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Walking the tightrope or constructing a bridge? A study into effective partnership practices between an interstate boarding school community and a very remote Aboriginal Community

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Abstract

Access to secondary education for very remote Northern Territory Indigenous students is limited. Although many students attend distant boarding schools, very few stay to complete Year 12 (the final year of secondary school in Australia). Few families and communities are fully engaged in the whole transition process. This paper describes a case study of one very remote Indigenous community and its partnership with an interstate boarding College. The partnership is attributed with students from community staying to complete Year 12 and then seeking local employment pathways afterward. The study on which this paper is based, investigated how the elements within this partnership function. Using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design, two adults from the remote Indigenous Community and six staff from a partner boarding College were interviewed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, thematically coded and participants were deidentified. Limitations included small sample size not completely representative of the students, families, Elders and staff from either the community or the college.

Keywords: *Indigenous, secondary, education, partnership, remote, boarding*

Introduction

Every child has a right to an education; every parent a right for their child to be educated. Indigenous people 'in the bush' understand the importance of engaging with Western ways, recognising that '2 ways' education builds choice and opportunity (Wearne & Yunupingu, 2011). Despite this, many Indigenous children currently living in remote parts of Australia will not complete their secondary education. Remote Indigenous communities in Australia's Northern Territory [NT], have few, if any, local secondary schools, and post-school pathways are limited (Guenther et al., 2016). In many places ecological knowledge remains strong, and traditional language and culture are maintained, but these, too, are compromised when education systems are not fit for purpose and young people lose hope (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). By contrast, those growing up in cities enjoy a plethora of choice with both school and post school pathways designed to set them up for independent adult lives. While they enjoy every advantage the education system has to offer, families in urban environments have little idea of the ancient roots of this land, the story, the song, the language, the lifestyle. Increasingly, this is being understood as an historic failure of the Australian education system, and the need to drive change is seen in the development of the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012). Indigenous writers and filmmakers, and a media committed to building public awareness, have inspired in many non-Indigenous Australians a yearning to understand what

sustains the oldest living culture on this planet. People desire to take the step, to look, to listen, to hear the ancient rhythms of this land.

The case study presented here demonstrates how two groups of people separated by thousands of kilometres and a deep cultural, linguistic and educational divide, have worked to overcome obstacles and learn each other's ways. The story begins with an educational partnership which connects an urban Western boarding school community with a traditional remote Indigenous community. It explores the ways in which these two communities have learned from each other, and the implications of the partnership as played out in the lives of all involved.

Positionality and Context

I am a non-Indigenous researcher. I have lived in central Australia for more than 21 years, working for most of that time as a teacher. I currently have a role supporting remote Indigenous students as they transition to boarding schools across Australia. My employment is distinct from the research underpinning this paper, but provides a unique perspective: from day to day, I connect with many remote living and traditionally oriented people at a 'grass-roots level'. I have been accepted within the Warlpiri community and given the skin name *Japaljarri*. I am on a journey to learn more about other Indigenous cultures and my interest is piqued by those who, like me, are committed to learning more about remote Northern Territory Indigenous communities, their cultural heritage, their languages and their traditional knowledge. I believe that all Australians should be given the opportunity to engage with both Western and Indigenous culture.

Through my current role, I heard of an organic partnership between an independent school in rural South Australia and a remote Pitjantjatjara community in the southern regions of the Northern Territory. Neither officially negotiated nor formally documented, the partnership was characterised by an evident relationship of trust which had been purposefully built between the two communities (Finke River Mission, 2016). As someone working with secondary aged young people from a range of communities, I saw differential education outcomes being achieved by students whose boarding experience was framed within this context of mutuality, of relationship and of holistic understanding, relative to those attending schools with no prior context or history of engagement with community life.

This paper emerges from a study conducted through Charles Darwin University. It draws on insights gleaned over my more than two decades of working at the coalface, as well as on academic literature. The insights I share are mine alone, and do not reflect the opinions of others working in the Australian education system. They reflect my conviction that understanding how young people are supported to achieve better education outcomes through partnerships such as the one described here should inform how such relationships might be prioritised and supported in other contexts.

Literature Review

Why Partnerships?

Partnerships can change lives. Functional educational partnerships can move students to new ways of knowing, of living, of being (Australian Government, 2020). For young people who have no option but to leave home and attend boarding school (Mander, 2015) in a culturally foreign environment, a partnership's matrix should delicately, intentionally, weave a dynamic network of supports around the student. Together these form a strong and reliable safety net. This is in stark contrast to the banal, overly punctilious nature of a 'joining the dots' transition where a student moves from community A to boarding school B where never the twain shall meet. The perilous journey from home to school for this young person is akin to walking a tightrope, open to the elements, where supports err and hopes are often lost. A tightrope concentrates on its own energy, tussling from end to end, struggling to keep itself taut, to just exist, while those who

cross, in this case students who take one tentative step at a time, often succumb to the elements and, all too often, tragically fall into a sea of oblivion. By the time they have disengaged, or dropped out of school, it is often too late to pick the pieces up and to guide these anxious young people back into school. Their trust in the formal education system has been lost. The concept of boarding will forever be associated in their minds with trauma. Consistent with international literature on trauma, these most vulnerable students will typically retreat, accept defeat and return home harbouring a sense of failure and shame (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker & Vigilante, 1995; Carson, Dunbar, Chenall & Bailie, 2007). To these students, the hope, curiosity and wonder of an education is not to be.

The transition from a remote community to an urban boarding schools is too often marked by feelings of disconnection and isolation (O'Bryan & Fogarty 2020; Mander, 2015). Effective partnerships work to link home and school by building reliable bridges between worlds. The partnership described below was built on the shared objective of ensuring that a student will never feel alone or isolated; that they can be safe. This partnership began with two groups of people, with a genuine hope, an authentic belief and a commitment to wholly support a student. The commitment came from both sides. Creative approaches to problem solving emerged. Genuine partnership, such as the one described here, facilitates a free flow of communication, of learning, of cultural knowledge, of language, of safety in both directions. Genuine partnership enables positive and productive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Embedded within every connecting cord, are the core values of trust and cultural respect; these are the building blocks of growth. The path from one world to another is now safe to traverse. The bridge becomes a world of its own; a place populated with family, friends, teachers, peers all on a journey of learning and cultural exchange. Education becomes a shared enterprise at every level.

The case study which follows reveals the purposeful and collaborative effort required to construct this bridge: commitment and the investment of resources beyond what either or both partners can bring to the relationship. Organisations, philanthropists and governments each have a role to play. By practically and financially supporting such an enterprise, they have become part of the solution to the seemingly intractable problem of education retention and attainment in remote Australia. They also address the deficit of cultural knowledge which characterises 'mainstream' Australian life.

The Role of Boarding- Present Policy, Past Experience

As a result of the *Wilson Review into Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Wilson, 2014), a boarding school experience was seen as a practical solution for secondary education for very remotely located Indigenous students. However, this Review did not engage with how relationships might be fostered between remote Northern Territory families, communities and boarding schools. With the implementation of the Northern Territory Department of Education *Indigenous Education Strategy*, a Transition Support Unit was established to support families who have made a choice to send their child to a boarding school- either locally or to distant parts of Australia (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015). Despite there being a strong demand from families to send their child to a boarding school, limited supply of boarding places means families within a single community are often forced to send children to several different boarding schools (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Likewise, it is quite common for one boarding school to accept students from multiple communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). These practices of selecting multiple boarding schools or multiple communities creates an environment lacking clear focus, contextual practice and sustaining relationships.

This is not the first time governments have looked to boarding schools to create education opportunity for First Nations young people, but it is fair to say that Indigenous boarding has had a chequered history, some of which is canvassed in other papers appearing in this Special Edition.

Over the 19th and 20th Centuries, governments throughout the colonised world used boarding as a plank in assimilatory policies aimed at integrating Indigenous boarding students into a commanding society (Smith, 2009). Themes of dislocation, the loss of language and culture are prevalent, with Canada's 'residential schools', in particular, implicated in a program of what has been described as 'cultural genocide' (MacDonald, 2015).

By contrast, in contemporary Australia, boarding programs are presented using a rhetoric of opportunity, choice and hope for the future. The extent to which this is matched in reality, especially for young people from remote Australia, remains a moot point (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). A report tracking the education histories of secondary aged young people from one remote NT community suggests that there are a range of structural and operational issues which impede families and their children from thriving in boarding schools (O'Bryan & Fogarty 2020). Findings in that report confirm the conclusions of the Australian Government's Study Away Review, that strong relationships between a student's home and school communities are an essential factor facilitating education engagement, attainment and longer term wellbeing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017)

Community engagement and empowerment lie at the heart of genuine partnerships. Community engagement is essential to disrupting asymmetries of power which are the legacy of colonial history (Duggie & Kotzur, 2014; O'Bryan & Rose, 2015). Community empowerment has a positive impact on education outcomes: genuine communication with Indigenous students, families and Elders has been shown to promote student learning, wellbeing, high expectations and success (Hattie in Queensland Government, 2018 p. 2).

One New Zealand Ministry of Education study identifies the benefit of parental engagement, collaboration and intervention with school staff on a student's learning journey (Robinson, 2009). The positive effects of reciprocal culturally intelligent relationships based on the Māori principle of *Kotahitanga* (Unity of Purpose) promote the values of trust and respect (Robinson, 2009, p. 161). Practically, the Māori metaphor of *Ako* (reciprocation), where there is a *Kotahitanga* or 'unity of purpose' for both cultures to share knowledge (Berryman, 2014), assumes direct family involvement in their child's education. In a New Zealand Ministry of Education commissioned metastudy, parent and teaching intervention (e.g. co-designing curriculum) had an effect size of +1.81 on a child's educational achievement (Robinson, 2009). This equates to more than four times the average growth in a child's learning (Robinson, 2009, p. 143). Similarly, North American First Nations people have promoted a unity concept through the Alaskan Rural Systematic Initiative which seeks to promote both Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, allowing for mutually beneficial learning (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005).

The case study presented here emerged from a research project undertaken between 2018 and 2019 and conducted through Charles Darwin University. It focuses in particular on how the school and community learn from each other and how they mutually support that learning.

Research Methods and Design

This qualitative case study emphasised the human experience and discovered the inner workings (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) or phenomenon (Gillies & Cruz, 2014) of the educational partnership. A phenomenological design (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Philips, 2014; Willig, 2013) allowed an Indigenous cultural narrative where knowledge is transferred through story (Gorman & Toombs, 2009). Each participant's story was recorded. Inquiry occurred freely (Ober, 2017) and questions dug-deep to find the true essence of the partnership (Kafle, 2011).

The research question this article responds to, as part of the broader research project is:

What are the key elements of a community-school partnership that underpin student learning at a boarding school?

Sites and Participants

Two research sites formed the basis for this study: 1) The Community (referred to as **Community**); and 2) The College in South Australia (referred to as **College**)

Families and school staff resided or worked at either site. The College and Community populations formed the basis for the sampling frame (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Walliman, 2011).

Eight participants were chosen through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used as it was necessary to have participants who were directly involved in the partnership. These included six College participants (three male and three female) and two Community participants (both female). It was difficult to achieve a balanced gendered sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) as the partnership was led by Community women.

The following sampling criteria applied to both sites:

- **College:** The College Principal identified staff participants actively involved in the program for at least one year.
- **Community:** A local Indigenous family or Indigenous school staff who have cared for or supervised a Community student (residing at the College student during school terms) for at least one year. An Aboriginal Knowledge and Advisory Group identified participants addressing these criteria.

Aboriginal Knowledge and Advisory Group

To acquire Indigenous consent for knowledge transfer (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005), Community Elders were consulted and gave their authority for the research (Gorman & Toombs, 2009). Two Indigenous staff from the Northern Territory Department of Education joined the group. Advisors were asked for cultural direction on research progress to alleviate potential conflicts (Gorman & Toombs, 2009) whilst hoping to uphold local Indigenous research methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Tuhiwai Smith, 2008; Ober, 2017).

Data Gathering

On the advice of the Aboriginal Knowledge and Advisory Group, participant interviews occurred individually. One Community participant chose to have a local support person present. Although given opportunity to contribute, this person decided not to talk during the interview.

Using a narrative approach, there were face-to-face semi-structured English conversations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Johnson & Christensen, 2012) between the interviewer and each participant (Willig, 2013, p.29-30). Audio recordings were made of each interview (Groenewald, 2004; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Walliman, 2011).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 119). After transcription, participants were de-identified (Groenewald, 2004; Walliman, 2011) and accounts were coded using a NVIVO-12 program. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Willig, 2013, pp. 87-88) a staged approach was conducted to discover themes. Six thematic clusters resulted as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Participant Themes

| Theme cluster | Summary of coded responses |
|----------------------|--|
| Communication | Trust and Communication; Processes; Combined meetings; Two-way communication; Modes of Communication; Culture and Communication |
| Relationships | Initial Contact with Community; Intentional Partnership and Vision; Earning Respect; Relationships and Understanding; Teamwork; Bilingual conversation; Relationships: Student-student, Student-Staff, Staff-parent; Christianity and Relationships; Brokerage |
| Student Factors | Wellbeing and Readiness; Opportunity and Improvement; Change and Integration; Homesickness, Misbehaviour; Strategic Response |
| Learning | Western Learning; Local Learning; Two-Way Learning; Teachers and Elders Co-curriculum Design; Year 12 Completion; Learning Time and Terms; Exchange Teaching and Students; Technology and Learning |
| Language and Culture | Cultural Respect; Gender and Culture; Cultural Business; Bilingual education; College staff and students learning Culture 'On Country'; Culture and Confirmation |
| Collaboration | Initial Collaborative Meeting; Developing Modes of Communication; Respect as a Vehicle to Collaborate; Teamwork; Points of Contact; Parental Input; Reflective Humility |

Ethical Considerations

The role of the Aboriginal Knowledge and Advisory Group was paramount as local Indigenous people were empowered to guide the research process. This approach confers with contemporary research and ethical comment (Berryman, 2014; Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2006; Gorman & Toombs, 2009; Stewart et al., 2006).

This study followed principles of acting honestly with integrity and treating others with respect and courtesy (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018; Walliman, 2011). Procedures from the National Statement on Ethical Conduct the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018) and others (Bhattacharjee, 2012), were followed.

A Charles Darwin University Human Research Ethics Proposal was approved on 10 October 2018, Reference H18o8o. A Northern Territory Department of Education Application for Conduct Research was approved on 17 September 2018, Reference EDOC2018/76200.

Limitations

The small sample size could have potentially caused theme variation as participants may have presented their personal view and this view may not have been representative of each community. Having more participants may have provided a clearer picture (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005) as there were more College participants (6) to Community participants (2). The two Community participants had good English although an interpreter would have allowed community participants to answer in Pitjantjatjara. Even though the phenomenological design drew out perceptive responses, misunderstandings of cultural nuances may have compromised this meaning (Willig, 2013, p. 95). Researcher bias in the data coding process (Babbie, 2007) may have occurred where consideration may have been given to one theme ahead of another where

it was difficult for the researcher to disconnect from his accumulated experience and thereby allow participant voice to emerge fully (Guenther et al., 2015). This was particularly the case as Indigenous Community participants spoke English as a second or even third language giving limited responses (Shi, 2011). It was also difficult to demonstrate a causal connection between the effectiveness of this partnership and retention to Year 12, although students engaged in this program achieved better educational outcomes relative to young people from other remote communities where no partnership supported their transition to boarding school.

The model presented in the case study which follows did not address how power is distributed between communities. Given that most learning occurred in the English language, there is an automatic (but not necessarily intended) exclusion of Pitjantjatjara communication. Important cultural concepts would most naturally and authentically be taught in Pitjantjatjara (Osborne, 2017), but given the mono-lingual orientation of the urban partner school, neither students nor staff from that institution had the skills to engage with bi-lingual knowledge transfer. Truly shared power (where learning exists partly between either Western or Pitjantjatjara spheres) would require that both spheres be embraced as equally important in what some describe as a “*contested knowledge space*” (Osborne & Guenther, 2013, p. 112).

Findings

The following factors were identified as the essential elements underpinning this partnership. Taken together they are the components of the bridge spanning the divide between home, school and communities for the students from two worlds.

Partnership Design

Participants described this partnership as having a clear student centred intention, equally respecting and affirming the positions of both College and Community leaders. This clear intention formed the basis for a defined commitment to educate the students. Central to this was the commitment made by College staff who visited the community at least ten times per year. This commitment, through a team based approach, fostered community engagement and cultural learning. Community students were supported by a College organisational structure which recognised them within their life and cultural context, and saw the strength and dignity of each student. Belonging at school was further enhanced by the development of a supportive, inclusive curriculum (both academic and wellbeing).

The commitment to a two-ways framework extended beyond the Indigenous students in the school. A cohort of non Indigenous college students were supported to visit, serve and learn about the Community through a cultural immersion program. This included an intensive week-long service project where students worked in local community organisations, helped to build a community garden and participated in bush tucker trips and learnt community culture (Land Rights News, 2017).

The extent to which relationships had built across generations is evidenced by the number of secondary aged students from the community who chose to board at the College. While for some this experience was an exercise in exposure to Western culture, others enrolled in academic pathways with ambitions to work beyond school. In 2018, when the study began, two students from the community were completing Year 12 at the partner school. A year later, another four students had completed Year 12 (Centralian Advocate, 2019). This level of Western school achievement is rarely seen in very remote communities within the Northern Territory, as many do not have the capacity to support students through secondary years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

The Desire to Learn Within Another Culture

Children (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) wanted to learn in each other's community. Community and College participants extolled the value of learning 'both ways'. Community participants discussed the value of learning 'on country' while also yearning for students to learn Western ways. Families felt that 'both-way' learning approach allowed students to become strong and confident in another world. One Community participant commented:

Our culture they can come back and do it any time they want. It is always here. It is a good thing that the students need to learn the Western culture so they can be confident and strong ... They can always come back and learn culture at home. Like during holiday.

College participants also valued how both staff and students had a strong desire to visit the Community:

Our kids when they go up there every year... they learn so much ... They just love it ... it is just something extraordinary ... you would not expect our kids to want go up there and you would not expect them to come back with that impression.

Knowledge Transference

Traditionally, in a one-directional boarding transition, students leave their home and transition to a boarding school primarily to learn Western Culture on a different country. This College-Community partnership had a reciprocal dynamic where Community students learnt Western ways at the boarding school and Western College students learnt 'on country'. Both College and Community responses showed the willingness of children to learn knowledge in the other's world. One Community participant reflected: *"It is like a learning each other. Whitefella way and our way... [The College] kids they coming in and learning our ways... our kids go there to [The College] and they learning their way"*. One College participant valued their Western community learning on Aboriginal country:

We need to make sure that we are going into a Community that we can learn from ... when you serve a Community such as [Community] you actually get more back yourself ... that is a real learned thing... You can't just get that by having a conversation. You have got to be out there and experience it.

The reciprocal relationship created completely different learning contexts; bi-cultural, mutually respectful, mutually empowering. They are a far cry from historically disconnected learning models where culture was obliterated from a child's learning journey.

Learning on Country and the Involvement of Families

In their home community, two students completed one Year 12 SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) subject working both with their Community Elders and their College teachers. The project included the teachers, the Elders and an independent community organisation working in an informal partnership. One College participant related the experience: *"... our students head up into the Community and during that time ... actually tick off ... their Community Studies subject. So last year they built an Op Shop ... So, we had our teachers up there ... Elders help them"*.

Community and College participants saw learning as a reciprocal, collaborative journey. Participants were encouraged to actively reflect on cross-cultural learning which had occurred and their insights were presented at a College-Community meeting, in a student religious confirmation as well as at a personal level. One Community participant reflected on a joint College-Community meeting where families (with children of all ages) met 'on country': *"They are on the front and all the families are sitting there and our children together from [College]. All the teachers standing there telling stories with the Community and the families ... stories and pictures,*

what they are doing". A College participant's reflected on the richness of the experience from her point of view:

Sitting down and making bush medicine with the women and finding these leaves and grinding them up ... and kangaroo tail... I mean they are things we would never experience... and even if we went to Alice Springs ... we would never experience things like that ... so really, we do nothing in comparison to what we get back.

These examples of learning 'on country' contribute to the rich environmental and cultural experiences within a remote Northern Territory Community school (Duggie & Kotzur, 2014). One College participant expressed the desire for staff to learn local Indigenous history from the Elders. Another explained how College staff and students wanted to "*learn their [Indigenous] ways and understand their culture*". These participant comments aligned with local research showing how boarding staff learnt when *listening* to Indigenous student's stories while visiting their community (Benveniste, Dawson & Rainbird, 2015).

Community participants also explained the cumulative benefit for students learning Western science and art in addition to traditional culture. This idea of acquiring culture is not new with Indigenous leaders. Martin Nakata describes how introduced Western culture (especially Western science) can improve traditional dugong hunting practices (Nakata, 2010). Adding Western culture to traditional culture was also articulated in the central Australian anthology, *Every Hill Got a Story*, where many Elders related positive, additional benefits of both-ways learning (Hiew, 2015)

Reciprocal learning occurred in a community led, 'on country' Lutheran confirmation service. The service, in Pitjantjatjara language, celebrated the confirmation of both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. A Community Elder who initiated this event saw the learning as a necessary part of a child's education. College and Community participant comments ranged from "*working in partnership*" to "*people are really happy and proud*".

Reinforcing Learning on Pitjantjatjara Country

Every year non-Indigenous College students visited the Community for an annual service trip where they learnt and engaged in cultural activities 'on country'. One participant described how these students came back to the College "*more in tune with their world view*" by learning their Indigenous peer's unique connection to community, family and land. A Community participant described how College children made a garden and played sport. Community participants also described how the visiting students learnt from their Indigenous peers about 'bush tucker' and endemic animals. College staff went hunting with Elders for witchetty grubs and honey ants. Staff showed interest about learning language. Everyone cooked damper and kangaroo tail. One College staff member related how this learning allowed her to question commonly accepted elements of Western Society: "*I came back a changed person and I know the students did too*". This participant did not go into detail about how they had changed, but it seems the experience challenged their value system to live a deeper, more satisfying life.

Spending time on country strengthened not only staff cultural understanding but also relationships with the Elders. Whilst there is no direct evidence that this experience resulted in greater student engagement, it is plausible that this experience created a trusting respectful environment, allowing students to feel included.

Potential for Innovation

One Community participant reflected on the larger contribution she felt she had to make in promoting two-ways education. To that end, she suggested that a teacher exchange should be initiated:

I should be going to [College] and teaching what I have taught them here... talking about one theme. So, they can see this is what they learn. Like one topic. Like water. Or trees or the seasons or calendar... how many seasons we got... like science you know. What type of fruit and what type of season where we can get that fruit.

She believed that Elders should be going to the College to see what the students are learning and to assist in the development and delivery of a culturally rich curriculum to all College students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous). Within this proposition, there would be the challenge to fit a cultural curriculum into the College curriculum. Also, this teacher would need to differentiate her culturally based, language-based pedagogy for a completely different student cohort. This proposal compares to the Wesley/Yiramalay partnership where Kimberley based Elders travelled thousands of kilometres to teach Bunaba language to primary non-indigenous students in Melbourne (Drennan & McCord, 2015). Additionally, a teacher exchange could inspire College teachers to learn more by teaching at the Community school (Drennan & McCord, 2015). Exchange teaching would authentically showcase Indigenous cultural teaching standards (Perso, 2012), allowing for families and Elders to be directly involved with curriculum development and co-teaching (Robinson, 2009; Berryman, 2014).

Maintaining Symmetry

The value for communities learning from each other was articulated by a College participant: *“It’s about connecting [Community] and [College] way together. Not putting one above the other but marrying them so that they are the ‘same-same’”*. This quote describes one main governing principle that should frame learning partnerships. If learning is about connection, it needs to be on a level playing field. This “same-same” homology has similarities with a butterfly flying metaphor where each wing represents Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies (Duggie & Kotzur, 2014). The butterfly must acquire both Indigenous and Western learning to allow it to fly. Considering the Community bilingual model where local community students learn in Pitjantjatjara and English (Freeman, Bell, Andrews & Gallagher, 2018), the expectation of exchange teaching allows for Indigenous students to receive a ‘both-ways’ education at the College. There are challenges for the Community and the College. For example, the College and the Community must continually communicate and learn with each other to address the sense of cultural loss when students are away from home (Bobongie, 2017; Osborne, Rigney, Benveniste, Guenther & Disbray, 2018). The challenge also remains for the non-Indigenous College students. For learning to develop symmetrically, learning needs to move beyond service visits and epistemological learning to ontological inquiry (Langton & Ma Rhea, 2009). In other words, the learning needs to move past the awe of knowing about Indigenous culture to delve deeper into the “being” or the “how” of Indigenous culture. Osborne argues that English language may describe the heart as the deepest point for human emotions although the Anangu describe the spirit at the core of a very remote Indigenous person (Osborne, 2013). So where does the heart meet the spirit? Learning a local Indigenous language is a step forward to understanding the spirit of Indigenous culture (Osborne & Guenther, 2013). If non-Indigenous College staff and students learnt the depth of Pitjantjatjara language, then Indigenous students may sense a reciprocity of understanding and perceive a restored equilibrium (Trudgen, 2000).

Practical Elements Within the Partnership Symmetry

These practical examples outline some key actions within the partnership:

- The College staff visited the Community ten times per year
- The Community families and Elders took College staff and students on cultural walks in the Community and taught them about bush foods.
- The College staff held meetings ‘on country’ where the whole community learnt of their children’s progress

- The families connected to their child's learning through school Facebook site
- The College created a 'safe garden' where students could find solace if they were feeling emotionally fragile
- The Community Elders hosted a confirmation service 'on country' led in Pitjantjatjara language
- Elders co-designed a Year 12 project with College teachers which resulted in successful Year 12 achievement.

Conclusion

In this case study, I have reported on how one community and boarding college constructed a bridge between home and school to support Indigenous students to complete their secondary schooling. This partnership incorporated families, stakeholders and all the Indigenous community with a growing team of staff and students from the College. Frequent interchanges of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) between these diverse communities allowed for partnership growth through multiple learning experiences. There were opportunities for young people from both settings to engage in a genuine 'both-ways' education.

One key element of this partnership was the intentional commitment for both communities to learn and understand each other. Active visits from the College to the Community generated ongoing trusting relationship development. This framework allowed children to learn and belong in a culturally safe environment. The desire for non-Indigenous College students to learn about and serve the Community, reinforced a positive learning culture and further deepened the partnership. This study showed that co-designed, empowering, partnership frameworks have positive student outcomes when driven by local Indigenous people. It was clear that this partnership included a positive, strengths-based model where there was a *ngaprtji*, the Pitjantjatjara word for 'give-give' (Langton & Ma Rhea, 2009).

This study has shown elements of an effective partnership in one setting. The relationship appears to have contributed to vastly improved academic outcomes for young community members, although measuring the long-term impacts on non-Indigenous students is a less precise exercise. Equally, we cannot predict to what extent the partnership will contribute to future student retention. Neither is there evidence to show that the elements described here necessarily apply more generally to other communities and boarding schools. This partnership was community led and organic in its growth. I cannot say whether government policy to support or develop partnerships would be effective at scale, although such evidence as exists suggests that such an approach is worthy of consideration. Further research should evaluate multiple school-community partnerships in an attempt to find common, replicable elements.

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