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The Relationship Between Low Adult Literacy Levels and Aboriginal Family and Community Engagement in Educational Decision Making

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Abstract

This article draws on work with communities in the rural and remote towns of Brewarrina, Wilcannia and Enngonia, New South Wales (NSW) to explore the relationship between low adult literacy levels and the continuing alienation of Aboriginal communities from educational decision making. Building on the analysis of community/school relations conducted by scholars such as Chris Sarra, Jay Phillips, Allan Luke and Kevin Lowe, we contend that addressing the problem of low adult literacy is necessary to improve relationships between communities and schools in widespread and sustainable ways. Communities who have participated in the *Yes, I Can!* Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign help us to understand a number of important issues, including, the extent of disenfranchisement that is associated with inadequate adult literacy, the enormity of the challenges faced by previously low-literate and disengaged people to re-engage in community life, the additional pressures placed on literate members of the community when many people have minimal literacy, and the relationship between low rates of adult literacy and the persistence of deficit thinking on the part of schools.

Key words: adult literacy, community/school relationships, Aboriginal education, First Nations

A note on terminology: To respect the preferences of the New South Wales communities in which this research has been conducted, the term Aboriginal has generally been used, except when referring specifically to the community in Brewarrina where people prefer the term First Nations.

Introduction

This article examines the community/school relationship and how low rates of literacy amongst Aboriginal adults have impacted on community engagement with educational decision-making in three sites in rural New South Wales (NSW). The research was conducted in 2016-17 in partnership with the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), a national Aboriginal organisation established to address the problem of low levels of adult literacy in Aboriginal communities, utilising a mass campaign model, known as *Yes, I Can!* (hereafter YIC!). Rural communities are disproportionately impacted by low rates of adult literacy (ABS, 2013b). This fact, combined with the tendency within educational research to situate the urban as the norm (Pini & Mayes, 2015) leads us to suggest that there may be benefits in paying more attention to adult literacy as an important dynamic in the community/school relationship in rural and remote areas. The following qualitative study may assist in reframing understandings of this relationship away from the urban 'norm'.

Adult literacy influences school outcomes in several ways. It is widely understood that parental literacy is an important influence on children's literacy and school success (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). It is also understood that when there are effective relationships between parents, community, teachers and school administration, student learning benefits (Beresford & Gray, 2006; Epstein, 1995; OECD, 2012). This research considers the issue that sits between these two acknowledged associations – specifically how low adult literacy might impact on the ability of community members to build effective relationships with schools. We argue that the education of children in low literacy communities is disadvantaged in (at least) two ways by their families' low literacy. First, these families are less able to model effective literacy or assist with their children's developing literacy skills. Second, these same families find it harder to establish effective relationships with their children's school.

We begin by examining the setting of this study. We then review the literature on low literacy among Aboriginal adults and the longstanding policy history around efforts to develop relationships between Aboriginal communities and schools. We then describe the methodology used to gather data for this study and examine some of the data collected to date, to explore how the intervention of this campaign and specific interventions associated with this research are helping develop a better understanding of the impact of low adult literacy on community/school relationships.

Setting

Beginning in 2012 at the initiative of the Wilcannia Land Council, YIC! has now run seventeen intakes in another seven NSW communities (Bourke, Enngonia, Brewarrina, Weilmoringle, Walgett, Toomelah and Boggabilla). All the communities where YIC! has been delivered to date, have like much of rural NSW, suffered severe economic decline since the 1970s. This article reports on fieldwork in three communities, Wilcannia, Enngonia and Brewarrina. News of the literacy campaign has spread through Aboriginal leadership networks up and down the Darling/Barwon river system which runs through many of these locations. Interest has outstripped the LFLF's ability deliver the campaign and subsequent sites have been selected through a process of discussions between community leaders, LFLF staff and a mix of public and private funding bodies. The various communities which have participated in the campaign, all have distinct histories and represent varying degrees of rurality and remoteness.

For example, Enngonia is a tiny settlement, with a population of 148, of whom 44.9% are Aboriginal. Residents use many services in Bourke which is one hour drive south. An hour's drive east of Bourke is Brewarrina, population 1143, of whom 64.6 % are First Nations. Brewarrina is the home of the Ngunnhu or fish traps, the oldest human-built structures in the world. In the 1880s the Brewarrina Mission was established, which became one of the largest and longest running Aboriginal reserves. The Ngunnhu and the long history of the mission mean that, as well as the traditional owners, the Ngemba, many other First Nations have important connections with the area. Until the 1950s, Brewarrina was a busy service town for surrounding pastoral properties but the rural economic decline led to a drastic fall in population (Jarvie & Stewart, 2011). Further to the south-west, Wilcannia has a population of 745 people, of whom 61.2% are Aboriginal, mostly local Barkindji people. Once, a prosperous river port, the economy of the town, along with many of the grand buildings that speak to the town's former glory, is now crumbling. All three sites are listed amongst the most disadvantaged communities in the Dropping off the Edge Report (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015). Brewarrina and Wilcannia schools (and Bourke High School, which serves Enngonia) are among the fifteen most disadvantaged schools included in the NSW Connected Communities Strategy. Enngonia, Wilcannia and Brewarrina are classified as very remote according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics remoteness categories.

While the social indicators of these towns are dire, they by no means tell the whole story. There is a rich and diverse history across the west and north west of NSW, and people across the region tell inspiring stories of resistance and survival. Despite the ravages of colonisation, people continue to hold important cultural knowledge (Forsyth & Gavranovic, 2017; Goodall, 1996).

The Yes, I Can! Adult Literacy Campaign

The *Yes, I Can!* (YIC!) adult literacy campaign was designed in Cuba, and its origins lie in Cuba's own successful national literacy campaign of 1961 (Abendroth, 2009). Since 2000, it has run in 30 countries, helping over 10 million people gain basic literacy skills (Boughton & Durnan, 2014; Valdés, 2016). The campaign is rolled out in three phases. The first phase, called socialisation and mobilisation, includes a door-to-door literacy survey, the establishment of a Campaign Working Group (CWG), and other activities to inform and involve the broader community, under the slogan, 'Literacy: Everyone's right, everyone's business!'. The aim is that, as the campaign continues, the whole town takes interest and pride in the progress of the literacy learners. The process of training local staff to conduct the door-to-door survey is particularly important in building community ownership of the campaign and ensuring the campaign is adapted to meet local needs. Phase Two is the actual YIC! literacy lessons, delivered over 12 weeks, with opportunity for catch up classes and community days. The literacy lessons begin from a very basic level and there is a strong emphasis on ensuring that everybody succeeds. Phase Three, post-literacy, provides participants with 100 hours of activities, practising their new literacy in a range of contexts. All classes are led by local facilitators, supported by a local campaign coordinator. Local staff, who are all Aboriginal, are trained by a Cuban YIC! technical adviser and a professionally-qualified campaign project officer. Significant attention is paid to adapting the campaign to the local context, an important consideration in rural and Aboriginal settings.

The adult Aboriginal population across the eight campaign communities is 2202. To date, over 10% (274 people) have enrolled in classes, of whom 175 have graduated, a 64% retention rate. The YIC! Campaign was assessed against the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) as a requirement of the Commonwealth funder, because this is the benchmark used by the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) programs for job-seekers. Each ACSF level corresponds approximately to the same Certificate level in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) ACSF Level Two students have the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills normally needed to complete a pre-vocational Certificate Level Two. The ACSF consultant found that YIC! took people who begin at Pre-Level One and Level One to the top of Level One and sometimes to Level Two on the ACSF (McLean, 2012). In general, the literacy gains from YIC! are not enough to make participants 'job ready' although where participants had higher literacy skills to begin with, the confidence boost they gain from YIC! can assist them to obtain employment or move to a more suitable or fulfilling job. The importance of YIC! is that it caters primarily to people whose literacy skills are too low to successfully engage in the existing SEE programs or TAFE certificates. A key outcome for learners is that they develop confidence in their ability to learn and upon graduation from YIC! are better positioned to engage with other opportunities.

As the campaign works to activate the entire community to achieve improved adult literacy, local schools become involved in the campaign in a variety of ways. In the sites involved in this study YIC! staff acknowledged significant material support from the schools including photocopying, furniture, meeting space and, in Wilcannia, the use of a school vehicle. The schools also provided important organisational and moral support to campaign staff and participants; and were involved in various ways with post-literacy activities including workshops on the importance of reading with children and visiting the school libraries.

The Extent of Low-Literacy Amongst Aboriginal Adults

Literacy is a contested concept and various definitions of literacy come with their own ideological understandings and implications (Kalman, 2008). The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition, ‘the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short simple sentence about one’s everyday life’ (UNESCO, 2005, p. 29) comes from a human rights perspective. The graduating task of *YIC!* roughly aligns with this definition, with room for extension, as participants are required to write a simple letter about their life. However the most recent quantitative research on adult literacy in Australia is sourced from the Program of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) which defines literacy as ‘understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential’ (PLEG, 2009, p. 8). This definition recognizes literacy as a social practice and reflects the understanding that literacy exists on a continuum rather than as a dichotomy between literate and illiterate.

There has been no national survey of Aboriginal adult literacy levels in Australia, but, using a range of sources, we can estimate the extent of the problem. The PIAAC survey (ABS, 2013b) found that 43.7% of the Australian population operate at the two most basic literacy levels. As a large scale, international study, underpinned by human capital theory, the PIAAC results need to be interpreted with ‘informed caution’ (St. Clair, 2013). Specifically, St Clair notes that the distribution of the population across the various levels is partly driven by its own analytical model. Additionally, PIAAC did not report Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, and people living in very remote areas and people in districts containing a Discrete Indigenous Community were specifically excluded (ABS, 2013a; Caldwell & Webster, 2013; Shalley & Stewart, 2017). However, people who are unemployed, and/or not in the labor force, and/or living in rural and remote areas, and/or or have a first language other than English were all over-represented in the lower brackets of literacy competence (ABS, 2013b). As Aboriginal adults are more likely than the population as a whole to fall into one or more of these categories, it is safe to conclude that they are more likely to have lower levels of literacy.

A recent study of LLN levels amongst 660 Aboriginal adults in the Northern Territory found that 85% had core skills ‘below the level needed for independence in the workplace and for having the confidence to participate in all aspects of the broadest Australian society’ (Shalley & Stewart, 2017, p. 71). LFLF’s door-to-door surveys have shown similar results. These surveys target households most likely to need literacy assistance, so it is an intentionally skewed sample. But results are still striking. From a total Aboriginal adult population of 2202 across seven communities, 880 people have been surveyed to date. Of these, 554 people, 63% of those surveyed, believed their literacy skills were less than they needed in their daily lives.

A Problem Which Policy Has Ignored

As far back as 1988 the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force identified low levels of adult literacy as an issue, and recommended that the Commonwealth negotiate with States and Territories to:

develop and implement a national Aboriginal literacy strategy aimed to significantly increase the opportunities available to Aboriginal adults to improve their literacy skills ... as a result of the lack of education provided for Aboriginal people it can be assumed that at least one half of the Aboriginal population is illiterate or functionally illiterate. The need for a national strategy is vital (Hughes, 1988, p. 33).

However, the 1989 National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) ignored this recommendation, and no national adult Aboriginal literacy strategy has been developed since. The assumption appears to be that children can acquire necessary literacy skills for employment or ongoing training through participation in formal schooling even while the broader community lacks such skills. This view is contradicted by research on the intergenerational transmission of literacy practices, which demonstrates that children learn literacy best when they see their family members using it in ways that are powerful and relevant to their lives, rather than as an isolated technical skill, taught by an outside expert (Guenther et al., 2014; Kral, 2009). Still, governments persist in dealing with low adult literacy only as a problem of ‘skills’ associated with entry to the labour market, ignoring the intimate link between raising adult literacy and school achievement in literacy. Aboriginal adults with low literacy are offered only mainstream vocational education and training system programs, and only if they are registered job-seekers. Consequently, 30 years since the Task Force recommendation, Aboriginal communities continue to struggle with low English language literacy and the multifarious problems which flow from it.

Parental and Community Involvement in Schools

While the demand for a national adult literacy strategy was effectively sidelined, the demand for Aboriginal involvement in schools met with more success. Originally raised by the Schools Commission Aboriginal Consultative Group in 1975, it was re-asserted in the 1988 Task Force report:

Without real community involvement in the planning and management of education programs in curriculum development and teaching activities, the full benefits of education for Aboriginal people will not eventuate (Hughes, 1988, pp. 17,18).

These recommendations found their way into policy, resulting in numerous programs to strengthen Aboriginal parental engagement with schools (Higgins & Morley, 2014). In NSW, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) has worked since the 1980s to advocate for Aboriginal students and as a community voice on education issues. Since there remains significant inequity in educational outcomes for Aboriginal students compared to the non-Aboriginal population (Audit Office of NSW, 2012; DPMC, 2017; SCRGSP, 2014), we need to ask to what extent there has been real community involvement in the planning and management of education programs.

The 2015 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy includes partnerships as an ‘underpinning principle’ as follows,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged in decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation of early childhood, schooling and higher education services at local, sector and national levels (Education Council, 2015).

The Australian Government’s education policy focus, Students First, discusses engaging parents in education as follows,

Effective parent and family engagement in education is more than just participation in school meetings and helping with fundraising, it is actively engaging with your child’s learning, both at home and at school (Department of Education and Training, 2015, cited in Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2016, p. 61).

In NSW, the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) commits the Department of Education to, ‘collaborative decision making with Aboriginal Peoples, parents, caregivers, families and their communities’ and to, ‘engage the NSW AECG Inc. and Aboriginal communities as partners in Aboriginal education’ (DEC, 2008).

As NSW AECG president Cindy Berwick has pointed out, ‘*a policy is just words on paper. It is how these words are translated into action and practices that make the difference...*’ (Berwick, 2008 in Keenan, 2009, p. 11). In reality, there are many barriers to building such partnerships including imbalances in ‘power, control and resources between schools and many families’ (Chodkiewicz, Widin, & Yasukawa, 2008, p. 77). Specifically, low adult literacy is associated with many such imbalances, including poverty, homelessness, unemployment, poor physical and mental health, higher rates of incarceration and substance abuse (Reder & Bynner, 2008), all of which impact on families’ capacity to engage with education. Schools need to acknowledge that, in communities with low literacy, daily life can be full of chaos and challenges. These impact in multiple ways, both directly on children, and on the capacity of families to be involved in school in the same ways, or to the same extent, as families whose adults have sufficient literacy skills. Therefore, we must question whether it is realistic to expect Aboriginal communities to engage in such educational partnerships when a large proportion of the adult population has low or very low English language literacy.

Transforming Policy into Practice or Caught in a Rhetoric Rut?

In some important instances, communities and schools have moved beyond the ‘rhetoric rut’ (Epstein, 1995, p. 4) of aiming for family involvement but unable to actualize it and have achieved important improvements. Burgess and Cavanagh (2015) discuss the relationship building and cross-cultural learning that occurs through the *Connecting to Country* program, highlighting the important role of education programs that draw on Aboriginal knowledge and are delivered by Aboriginal community members in combatting teachers’ deficit discourses. Sarra (2014) details the priority he placed on developing strong community/school relationships in order to achieve dramatic improvements in educational outcomes at Cherbourg State School. The Families and Schools Together (FAST) program likewise demonstrates that current problems are not intractable and that, given reasonable support, Aboriginal parents and schools can develop stronger relationships with positive outcomes for Aboriginal students (Guenther, 2014). At least one study has concluded that parent involvement in education should be an indicator of educational success in itself (Guenther et al., 2016, p. 64).

The community/school relationship nevertheless remains problematic. A study of four diverse communities in NSW and Queensland found that community engagement efforts were often, impacted by a deficit view, focussed on perceived weaknesses rather than strengths. This led school staff to interpret community engagement as a ‘means to change, reframe and modify that out-of-school context... [thereby reframing] ‘engagement’ as a task of fixing and repairing, rather than knowing, a cultural/racial Other’ (Phillips & Luke, 2016, p. 6). Lowe (2011) argues that partnerships are designed to give the appearance of empowering citizens, yet the neo-liberal theory and practice which frame such partnerships prevent parents and communities from participating as equal partners with schools or teachers. He reminds us that schools do not exist in a vacuum. The perspective promoted by many politicians and media outlets and used to justify coercive policy approaches is both ideologically justified by, and reinforces, the deficit assumptions which persist in schools ‘despite decades of reforms and intervention’ (Phillips & Luke, 2016, p. 37). It appears that deficit views of communities and families are still far too commonly a barrier to effective community engagement. As we argue below, very low rates of adult literacy constitute another barrier and, in fact, these problems are intertwined. Meanwhile,

the most recent review of education for Aboriginal students calls once again for improved involvement, decision making and ownership by Aboriginal communities, but with no mention of this barrier (Gillan, Mellor, & Krakouer, 2017).

Method

This study is part of an ongoing program of academic research and evaluation, involving a partnership between LFLF and the authors' university. This research utilises a Community Based Participatory Research framework (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012). It was initiated at the request of the LFLF, as part of its ongoing program of evaluation and research. The permission and participation of the communities involved was provided through the structures of campaign governance in each community, namely a local CWG and locally-recruited Aboriginal campaign staff. The research team worked as participant-observers, documenting and analysing community discussions and assessments of the campaign and its impacts, and reporting findings back to the LFLF Board and the communities for their consideration and action. The active involvement of Aboriginal community members ensures that the research is useful to the community, and aligns with best practice evaluation methods as outlined in the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, Evaluation Framework (DPMC, 2017). All data collection was covered by an ethical approval from UNE, requiring informed consent from individuals who provided information.

Qualitative data reported here were gathered, through participant observation on-site during campaign and community activities; interviews; examination of relevant policy documents; and a review of literature related to local history and schooling. We also gained permission from LFLF to access and analyse transcripts of interviews with participants and community leaders which the organisation had collected through other research. This article includes data from semi-structured interviews with 21 community members across three communities, some conducted individually, others as group discussions. Some individuals were only interviewed once, while others shared their reflections and opinions on multiple occasions. Interviewees included campaign participants (10), campaign staff (7), community leaders (3) and community members working in schools (1), and two school principals interviewed for an earlier project.

While the phrase community/school relationships suggests that both the community and the school are unified entities, this is somewhat misleading. This research focuses on the section of the community engaged as participants and staff in adult literacy classes. The literacy campaign itself is only possible with the support and engagement of community members with higher literacy levels and through the course of the campaign we become aware of other community members, too marginalised to engage with the campaign, who may have even lower literacy. Subsequent discussion of the community/school relationship therefore needs to be understood with the caveat that we are referring to a specific section of the community. However, we suggest while the literacy levels and life experiences of the individuals that make up that community are varied, the community has a certain view of itself as a cohesive whole. Consequently, community engagement processes which only engage the more literate sections of the community may have limited credibility – as the community's understanding of itself extends beyond those layers currently being engaged.

Initially, although some AECG members provided evaluative comments regarding the relationship with the school, this was not true of other community members. People had much to say about the impact of the YIC! campaign on people's sense of self, hopes for employment and further study, interactions with the criminal justice system and many other facets of community life, yet said very little about their interactions with the schools. We concluded that, for the section of the

community that YIC! was serving, the baseline for change in the relationship between school and community was in fact the absence of any relationship.

We then shifted the focus of research from more passive observations and interviews to an interventionist model. In discussion with a Brewarrina AECG member, one of the authors proposed a panel discussion with school personnel which was then organised by campaign staff as a post-literacy activity. A preparatory session was held in which campaign staff and participants worked with the researchers to compile a list of issues to raise with the school for discussion. Ten YIC! participants attended the Communicating with Schools panel, along with several community members. The invited panel included the principals from both the schools in Brewarrina, an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) from each school, the Vice-chair of the AECG and the NSW AECG Deputy Chair. The Brewarrina AECG Chairperson moderated the panel. YIC! participants participated confidently in discussion. This represented a significant development in the community/school relationship in Brewarrina, marking the first time anyone could remember such a discussion taking place, between the 'grassroots' of the community and senior school personnel. Similar research interventions may yet occur in the other research sites.

Our evaluation of the impact of the campaign on the relationship between schools and communities is ongoing, and subject to further discussion with the community and the Aboriginal leadership of the LFLF. To date, each interview has been transcribed and generally returned to the interviewee for verification. Transcripts and observational notes have been hand-coded according to repeated or important ideas. This coding and emergent themes were further refined through discussion with community in an iterative process which is ongoing. While the Communicating with Schools panel in Brewarrina provided deeper insight to and articulation of various issues in the community/school relationship in that site, interviews and community observations in other sites strongly suggest that similar issues to those raised in Brewarrina are at play. To date, we have organised our findings under three key themes: i) 'bad behaviour' rather than positive engagement defines community/school relationships; ii) existing consultative bodies draw on the small literate section of the community; iii) as people improve their literacy, they also improve their social confidence.

'Bad Behaviour' Rather Than Positive Engagement Defines Community/School Relationships

A prominent issue in the study communities mirrors classic research by Epstein (1995), namely the perception that the school only contacts parents and guardians when there is a problem with their child. As one woman put it: *I only go there for his bad behaviour*. Community members stated that they would like to hear more about their children's achievements and the first point they raised to discuss with school personnel in Brewarrina was, *We would like to hear from schools about the positives – praising up our kids – not just when they're in trouble*.

Informants in both Brewarrina and Wilcannia acknowledged that the school provided opportunities to showcase student achievement,

they're starting to do it now, they go around and show you the work they've been doing at school and things... they get all the children to see the parents and show them their work and they get you to have a photo taken with their work.

Yet such initiatives did not appear to overcome the sense that the schools put considerably more effort into contacting family about problems rather than achievements.

This was connected to another source of community discontent; the frequency and length of time students are suspended from school. This was raised during the Communicating with Schools panel as follows,

What are some alternatives to suspending kids? What about in-school suspensions in the community hub or at least making sure work is sent home during suspensions? How are kids meant to catch up on work they miss during the suspension?

Student suspensions are viewed by community members as counterproductive, further disengaging the student from learning and putting considerable strain on families. The willingness of schools to impose lengthy suspensions on students is viewed with confusion by communities who are also under considerable pressure to improve attendance rates. As one facilitator queried,

I mean they gotta go to school, it's compulsory directed by the government and yet they're going to suspend them for that long.

The communities' frustration with the negative framing of the community/school relationship sits in contrast to other points raised for discussion with the panel in Brewarrina which demonstrate that the community members involved in YIC! would like to be productively involved in the school as follows,

*We would like more community input into the curriculum,
We would like more cultural trips and camp outs – and we are willing to help with these,
Get the elders into school more.*

Existing Consultative Bodies Draw on the Small Literate Section of the Community

We discovered that the AECGs were only engaging people from the more literate section of the community confirming earlier evidence that the relationship between the school and low literate members of the Brewarrina community had been almost non-existent. Other research (Bingham, 2008; Hartley, 1989) suggests low literate adults lack the social confidence to engage with community events. The former YIC! coordinator in Bourke recounted her experience taking students on a post-literacy excursion to a community meeting. The coordinator and her students felt strongly that they were made to feel out of place by other attendees at the meeting. She told us that although her students sat with her in the meeting, she was aware of their discomfort and after returning to their bus they 'really let it go' saying,

'you saw how they looked at us... that's why we won't go to meetings'. But I explained that's what you've got to do. You've got to go in show that you're not afraid of nothing...you can do anything and we just encourage, empowering words, talking really positive to them.

Understanding the importance of adult literacy to participation in organisations such as the AECG is a nuanced question. There is no formal literacy requirement for AECG members, and there are adults in the community with minimal literacy whose knowledge would be very valuable to the AECG and the school itself. Yet, even adults with reasonable literacy skills can find official forums such as the AECG highly intimidating, as one YIC! coordinator explained,

I went to a lot of AECG meetings for a very long time and I've never spoken in AECG meetings 'cause I was frightened, I didn't know what to say and if I did know what to say I was frightened to say it because I'd feel shame and embarrassed

It appears that when provided with explanation and encouragement, more community members may participate in organisations such as the AECG. Following the Communicating with Schools panel, two community members applied for membership of the AECG. An additional point raised with the panel was to,

Make sure AECG meeting dates and other important events are front and centre in the newsletter.

This highlights the fact that people with low literacy skills have difficulty finding specific information within a text, a fact people with better literacy skills often fail to accommodate for.

As People's Literacy Improves So Does Their Social Confidence

Many community members report feelings of shyness or cultural discomfort, particularly in the presence of non-Indigenous people or in more official settings such as schools. Such problems appear to be intertwined with the impacts of low literacy as demonstrated by the following comment from an AEW,

Shyness is a big problem for parents. ... if I wasn't there, lots of them wouldn't even sit there, I make them feel more comfortable, get them a cup of tea, just sit and talk to them before we see the teacher.... I think a lot of parents' literacy isn't that high.

People often describe themselves as 'shy' or 'quiet' prior to their participation in the literacy campaign.

Me, I never talked, I never said boo. I was just going home and that was it but now I sit up yarning...

Well I was a very shy girl and now ever since I done the Yes I Can! I talk to anyone now and I go and I just speak up real loud now.

One of the clearest outcomes of the literacy campaign is often described by participants and staff, as being able to speak up or speak out, including the confidence to speak up for their children and in official settings. The following three comments are typical:

It gives you a lot of confidence, you know and builds the self-esteem up in all of us. We're quiet people out here and ever since we've done the YIC! program we just open up to everyone. You know we just speak out on behalf of our kids.... We've done a lot and its done a lot for us too...

People built their confidence to actually have a voice so to see people change from not having a voice and you think they didn't have a voice before and now they're speaking up more...

We had one old uncle there... and when he first joined the program he was very shy and timid you know. One of hardest things is to get a person to stand up in front of people and

talk, actually speak, and by the end of the program that was one of the greatest things to see, people actually getting up and standing up and actually reading their stories out, that was a great achievement to see 'em, because, they're building their confidence up and their self-esteem and that's a great thing.

This ability to speak out was evidenced during the Communicating with Schools panel, when 50% of the YIC! participants participated in discussion. A YIC! facilitator highlighted the significance of the cross-cultural communication at the panel discussion, saying of one of the participants,

She's always been outspoken but to be asking white people questions and that... cause she's never really had that opportunity before you know and now they have.

As people develop their literacy skills, they undergo a transformation in their sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence. This transformation echoes Freire's work on conscientization, the process by which people shift from viewing themselves as objects of history and come to understand their role as subjects of history and thereby recognise their agency (Freire, 1984). Importantly, one participant draws the connection between 'speaking up' and learning, as follows,

... Cause I never used to speak up or nothing I used to be real quiet but now I'm starting to learn a lot.

People change their narrative regarding their previous experience at school. As described by one of the campaign coordinators,

They no longer think 'I failed school', but 'school failed me, then I went back and learnt with YIC!'.

As participants come to view themselves as learners, this becomes a value they can authentically encourage in their children. The principal at Wilcannia commented,

the literacy levels of our parents have direct impact on the valuing of education and the literacy levels of our students... I know all of the people that are involved have been interacting very positively with the School. And I know comments from our students about their pride in their parents who are doing the project, or relatives who are doing the project, have been a very good outcome for us...

This changed narrative allows people to re-engage with educational processes and community life in general with a renewed hope of efficacy, with potentially wide-ranging impacts. In Wilcannia, two graduates of the literacy campaign have been employed at the school and three community members who were employed by the literacy campaign went on to work in the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy (RSAS) program, while another became an AEW.

Specific evidence of this increased sense of efficacy and how it can impact on community/school relationships and in turn student learning comes from the principal in Enngonia:

we started getting requests for homework, which we'd never had before – and it was being done. It was clear the kids were getting help with it but we didn't mind. Also, the kids' reading levels didn't drop over the summer holidays.

The woman who previously felt too shy to speak up in AECG meetings, when asked what had changed for her since working in YIC! and how she was now able to give reports and participate in discussion in both the AECG and CWP, replied:

Empowerment. Just feeling empowered. Yeah look I don't know what it is. It's magic, black magic (laughter).

Implications

This research demonstrates that in the study communities, small but significant steps have begun to address the interwoven problems of low adult literacy and non-existent or negatively-framed community/school relationships. Taking these steps has illustrated several implications.

Firstly, it should be obvious that when schools fail to make sufficient contact with families regarding children's positive achievements, the development of healthy community/school relationships are hindered. Yet schools should be aware that it will take more than generic showcasing of student achievements to overcome this problem. While community members appeared to appreciate such community-wide activities, their generic quality doesn't overcome the impression that specific efforts to contact individual parents/care-givers only occur for negative reasons.

Our research reveals that, when adult literacy is addressed, it begins to enlarge the section of the community with the necessary social confidence to engage with the school. The socialisation of the YIC! campaign means that, school personnel are more likely to have witnessed, or heard of the, transformation in campaign participants, which in turn means they are more likely to be able to break from any previous deficit viewpoints they may have held. As the AECG Deputy Chair said at the Communicating with Schools panel, 'Yes I Can! is an opportunity to do something different'.

On the other hand, we can also conclude that while low literacy levels persist in communities, the reluctance of adults with low literacy to participate in organisations such as the AECG, results in roles and responsibilities becoming concentrated within the community members who do possess the literacy skills and social confidence to engage with such forums. As well as being problematic for the low-literate section of the population who become increasingly isolated from community decision making, this phenomenon is a problem for those community members with better literacy who then carry an even larger burden of responsibility. The two leading members of the AECG in Brewarrina both sit on several other community organisations. They both have significant family responsibilities as matriarchs of large and complex families. Much of the community work these women undertake is unpaid and, at times, results in stressful encounters with dissatisfied community members or representatives from the school or other authorities which can result in significant distress for these community leaders.

Thus, improving the rate of adult literacy, needs to be understood as an important contributor to improving community cohesion, a very important value in Aboriginal communities, and a value that is embedded within the YIC! campaign (Boughton, Chee, Beetson, Durnan, & LeBlanch, 2013). This impact of the campaign was noted by the principal at Enngonia who commented,

people in the community were encouraging each other and motivating each other. That was really noticeable.

Conclusion

Our investigations confirmed our hypothesis that, in the communities involved in this study, low adult literacy was a barrier to healthy community/school relationships. The steps towards improved literacy, and improved community/school relations witnessed in association with the YIC! campaign are modest but significant as they follow decades of living with low literacy and its associated disenfranchisement. YIC! specifically targets the *most socially excluded section* of the community while the community leadership structures that support YIC! include more literate and educated community members, including those who have worked for decades to build more effective relationships with schools. By targeting and ensuring success for people who have been living profoundly difficult lives the YIC! campaign provides rich learnings, not only for those who are seeking to improve their literacy, and that of their children, but for those with much higher literacy who have been seeking to improve educational outcomes while remaining largely ignorant of the experiences of some of the most disenfranchised families.

Working within the YIC! campaign as participant researchers considering the specific question of community/school relationships has provided us with a snapshot of the dynamics of these relationships within three very remote sites in NSW. We have reported findings that were common across the sites, yet acknowledge that there are also variations in the experiences of each site. We consider that the issues discussed in this article may well be true in other communities as well. Yet it is vital that community members in other sites have the opportunity to speak for themselves about their unique experiences working to secure educational outcomes for their children.

A quarter of a century has passed since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) concluded that:

The only chance for improving education as a social resource for Aboriginal people will come as a result of Aboriginal people deciding for themselves what it is they require of education and then having the means of determining how that end is to be achieved (RCIADIC, 1991, p. 156).

To do this, however, people must first redress the power imbalance that exists between the community and the current decision makers, teachers, principals and Department officials who determine how schooling will be conducted. Low levels of English language literacy, along with all the problems this creates or is associated with for families and communities, are directly implicated in this imbalance.

That the scale of progress over recent decades has been insufficient, both in terms of community control of education and educational outcomes, suggests that unless the question of adult literacy is addressed, efforts to engage families and communities in educational decision making, will continue to progress in a spasmodic and piecemeal way. However, when people develop their literacy, confidence and ability to speak out there is potential for community/school relationships to be transformed. The last words should rightly go to an AECG member in Brewarrina:

... until people are able to read the documentation that's presented before them and those kids are getting the tools to be able to go through school and be able to write and things and then at the end of that undertake processes that will enable them to challenge these processes that really are affecting a lot of our kids today well then nothing will ever, ever change for Aboriginal people.

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