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Abstract

Australian schools are now under constant pressure to improve student achievement, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Successful school-community interrelationships are considered an important contributing factor to this improvement as is the school's educational leadership. This paper reports on a four year research project that looks into these contributing factors, through the work of Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs)/Community Education Counselors (CECs) and principals and how they collaborate together. Informed by theoretical underpinnings emanating from a critical theorist framework, a mixed method, participatory action research multi-site case study approach was undertaken in a large educational region in the state of Queensland, Australia. Insights into the significance of the IEW/CEC role and the distinctive educational leadership relationship practice between IEWs/CECs and principals are presented. Finally, the paper explains the scholarly significance of the project and its potential to influence system policy and actions of educational leaders in Australian schools.

Introduction

Improving schools to achieve equity *and* excellence has become the focus of many countries with diverse student populations (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2012). In Australia, all schools are expected more than ever to achieve equal educational opportunity and achievement, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Indigenous students) who are perpetually considered the most disadvantaged group in the nation (Council of Australian Governments Reform Council, 2011). It has been long argued that improving engagement and partnerships between schools and their Indigenous community is a necessary component for improved Indigenous student success. One recommended strategy to achieve this is the employment of Indigenous people within schools (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). While various educational jurisdictions employ some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, very few are teachers or principals; more are teacher aides and currently

4,000 are employed in Australian schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). These teacher aides are sometimes known as Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs). In Queensland an additional specialised role at the school level has also been developed, called a Community Education Counsellor (CEC). While the IEW role requires no particular pre-requisite training, a person working as a CEC in a school must have at a minimum qualification of a Diploma of Counselling or equivalent. Both roles support the participation and achievement of Indigenous students and engagement of their families.

As such, if IEWs/CECs are considered crucial to linking their school with their community, a positive working relationship between the IEW/CEC and their school's Principal is likely to represent a microcosm of the desired school-community connection, which in turn positively impacts on student achievement. But not all schools employ IEWs/CECs, and currently there is a paucity of empirical studies that focus specifically on the Australian school IEW/CEC-principal relationship and what occurs *between* them. This is an overlooked situation as both are key leader members of a school and both have a role to play in the improvement of Indigenous student learning outcomes and parent-school-community engagement.

This paper reports on a four year research project that studied the working relationships between IEWs/CECs and principals in state government schools (state schools) located within a large educational region in Queensland, Australia. The region has a land mass approximately half of that of the state of Texas and has between 7,000 - 8,000 Indigenous students who are enrolled across just over 100 state schools (Queensland Government. Department of Education and Training. Strategy Performance Branch, 2016). The first author is an experienced principal working in one of the schools in this region.

The project draws its purpose from the social justice principles of 'parity of participation' (Fraser, 2007) and is foremost about seeking to advance the elimination of inequalities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools. Specifically, the focus of the study has been on examining and transforming the ambiguity of the professional relationship between IEWs/CECs and their principals. On another level, the project intention has been to highlight effective practice, to inform future improvements for Indigenous education within the schools

studied and to influence policy makers and practitioners in leadership within the wider school system. The core research questions that have guided all phases of this research are: *What is the current IEW/CEC- Principal relationship? How can this relationship be strengthened and what are the contextual features that influence this? What are the outcomes of this strengthened relationship? What are the implications for practice and policy in schools?*

Theoretical underpinnings

The transformative nature of this study is informed by a plurality of paradigms with the overarching being critical theory, which, defined at its simplest is one that challenges inequality and injustice (Freire, 1973). Critical theory seeks to critique and change the status quo and advocate for resistance, struggle and emancipation at the local level – the seat of social justice. This study aligns closely with what Denzin and Lincoln (2008) term as *critical indigenous pedagogy* which merges critical and indigenous methodologies. In turn, Nakata's (2007) Cultural Interface Theory epitomises the current evolution of critical theory and has accordingly informed this research project. Nakata's theory challenges the orthodoxy to move from the binary, the 'decoloniality' and closed-minded thinking about relationships between Indigenous and other Australians.

Interwoven with the above theoretical frameworks to assist with the investigation of the IEW/CEC – principal relationship is an interpretation of trust in schools using Relational Leadership Theory (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000). Relational Leadership is defined as an overarching framework for the study of the dynamics of leadership and reflects a mutual influence process (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

This plurality of paradigms reflects 'a mixed methods way of thinking' (Greene, cited in Patton, 2015) and augur relational happenings, transformation, a hybridity where there is overlap. Scholars in contemporary organisational and cultural discourse call this 'powerful places of liminality' (Küpers, 2011; Tempest & Starkey, 2004). Homi Bhabha's (2012) 'Third Cultural Space' has been defined in the Australian schooling context as one where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are acknowledged as having, "...distinct and deep cultural and world

views...that differ from those found in most Western education systems. When Western and Indigenous systems are acknowledged and valued equally, the overlapping or merging of views represents a new way of educating” (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2011, p. 9).

Finally, the first author has approached this research project with not only the philosophical ideas and traditions mentioned above but also as practitioner researcher who has firsthand experience gleaned from two decades of educational leadership in the Queensland schooling context. The mixed method data collection, analysis and synthesis of findings of this study are therefore informed by a multiplicity of theoretical considerations with a depth of experience – ultimately working in the nexus between research and practice.

Methods and modes of inquiry

If “form follows function, design follows purpose” (Patton, 2015, p. 37) then in this research, the choice of methodology was primarily participatory. There was a pre-established base of trusting relationships with participants as agents of change in this study which enabled authentic two-way dialogue, an exchange of ideas and where possible, opportunities for action to be taken in ways to improve practices for the benefit of Indigenous students. This choice is congruent with afore mentioned critical and Indigenous theories, which are dialogic/dialectical and committed to action in the world (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This study has been very much about research *with* to learn from others (Morrison, 2012). The first author as ‘insider’ conducted practitioner research the main aim to work *with* colleagues to achieve the shared goal of improving leadership practice for better learning outcomes for Indigenous students. Mertens calls this a “transformative sequential mixed methods design”(2015, p. 309).

To this end, the research has been conducted in three phases from 2013 to 2017. Following a literature review, preliminary data was gathered from a regional survey in Phase 1. In Phase 2, a multi-site case study was established using critical participatory action research (CPAR) (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014) over three cycles of inquiry in four schools. These phases

have been completed and the research has moved to Phase 3 (See Diagram 1). The IEW/CEC and principal relationship is being understood through examining regional information about IEWs/CECs and principals and then specifically four pairs of IEWs/CECs and principals who were known to work together successfully. At the same time, the 'case-quintain dilemma' (Stake, 2006) has been countered by a coexistent consideration. In other words, the multi-site case study provides a fine grained explanation of the CEC/IEW and principal relationship *within* each school as well as more broad commonalities and differences of the CEC/IEW and principal relationship *across* schools. Further, an action research orientation to inquiry was undertaken within the school sites to achieve the purpose of the research and to stay true to the tenets of social justice. Employing CPAR in the second phase of this study has enabled all participants, to, "get together and talk about their work and their lives. They explore whether things are going the way they hope, or whether things would be better if they acted otherwise" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 33). In Phase 1, descriptive statistical analysis using SSPS was used with the regional surveys shortly after their return. Thematic analysis using inductive and deductive processes was undertaken with data gathered from each round of CPAR. Informed consent was sought from all participants in this research with particular consideration given to values and ethics of conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The first author has consulted with and sought advice from several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Indigenous academic and professional mentors throughout the course of the research.

Data sources and evidence

The research design enabled the capturing of complex issues, promotion of change and answering of research questions and as mentioned above, the collection a variety of quantitative and qualitative data over time. This variety allowed for internal validity (quantitative) and credibility, transferability and transformability (qualitative) in the findings.

Specifically, in Phase 1 of the research a total of 112 questionnaires were issued during a 2013 regional principals' forum with 41 consenting to and completing the questionnaire. 45

questionnaires were similarly distributed to IEWs/CECs at a 2013 regional Indigenous workers' meeting with 35 consenting to and completing the questionnaire. In four sections, the questionnaire was designed to provide a snapshot of the situation with IEWs/CECs and principals in the region: their school context, perceptions on the nature of the work undertaken by IEWs/CECs, what they do together and willingness to participate in case study work with the first author. The majority of all respondents indicated they were willing to participate further.

In Phase 2 of the research, four case study IEW/CEC and principal pairs from four different schools geographically located across the region were identified after review of the regional questionnaire responses and discussion with the first author's Indigenous professional mentor, a long serving educational officer. Two pairs from secondary schools and two pairs from primary schools were chosen as exemplar cases. While all pairs had varying experience of working directly together from eight years to eight weeks, it was known by the Indigenous professional mentor and first author that these pairs worked well together and were in a positive position to provide evidence of effective practice.

The first round of school visits occurred between August and September 2014. The first author visited each of the four case study schools and at each, conducted 40-60 minute joint interviews with the IEW/CEC and principal pairs with discussion about what would be the focus of their work together over the next few years. In this interview, the pairs also completed a diagnostic questionnaire. Two more rounds of school visits occurred between June – November 2015 and then in May 2016, respectively. At each visit, a 40-60 minute joint interview was held (The first author was unable to visit one of the schools in the third round in 2016 and instead conducted an interview via phone). All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed with follow up member checking during school visits, via emails and phone discussions. Other data collected in Phase 2 included: field notes, observations, some school documents and photos from school visits and in-school quantitative data profiles about academic and participation results that were provided via email from each school upon request by the first author.

Results and/or substantiated conclusions

While Phase 3 of the research is still underway, findings from the regional survey conducted in Phase 1 provide a snapshot of regional demographics, perceptions of roles and duties of IEWs/CECs and what a large number of IEWs/CECs and principals think they work on together. The findings to date from the multi-site case study in Phase 2 are giving greater insight into the joint IEW/CEC and principal leadership relationship, they are showing what contextual features influence their strong connection, what outcomes could be produced and possible implications for future practice and policy.

Suggested by the regional surveys are a difference of perception by both the IEW/CEC and principal groups around the role of the IEW/CEC. This likely reflects an under appreciation of the reach and influence of the IEW/CEC role not only by principals, but potentially by the IEWs/CECs themselves. Co-work actions were shown to be largely in operational policies and school routine with the most commonly mentioned other co-work being embedding Indigenous perspectives within the school.

In the case study schools, findings to date from the three rounds of interviews show IEWs/CECs and principals are more visible together, participating side-by-side in activities that are directly aimed at increasing Indigenous participation and achievement. The IEW/CEC role is one that is recognised and valued by the principal and staff. The IEW/CEC is enabled to help forge stronger links between the school and the community; to advise teachers and be a member of or consulted by student support teams, leadership teams and the principal. They assist Indigenous students in improving their attendance, literacy and numeracy skills and emotional and social well-being. While it can be seen each of the IEWs/CECs facilitate students' vocational and tertiary education aspirations, this seems most evident in the secondary school cases. Emerging issues from all cases include the lack of guarantee of continuity of employment of the IEW/CEC role because of perceived uncertainty around annual funding arrangements and the apparent time and effort it takes to increase the number and capacity of non-Indigenous staff who can actively engage in supporting achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

With Phase 3 still ongoing some preliminary understandings are emerging. One proposition is a practical one - that educational leadership in stronger school-community engagement and improved Indigenous student achievement can be maximised if the role of the IEW/CEC continues to exist with certainty and that schools create the conditions that empower IEWs/CECs to do what is asked of them. Another proposition becoming evident from the cases is that working relationships between IEWs/CECs and principals can and do extend beyond the transactional or procedural to a different type of leader collaboration. Importantly, IEWs/CECs and principals can lead effectively together when what they do is interwoven on a common ground of shared knowledge, trust, and respect with an intent to create a 'vorticity', or powerful flow that encircles other members of the school community into a spiral of collaboration and shared responsibility for achievement of all students - something that goes beyond the power of two.

Scholarly significance of the work

There is emerging work in Australia that investigates and promotes Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational leadership practices and development of partnerships between members within school settings (see, for example, D'Arbon, Fasoli, Frawley, & Ober, 2010; Flückiger, Diamond, & Jones, 2012; Frawley & Fasoli, 2012). But there is a paucity of empirical studies about the effects in schools of employing Indigenous non-teaching staff. Missing is research that specifically explores what happens in larger schools in more urbanised areas when the IEW/CEC and the non-Indigenous principal work together to lead school improvement for their Indigenous students. Examining the problem of this ambiguity of professional relationship between IEWs/CECs and principals as they respond to and address implementation issues of 'Closing the Gap' in their schools will make an important contribution to the field of Indigenous education and can be utilised to influence future policy of educational systems and actions of educational leaders in Australia.

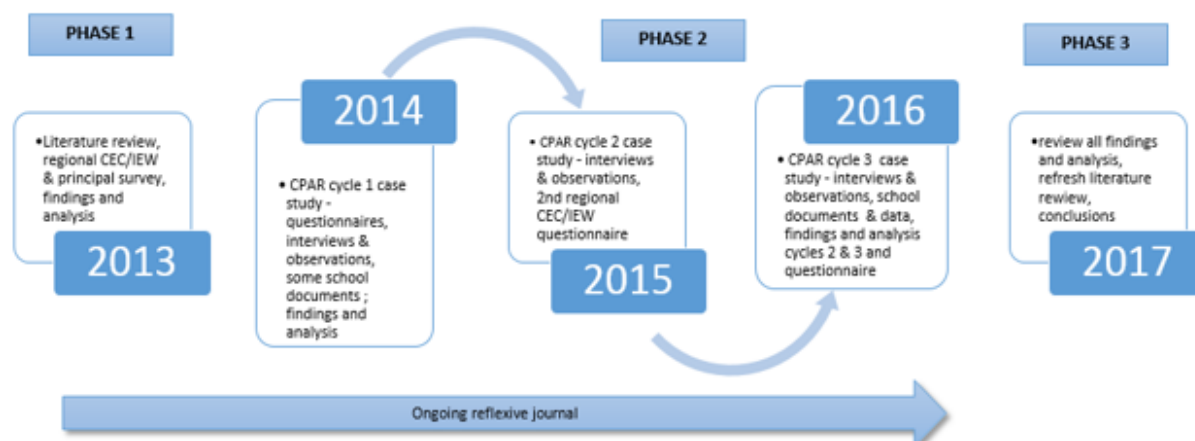


Diagram 1: Research Design

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