. 13).

These four elements will be considered in relation to the data presented in this chapter. However, first, I will describe the research background and process undertaken as a part of this project.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In light of the above research and literature, the project on which this chapter reports aimed to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of

Indigenous youth within a holistic, community-centred educational framework, in partnership with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). The project involved two core intertwined dimensions: the preparation of teachers and school leaders to undertake culturally responsive schooling practices; and the preparation of Indigenous parents, carers, and community members with the skills to work collaboratively with teachers and contribute to the decision-making within the school community of their children (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). These two core elements were designed to improve the engagement and achievements of the students. To do this, the project team worked towards establishing a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies and curriculum practices along with supportive and sustainable leadership to ensure that the broader school community, including non-Indigenous children, benefit from the cultural wealth and knowledge of the local Indigenous community in ways which build mutual understanding and respect (Paris & Alim, 2014). The research activities are outlined as follows under the two main project goals.

Goal 1

To build capacity among Indigenous parents to support improved educational outcomes, enhancing both their children's academic achievement and attitudes towards schooling as well as non-Indigenous understanding and respect, by positioning them as valuable sources of knowledge important to all Australians and increasing their involvement and visibility in the school community.

- Five participating schools ran term length projects across two of the terms during 2017–2018 (and two schools for one term in 2016), involving a total of 10 Aboriginal community members and 18 teachers. The participants were involved with the relationship building and professional learning workshops.
- A total of 12 interviews were conducted with Aboriginal community members to gauge changes in attitudes and perceptions of the success across the span of the project. In addition, 19 separate consultations were undertaken with the local AECG representatives.
- A total of 15 classroom observations were undertaken and resources were gathered as examples of culturally responsive practices informed by the project. In addition, a range of extracurricular activities such as NAIDOC celebrations, Koori Parents group, and AECG meetings were attended by the research team.

Goal 2

To strengthen teachers' capacity to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners and to meet their professional obligation to be advocates for reconciliation and to teach students to understand and value Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge.

- 14 workshops and professional learning sessions were conducted across the life of the project. Activities included introductions to the project, relationship building, professional learning, reflection, and individual mentoring sessions.
- A total of 125 surveys were collected across the 3 years of the project from teachers in all 5 schools. These surveys included items with Likert scales to evaluate changes in teacher attitudes regarding meeting the AITSL standards; preparedness working with Indigenous students and teaching Indigenous perspectives; confidence with addressing anti-racist activities; and culturally responsive schooling and working with diverse learners.
- A total of 18 interviews with teachers, and 6 with school principals were undertaken across the 3 years of the project.

The data included for the purposes of this chapter include the interviews with Aboriginal community members, classroom teachers, and school principals across the life of the project. These have been selected primarily for the purposes of acknowledging the voices of the participants involved in the project. Participants have been given pseudonyms throughout for the purposes of anonymity.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A Project for More Than Just Aboriginal Kids

One of the recurring themes from the interviews with local Aboriginal community members was that of the benefits of the project for all students, not just those of Aboriginal background. For example, comments from Aboriginal community members include:

> *I want to see them value it as more than just an 'Aboriginal program', but as a whole school program. (Cheryl)*

> *You don't want to just be in the classroom, being like an aide, I guess, but this is different, because we got to deliver it rather than*

> *dealing with just the Aboriginal students like [AEO's] do. We got to do the whole classroom and provide that perspective on to all the students there. Yeah. And the teacher, too. It can only build cultural competence in them, as well. (Kimberley)*

These two comments above indicate how the community members believe the project of getting local community members into classrooms is important for the whole school and all students, not just Aboriginal students (and in fact, the teachers too). There was also pride that this role was a substantive one and not just about being a teacher's aide, which has traditionally been the role of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), but it is about building 'cultural' competence and delivering curriculum content and Aboriginal knowledge to teachers and students. Similar comments from other community members include:

> *I'm glad that this project's in this community of schools, because that's why I wanted to do it: because it is community, and it's important, and, like, we know all the Koori kids, and it's good to put our perspective on to the non-Aboriginal kids, and make sure they're still involved, and even thought here is an indigenous perspective in their lesson, that they need to know that they still are involved in the lesson, and hopefully the teachers can see that and we can learn something off them and they can learn something off us. (Kimberley)*

> *And you know, in the classroom, the more and more Aboriginal people you bring into the classroom, is going to make a big difference, not only just on Aboriginal kids. All kids. And it doesn't have to be a high-profile Koori person. It can be just at that low level, who's achieved. (Marion)*

Having Aboriginal community seen as valuable members of the school can have a powerful influence on Aboriginal students and for the perception of non-Aboriginal students away from stereotypical and deficit views that are more commonly found across Australian society.

Perceptions on the Role of Aboriginal Community Members

A significant theme to come through the interviews relates to the discussion of roles, that is, about the actual role the Aboriginal community member plays in the classroom and how that works with the classroom teacher. In the previous theme, the point was made that these roles are more teaching and learning

focused rather than simply behaviour-focused. However, this raises key issues about how the relationship is developed between the Aboriginal community member and the classroom teachers, how particular knowledge is valued, and the practicalities of implementing this set of arrangements. For example, the following excerpts are from Aboriginal community members about how they feel in relation to this issue:

> *The teachers already do a lot of great things, but they don't know how to think outside what they already know. They're having difficulties imagining a new type of relationship that's more than just 'a role model in the class' or an assistant, and they're struggling with what it might look like to relinquish some control. I tell them, you're doing a lot already but this will be more in-depth. It will involve different processes, maybe go across different subjects than you're used to thinking about incorporating Aboriginal perspectives. (Cheryl)*

> *It takes time to build relationships, so that people will be willing to embark on the journey. There are a lot of shades of grey – in the timing, funding, amount of work, what it might look like, who might be appropriate for the roles. It can be hard to find the appropriate community members; some might not have the skill or confidence. Some know more about culture, history than others. The types of experiences they've had in schools before is a factor. Some might be frightened of being judged by other community members. Not everyone is a good fit – AECG consultation is important. (Cheryl)*

> *Yes. So, like I said, with the curriculum in Term 1, we focused on – in J's class, in geography, so they looked at the map. The Aboriginal languages map. And they seen all the sort of boundaries and different territories that made up the country prior to, like, invasion, and show that they're still present and all the different tribes, and we talked to them about the boundaries, and a lot about, obviously, this area and the sort of cultural knowledge, like fishing and that sort of stuff, with the kids. I notice that sort of engages the Aboriginal students more, but it makes the non-Aboriginal kids a bit more curious about it, so they tend to – the Koori kids tend to listen a bit more, whereas the non-Aboriginal kids tend to ask a few more questions, and it also – but sometimes the Aboriginal students like to answer the questions, so that's always good! (Kimberley)*

> *Yeah. Well, see, as I said, the teachers' roles are there and their lesson plans are there, so I've got to step in and – I sit back at first, and then I think, OK, oh, they're going to do it that way? OK. I would have done it this way! But, yeah. And then they have their say and I have my say. Then we might come to agreement: Oh, we can do both! Or, give the children the choice. What would you like to do? This way or that way? (Marion)*

These comments indicate a range of perspectives and issues from community members from issues of 'relinquishing control' on behalf of the teacher and how it requires different process and working relationship to build Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom. There is acknowledgement that these relationships take time with the need to build trust and that getting the 'right fit' between community members and teachers is important. There was also the need to constantly negotiate the relationship depending on the topic to be covered and how students react differently to having the Aboriginal community member in the classroom, with the Aboriginal students sometimes wanting to answer the questions from non-Aboriginal students.

Teachers participating in the project also voiced their opinions on how it was for them to have community members come into their classrooms. For example:

> *It was so confronting for me, initially. I was like, how is this going to work? And now I can see the potential in it. I can see that, 'Oh, OK, it's all about my relationship with the community member', and me looking at myself as a teacher, and reshuffling how I see myself in the room, and moving myself to one side and saying, 'Come on, it's not all about you'. (Jodie)*

> *We're modelling the relationships we want to see across society, so we want to see Aboriginal people and elders, you know, being a part of education and being part of all sectors, really, and working collaboratively. (Karen)*

Clearly what is important to these teachers (and community members too) is the building of relationships and how they are going to function. In the early stages of the project, there was certainly some anxiety about this from both groups and the teachers felt they needed to critically reflect on their roles and work to accommodate and 'give up' some control to the community members to work collaboratively.

Principals also reflected on this issue in the following interview excepts:

> *They're not a teacher's aide. It's curriculum-based, what we have to learn. (Lisa)*

> *I was a bit apprehensive, I suppose, in terms of how it would work, I will be honest. I guess I thought of the work aspect for teachers, because they've mentioned, you know, the amount of time of meeting and planning, and, as a teacher, having someone come into your class can be pretty daunting. Yeah, and disruptive. But I threw it out to my staff and said, 'Who wants to be involved?' and I had a couple of people who were really keen, which was good. (Nina)*

Like the teachers, this principal above reflected on the anxiety and apprehension of how the relationship was going to work. The fact that there were some teachers immediately willing to put their hand up was reassuring to the principal as this meant that the project, that they saw merit in, might have a chance of having teachers willing to become involved. Other comments from principals include:

> *Because we've had our community members in the classrooms and actually working with the teachers, they've brought that knowledge in and shared those with the teachers and then with the kids, so it's now about building the capacity of our teachers to be able to continue with that, and particularly to continue with those authentic experiences for the kids without the guiding, you know, community member each week. (Nina)*

> *The teachers told me how well our Aboriginal students are doing, so the value added to the program looks to be very strong…So, as a school, we need to look at how we can then deliver that program across the whole broader school community, because, in all honesty, we need to do it as effectively as we're doing it for our Aboriginal kids. (David)*

It was important for the above principal that the programme 'value add' and not cause disruption to the day-to-day work and teaching going on in the school. There was also acknowledgement of the development of 'authentic' learning experiences for the students by having the community members come into the classrooms, and that the benefits also extend beyond the Aboriginal community.

Relationships with the Community

One of the most significant themes to emerge from the interview data was the relationship between the school and the local community because of the project bringing Aboriginal community members into schools and specifically, classrooms. In the following interview excerpt, one of the Aboriginal community members makes the point of saying how the local community started to become more comfortable with the idea of coming to the school in the first place – often a place many have been uncomfortable visiting:

> *Well, I think, myself, Aunty Alice, Aunty Joan, we've opened these schools up for the community to feel comfortable to come in. I know their first contact is the office, but I feel that we've changed that. They feel more comfortable in coming into the school. Some of them wouldn't even go in the office first. They'd come straight to us! (laughs). (Marion)*

> *My past experiences are different, I suppose, not having been a part of this school and knowing who they have as their local members. But now I would say it's certainly been strengthened, just being able to engage with Aunty Marion in particular, because she's really enthusiastic about bringing people together, and I suppose through her, then, I've met other people, and then that's certainly strengthened those bonds within the community. I know J and I, we go to AECG meetings…But I think, you know, I guess it's brought us together a little bit more as a community. Yeah. Definitely. (Nina)*

In the above quote, one school principal remarked that bringing in the community member has 'strengthened the bonds with the community' and 'brought the school and local community closer together'. Another principal explains:

> *The program's been really successful here. I said before we started, the key for us is getting the right person, and Aunty Joan has been a fantastic fit… She's embraced the school, she's embraced the program, and she's helped us as a school connect with our community even more than we already had been doing. (Paul)*

> *We've had a significant improvement in behaviour at this school this year. Would I put it all down to Aunty Joan being here? No. But has it helped? Yes, it has. And, do you know, it comes back to that contact with community. (Paul)*

> *We're getting members of the community saying, 'Wow, the school hasn't reached out to community for such a long time, it's so nice to have the school reconnecting with the Aboriginal community'. (Paul)*

This principal makes the point that getting the right person is key and has helped to build a closer connection with the local community. Interestingly, the principal raised the issue of improved behaviour although he is cautious to claim it is as a direct result of the project itself, but he does draw attention to the connections between school and community that are so important.

Other Benefits

In addition to the themes raised in the previous sections, there are some additional benefits that were highlighted through the interviews with participants. The following excerpts from an Aboriginal community member point out the confidence felt by the students when they saw the local elders in the classroom, in a role that was granted authority by the school:

> *It gave the students, the little ones, the students, it gave them a bit of courage when they see an elder there, in the classroom. They felt safe, and they felt a bit of confidence when they seen us there. (Alice)*

> *They [students] can see their teacher's interested, and because they did look over at her when she was moving things around when I first started, and she leaned across and they were looking at her, they must have been wondering what she was doing, and they realised she was also interested in the story, too. Their eyes were just pinned on me and my artwork, and you could see their minds blowing with the Dreamtime story. (Alice)*

The second interview excerpt above draws attention to how the teacher was also interested in the story being told by the community member and the powerful effect this had on the children in the classroom. Teachers also reflected on the issue of pride from the students:

> *Because we have quite a big Aboriginal population at the school, it's beneficial for them because they've got quite a lot of pride in their culture, and they're learning things as well, that their families may not have information to as well, because of things that might*

have happened in the past to their families. And even the non-Aboriginal families and their kids, they're all interested in learning about it. (Lisa)

There was also some sadness towards the end of the project about it coming to an end. The following quote highlights this example and how the community member explains that they would continue to do the work for free, such was the value they saw in the project. Thankfully this school was keen to see the programme continue past the specified funding period to continue the positive work that had been done:

I remember our last meetings, I remember you saying it was coming to an end, and I thought, oh, it's coming to an end. It's only one day a week. I actually said out there that I'd volunteer. I'd stay on and volunteer. So I'm staying on. I think they'll find some money for me! As I said to Marion, I'm quite happy to volunteer. It's one day a week. And he said, 'No, no. I'll look after you'. (Joan)

The following quote comes back to that issue of teachers feeling underprepared to be able to effectively teach aboriginal perspectives in their classrooms:

I felt nervous about it, because I really – like, as teachers do, we really want to do the right thing and teach it, but at the same time, well, I felt I wasn't an expert, and I didn't want to do the very tokenistic side of it. I really wanted to, you know, teach lessons that taught authentic Aboriginal perspectives. So I feel like I haven't been able to do that, really, until now. I really feel like until you've got somebody in there helping you…now I feel more confident, that's for sure. But yeah, nothing beats having someone in there. (Karen)

The issue around *authentically* teaching Aboriginal perspectives was also brought up by one of the school principals in the following quote:

Not just filling time, but actually making those experiences of the kids authentic, and teaching about their culture, which is great. (Nina)

Finally, one of the principals also made the point that over the course of the project they have noticed an improvement in behaviour and also attendance.

This time last year, we had eight suspensions. We've had one this year. Our attendance rate – with our current students we've got here, we're sitting on 95.6% attendance rate. (Paul)

SOME REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Through the above themes from the interview data, I have taken a detailed approach to emphasizing the voices of the participants whether they are Aboriginal community members, teachers, or school principals. Three implications for social justice, equity, and inclusion were identified coming out of this project: the importance of relationships, identifying strategies for shared decision-making in schooling, and demonstrating the benefits that stem from stronger school-community participation in schooling practices. The importance of relationships was understood as significant from the inception and was central to the design of the research. The learning outcome stems from negotiating the challenges of creating the time and space that enabled relationships to be established and sustained, alongside developing insights into the benefits that are associated with this when the time and space are protected/invested in. For future projects, it is important that (a) there will need to be more lead in time to establish these relationships, and (b) to plan for time and space available for this across the project.

An ambition of the project was to determine if shared school-community decision-making could impact positively on classroom practices and inclusion. While wanting to stress the limitations of what can be claimed given the scope and scale of the study, allowing the teacher–community relationship to develop organically, as in, independent of prescriptive targets or focus, was essential to observing this aim unfold. In future projects, a greater emphasis on pedagogical processes, rather than content, is to be prioritized.

A final implication for social justice and equity from the project has arisen in association with the growing profile of the study itself. Both within and beyond the participating schools, there has been momentum growing in terms of interest (and renewed trust) with people (within and beyond the participating schools) seeking to become involved in this kind of study. This is a strong endorsement that the sort of school–community relationships engendered by this project are viewed as desirable and beneficial in the contemporary schooling context for issues of equity and inclusion.

In terms of thinking through the findings of this research project in terms of culturally responsive leadership, there are several themes that are worth reflecting on. Khalifa (2018) argues that to be culturally responsive school leaders need to explicitly promote culturally responsive leadership and practices that work towards those goals. In this project, while the participating school principals were not directly involved in the actual project itself, they did unanimously (except for one principal that declined to be involved in the project) advocate (Anderson, 2009; Niesche & Keddie, 2016) and support the project both in resourcing and in its aims. It is important to remember

that the principal can act as a gatekeeper in allowing projects like this to be implemented in their schools and as such they occupy a key place within the education system for adopting culturally responsive leadership and social justice more broadly. Principals were involved in 'talking up' the project to the local community, the teachers, and parents. They also regularly attended workshops and checked in with the research team. As a result, it became apparent that principal support is essential for the success of these kinds of projects and for equity and inclusion.

The aims of the research project were very closely aligned with the key characteristics of culturally responsive leadership as identified in Khalifa's work (2018). However, there are a couple of additional issues to be considered in relation to undertaking this work. For example, while the development of relationships between teachers and the Aboriginal community members was one of the productive elements of this project. At the same time, this was also the source of some anxiety and took significant time to build. Taking this into consideration and the need for clarity of expectations for the participants proved difficult as it was largely dependent on the individuals involved hence a risk of getting 'buy in' from teachers due to this uncertainty. To be clear in the expectations is important even if there cannot be a prescribed way of doing this work and building those relationships. This is a tension for developing the kind of work that must be culturally responsive. This work needs to be generative and organic, and there can be no preset normative model, it needs to be culturally determined and negotiated. This is certainly one of the challenges in undertaking leadership for social justice and equity.

Clearly, there were a few positive elements coming out of the project as demonstrated by the interviews. However, with a project such as this there were also challenges that needed to be acknowledged and overcome for the project to be successful. Some of these include the following:

- One of the six schools chose not to participate at the discretion of the principal. Therefore, only five schools participated in the project. However, given the enthusiastic uptake and feedback from the remaining schools, this was not seen to affect the success of the project.
- The timeline of the project was extended a few times to allow further relationship building between schools, community members, and researchers. This aspect of the project design was underestimated at the start. As can be seen from the interview excerpts, this was seen as an important aspect of the project that required more time.
- Health issues affected the participation of some of the community members at different stages through the project and this required a shifting

around of community members between different schools to make up for this. This led to some uncertainty with planning and anxiety from schools.

- The project's budget was impacted by schools requesting longer duration of community members in classrooms beyond the planned six-week block. However, it was indicative of project's success that the schools wanted longer and continued engagement of community members. A further budgetary issue was related to teacher buyout/release, which was originally not included as it was anticipated to be a school-absorbed cost.
- Building leadership capacity amongst schools was difficult with the movement of both principals and teachers in and out of the schools involved. This is a part of the daily lives of schools and like the above factors need to be considered when implementing programmes such as this.

One thing that needs to be acknowledged from the research is that many school principals, teachers, and other leaders often feel underprepared for the challenges faced by many disadvantaged schools and communities in working towards social justice and equity, so there needs to be explicit guidance, preparation, and development for these school leaders. This requires acknowledgement and support from policymakers and system leaders that this is a key part of the job of socially just school leadership. I am cautious to be seen to add more work to the already overloaded school leadership terrain (as evidenced by Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020; See et al., 2023; Department of Education & Training, 2018) but if this explicit recognition of equity and incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into schools and classrooms as a key focus area is both acknowledged and supported then school leaders are more likely to create space and time for these discussions and approaches. It also must be recognized that many school leaders are doing this kind of work already so there is existing expertise to be drawn upon to help support these principals and other school leaders. Further research needs to be conducted in these schools and with these communities to find out what is working and what can be learned from these examples of good practice forming socially just leadership.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the findings from a research project that had as its main aims, to build capacity among local Aboriginal community members to implement Aboriginal perspectives in five New South Wales schools, and to build teachers' capacity to meet the needs of Aboriginal students.

These aims were seeking to contribute to the improvement of educational outcomes for Indigenous students, where these outcomes have historically (and up to the present been significantly lower than those of non-Indigenous students. Research has identified the importance of culturally appropriate and responsive approaches to schooling, education, and leadership to overcome the marginalization of Indigenous students and work towards social justice and equity.

Khalifa's approach to culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016) has been specifically drawn upon to highlight how schools can engage local communities, challenge systemic and historical forms of discrimination and marginalization, and develop inclusive practices whereby local Indigenous knowledges are valued in a genuine way. This project has identified some important benefits of this culturally responsive leadership approach as well as a few challenges for those wanting to implement these approaches in their own contexts and schools. If we are to take seriously, the challenge and importance of culturally responsive work, then there needs to be ongoing research and support for research that explicitly addresses and tackles these issues for the well-being, livelihood, and educational outcomes of all our students are dependent on these approaches being understood and successfully implemented at scale across education systems. This chapter has gone some way into identifying some key issues of success and ways forward for undertaking this important work for socially just and culturally responsive school leadership.

NOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge that the research connected with this chapter was conducted on Aboriginal country, the lands of the *Bidjigal* People.

2. It should be acknowledged that there is contestation around the use of terminology. Terms such as Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) and Indigenous are recent constructions that are ongoing sites of disagreement. It is not my aim here to engage with the politics of using various terms with which to identify people and communities but more so to acknowledge this and to explain that I will use the term Indigenous in a broader sense while using Aboriginal in a more localised description of the community on which this chapter is based, that is, referring to those who participated in the research. That is because they themselves used the term Aboriginal (or *Koori*) to refer to themselves in conversations and interviews.

3. As a white, male researcher, growing upon the lands of the *Gadigal* people, and one of the two chief investigators on the research project on which this chapter has been based, I am aware that while I am positioned as a 'leader' or 'expert' in educational research, I am also a learner and still have very much to learn about Aboriginal knowledge, perspectives, and history.

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. *What are the challenges faced by school leaders trying to implement culturally responsive practices? How might these be overcome?*
2. *How might school context impact upon culturally responsive practices?*
3. *What do policy makers need to be mindful of when designing reforms that involve culturally responsive leadership and schooling?*
4. *How might schools develop better relationship with their local communities?*
5. *What role can research play in helping educators implement culturally responsive leadership in their schools and communities?*

FURTHER READING

1. **Khalifa, M. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.**

In this book, Muhammad Khalifa argues that a fully developed account of culturally responsive leadership is essential for school leaders to address the needs of minoritized students. This requires explicit recognition of an approach that is critically reflective, sustained and the building of non-oppressive school

environments that also must engage with local community needs and contexts. The book draws on empirical practices that can be used by school leaders in their own situations and contexts but also must be done in a critically self-reflective way to adapt to the local needs of students. Khalifa, places community at the centre of what is required for culturally responsive leadership.

2. **Lopez, A. (2016).** ***Culturally responsive and socially just leadership in diverse contexts: From theory to action*****. Palgrave MacMillan.**

In this book, Ann Lopez explores what culturally responsive and socially just leadership practice looks like across a range of diverse contexts. The book is both theoretically rich and draws on the experiences and narratives of school leaders as they undertake this complex and challenging work. The aim here is to go beyond superficial or forms of 'window dressing' to achieve powerful and long-lasting change, to improve the lives of students who have been marginalized through an education system that has de-prioritized their learning and well-being for too long. The book argues that educational leaders must develop clear and coherent approaches to social justice and culturally responsive leadership and provides examples of this for educators.

3. **MacDonald, K. (2024).** ***Socially just educational leadership in unjust times*****. Springer.**

This book, while not explicitly exploring culturally responsive leadership per se, is focused on socially just leadership practices from the perspective of the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In this book, Katrina MacDonald draws on empirical research conducted in Victorian schools in Australia to show school principals across disadvantaged schools understand social justice and how this intersects with their life histories, and what this enables them to undertake in the form of practices of leadership for social justice. The intersection of these principals' habitus with their complex schools and contexts provides rich understandings of socially just leadership and its challenges.