



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Principals as Protagonists: Practices Beneficent for Indigenous Education in Rural Schools

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Abstract

What can school principals do to improve outcomes for Indigenous students in RRR schools? Evidence suggests that the impact on student learning of school principals' leadership is significant. Herein, we discuss research that investigated school principals' professional practices associated with their leadership of Indigenous education in rural, regional and remote (RRR) schools. Qualitative research was undertaken using interpretive methodologies and document analysis techniques. Data collected in the period 2012-2014 through evaluations of Indigenous education in thirty-one Australian primary, secondary and combined schools, from diverse RRR locations, were used for the research. Principals' professional practices described in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals provided the overall framing for analysis of the data (AITSL, 2014). Principals' extant practices that shape the ecology of education for Indigenous students in rural schools were identified. Educational leadership that authentically values the culture, agency and beliefs of Indigenous people; that places Indigenous students' physical, mental, cultural and spiritual wellbeing at the centre of the school's activities; that actively develops collaborative relationships and networks based on reciprocity, trust, cooperation and civility; that is guided and sustained by humanistic endeavour, makes a significant contribution towards the participation and achievements of Indigenous students. The article proposes a framework for leadership of Indigenous education in RRR schools which locates the principal in the role of 'protagonist', building social capital around the practices that contribute holistically to the education of Indigenous students.

Keywords: Indigenous education, leadership, inclusion, practice, principal, community

Introduction

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals 'charges' principals with the crucial role of "raising student achievement at all levels and all stages, promoting equity and excellence and creating and sustaining the conditions under which quality teaching and learning thrive" (AITSL, 2011, p. 2). Robinson's (2007) analysis of school leadership practices shows that principals exert moderate to large effects on students' academic and non-academic outcomes. Other research evidence shows that "the total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects" and the "demonstrated effects of successful

leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5).

Principals are appointed as leaders of a school and its community and by virtue of the role have responsibility and are accountable for the education of all students so that they can become “*successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active, informed citizens*” (MCEETYA, 2008, pp. 8-9). Evidence across a variety of measures indicates that the participation and performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [hereafter referred to as Indigenous (Pascoe, 2008, p. 7)] students in Australia’s schools is below that of other Australian students (De Bortoli & Thomson, 2009; Helme & Lamb, 2011; MCEETYA, 2008, p. 15; Price, 2012; Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, 2011). A number of system-wide reviews and reports, recently in the Northern Territory (Wilson B. , 2014) and nationally (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017; Australian Government. Department of Education and Training, 2016) have been conducted for the purpose of addressing this nationally concerning situation. With the same concern in mind a number of RRR school principals sought reviews (Principals Australia Institute, 2009) of their practice, and advice about their leadership of Indigenous education at the local school level. Reports emanating from reviews conducted in 31 RRR schools form the primary source of data for the research reported in this paper.

Indigenous students attend schools throughout Australia with significant diversity of context between schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). As argued by Giles, Bell, Halsey & Palmer (2012) “*leadership occurs in context and context influences leadership*”. Leadership in one context or location is not necessarily transferable to another (Leithwood et al., 2004, pp. 10-11; Southworth, 2005, pp. 75-92) and principals’ leadership must “*be responsive to the diverse nature of Australia’s schools*” (AITSL, 2011, p. 2). A broadly appreciative approach was adopted for the research reported in this paper thereby prioritising what appears to be successful, effective and responsive leadership in RRR school contexts, rather than seeking understanding of differences in leadership between RRR and non-RRR schools.

This paper focuses on developing an extended understanding of principals’ professional practices that facilitate, or have the potential to facilitate, the education of Indigenous students in RRR schools. Data from reports for 31 RRR school principals about their leadership of Indigenous education was analysed in this research activity. The ‘findings’ emanating from the analysis were further interrogated to identify common threads and themes about principals’ leadership of Indigenous education. These were then considered alongside the professional practices indicated in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011, pp. 5-11) leading to identification of principals’ professional practices considered to be beneficial for Indigenous education in RRR schools. A framework reflecting the identified beneficial leadership practices for Indigenous education in RRR schools is proposed.

Method

Qualitative research employing document analysis methodology, an “*integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving, and analysing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning*” (Altheide, 1996, p. 2) was used to explicate the impact of principal leadership styles and practices on Indigenous students. Consistent with the methodology advocated by Altheide, three stages or parcels of work were involved (Altheide, 1996, pp. 23-44). Ethics approval for the research activity (Project 7190) was

granted by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) at Flinders University on February 16th, 2016.

The first stage involved identifying the data sources for the research. Briefly, commencing in 2012, school principals seeking to improve outcomes for Indigenous students in their schools invited reviews of their leadership of Indigenous education through an Australia-wide program known as “*Dare to Lead Collegial Snapshots*” (Principals Australia Institute, 2009; Price, 2012, p. 17). All reviews were conducted on each school site, and in its community by experienced, former principals with extensive lived experience of leading Indigenous education in schools. A consistent review methodology, informed by the “*Dare to Lead Model: Principles and ways of working*” was applied across all schools (Principals Australia Institute, 2009, p. 7). The model was based on a belief “*that successful outcomes will be achieved when a school undertakes a multi-faceted and strategic approach, all the time affirming cultural identity and maintaining links with the Indigenous community*” (Principals Australia Institute, 2009, p. 6).

These reviews consistently involved interviews with Indigenous students, their parents and caregivers, Indigenous community members, Indigenous employees, school executive and staff with the intention of privileging the ‘voice’ of Indigenous people in the subsequent report to the principal. While the reports are silent about the cultural backgrounds of the school principals, it is important to appreciate the intention of the review process was to value Indigenous cultural perspectives enabling principals’ reflection of, and enactment of subsequent practices for the benefit of Indigenous education in their schools. The reports included ‘commendations’ about extant beneficial practices and ‘recommendations’ providing advice about future development of the principal’s leadership of Indigenous education in the school.

Thirty-one RRR schools, described as such using the Schools Geographic Location Classification Scheme (AITSL, 2011), were reviewed in the period 2012 to 2014 and the ‘commendations’ and ‘recommendations’ within the reports from these schools formed the data for the research discussed in this paper. Four criteria (“authenticity”, “credibility”, “representativeness”, and “meaning”) were applied in assessing the quality of the documents used in the study (Bryman, 2012, p. 544). The reports are authentic, coming from a known, identified origin; credibility is affirmed through the consistent methodology applied in formulating each report; all reports from RRR schools for the period 2012-2014 were used in the study and represent a full data set for the period; the documents are meaningful, containing clear and comprehensible evidence.

The second stage involved developing a protocol for systematically guiding analysis of the documents (Bowen, 2009). An analytical technique known as directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281), also described as theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 174-5) was applied utilising concepts such as “*professional practices*” in the theoretical framing of what principals are expected to “*know, understand and do to succeed in their work*” (AITSL, 2011, p. 2).

The third stage of the research process involved rounds of revisiting the review reports to conceptually refine understandings of meanings, relevance and significance associated with the recommendations and commendations. Categories of practice aligned with five areas of principals’ professional practice were identified and then aggregated for subsequent analysis (Davies, 2017, pp. 132-142). Understandings about what principals were doing to benefit Indigenous students (commended practices) and what practices they could initiate or improve (recommended practices) led to the findings.

Findings

Some brief comment about the antecedents to the formation of the *Dare to Lead Collegial Snapshot* reports is necessary to ‘bring to life’ the findings. Principals initiated and actively sought reviews of their leadership of Indigenous education with a clear intention of finding ways and means to improve experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students. Put another way, the principals were assertively adopting a strength-based approach to their leadership formation. The ‘commendations’ and ‘recommendations’ in the reports were aligned with this approach and focused on positively regarded practices, and practices that could be improved or developed for the benefit of Indigenous students. Thus, the ‘findings’ from the analysis of the reports highlight practices that come from an appreciative and strength-based perspective.

The following paragraphs spell out the practices of principals most commonly found or recommended in the 31 RRR schools. Some differences that were identified amongst the schools are also spelled out.

Principals in the schools were well known, have significant presence and visibility in the wider school community, although principals’ influence in regional locations tended to be more detached and distributed amongst other leaders in the school. The relationships between the schools and the community were consistently regarded as being constructive, mutually appreciative and generative of high levels of trust between the school and parents, families and community. Parents, staff and students of the schools expressed confidence in the leadership of the principal, described schools as happy places to be and were confident about the education that the children were receiving. Teachers were regarded as approachable, committed and supportive, and parents believed that their concerns were dealt with appropriately and in a timely manner.

In relation to building impact, principals were advised to build on the strengths of existing relationships to engage parents and community members more in initiatives within the school. Formalising engagement through a school and community partnership agreement or through formation of Indigenous education advisory groups and parent groups, thereby generating a deeper level of engagement of parents and community was recommended. The intended outcome was to arrive at a commonly understood and publicly disseminated approach, ethos and direction for Indigenous education.

Principals of schools who were considered successful communicated effectively with parents about the learning achievements of students, and about the school as a whole, particularly about literacy and numeracy, therein creating an affirming view of the schools’ effectiveness by parents and the wider community. Personal learning plans for each student, and practices that involve monitoring and supporting individual students were commonly found. However, in some schools there was scope for further development of personal learning plans for all Indigenous students; thereby furthering relationships between Indigenous students, teachers and parents through sharing understandings about the status of each student’s learning and their aspirations.

Employment of Indigenous people was commonplace in RRR schools and was perceived as an indicator of schools’ commitment to improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students. Indigenous employees were commonly described as being caring, committed, supportive and significant assets for the schools. Extending Indigenous workers’ roles to assist students to further develop their understanding about their cultural identity, including facilitating time for students to work with a variety of Elders and those from the community who have Indigenous knowledge was identified as worthy practice. Engagement of Elders to support the professional learning for staff to improve their knowledge and understandings of local community structures, traditions and cultures of Indigenous people was also evident in the schools.

'Lenses' on Leadership

The 'commendations' in the reports describe "*the leader's way of being in practice*" (Giles et al., 2012, p. 12). On the other hand, the 'recommendations' suggest practices that the principal might initiate, develop, or improve to enhance their leadership of Indigenous students' education; indicating ways and means of "*becoming*" or "*re-forming a leader's way of being*" (Giles et al., p. 12). The ongoing formation of a principal's leadership for the purpose of improving Indigenous education might be shaped by building on the strengths identified in the 'commendations' and through the uptake of practices indicated in the 'recommendations'; that is, through both "*being and becoming*" (Giles et al., 2012, p. 12). The focus was therefore on a search for the way, manner or means through which principals might enact practices that are constructive (helpful, beneficial, fruitful, useful) for the education of Indigenous students. Four lenses were used for this interpretive process.

The first lens used was the conceptual framing of leadership as being "*a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal*" (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). "*In its simplest form [leadership] is a tripod – a leader or leaders, followers and a common goal that they want to achieve*" (Bennis, 2007, pp. 3-4). Through this lens the school principal is the 'up front' leader and staff, students, parents and wider school community as followers. A version of the leader-follower ontology, referred to as "*authentic leadership*" also guided analysis using this lens (Northouse, 2010, pp. 205-240). Authentic leadership is where leaders' intentions are aligned with a higher purpose or conviction and where their actions are commonly based on their values.

[A]uthentic leadership [is] a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94)

The second lens was "*a more integrative ontology of leadership*" shaped around "*direction, alignment and commitment*" and referred to as the "*DAC ontology*" (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Velsor, O'Connor, McGuire, 2008, pp. 635-636). The authors argued that the leader and followers model of leadership is limited in its ability to understand leadership in "*increasingly peer-like and collaborative*" (p. 636) contexts. The essential entities of this leadership ontology are three leadership outcomes:

(1) direction: widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims and mission; (2) alignment: the organisation and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective; and (3) commitment: the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefit within the collective interest and benefit. (Drath, et al., 2008, p. 636)

The DAC ontology opens consideration of how leadership is formed in a school community. Leadership is recognised as a shared endeavour where, through ongoing interaction, individuals and networks can develop collective beliefs about how to achieve shared outcomes. "*Such individual and collective beliefs are called leadership beliefs. Leadership beliefs are assumed to be the major determinant and justification for practices: Practices are the beliefs put into action.*" (Drath, et al., 2008, p. 642). DAC leadership is conceptualised as iterative, developing and being created and re-created through shared activity amongst individuals and groups.

The third lens drew on theoretical understandings about social capital that "*refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance and trustworthiness*" (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 2). "*The central premise of social capital is that social networks have value*" (Saguaro Seminar:

Civic Engagement in America, 2000). Much of the discourse in the reports forming the data used in this study was about school leaders' development of relationships with Indigenous people and furthering the school community's understanding of Indigenous culture(s). Such a discourse potentially sets up a dichotomy that is *"built in large part around the idea of informing and sensitizing"* non-Indigenous staff and community members about Indigenous students' culture and heritage (Wilson S.-A. , 2014, p. 5). Relationships can also be fostered by informing and sensitizing Indigenous people about western schooling, its curriculum, pedagogy and its operational and social context. This lens is significantly aligned with *"ideas about 'two ways' (Harris, 1990) and 'both ways' (Yunupingu, 1999) education"* that are about *"mutual obligation, reciprocity and give and take"* (Lee, Fasoli, Ford, Stephenson, & McInerney, 2014, p. 57). Establishing mutuality and reciprocity amongst social networks and between cultural groups is similarly described as *'bridging' social capital* (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003).

Chirgwin and Huijser (2015) suggest that in both-ways ... *"there is no need to compromise either epistemological position, but rather a new space can come into being that supports the creation of new understandings and knowledge"* (p. 337). Other academics—particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics—espouse similar views (Arbon 2008, Nakata et al. 2012, Sarra 2011, Yunkaporta 2009), promoting pedagogies that create knowledge generatively (Christie, 2013) without needing to take one cultural position or another. (Ninti One CRC for Remote Economic Participation, 2016, p. 88)

Fourthly, a phenomenological lens was also used to interrogate the data and drew upon the researcher's experiences as a school principal in three different school contexts, including a rural secondary school of around 750 students with about 10% of the enrolment being Indigenous (Davies, 2017, pp. 95-96).

The four lenses were used to interrogate the 'findings' from the reports, as outlined earlier in this paper. The interrogation focused on *"how"*, *"in what way or manner"* or *"by what means"* should principals' professional practices therein, be enacted for the potential benefit of Indigenous students (Macquarie University, 1981, p. 861). The interrogations were applied in each area of principals' *"professional practice"* identified in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals, namely:

- *"Leading teaching and learning"*
- *"Developing self and others"*
- *"Leading improvement, innovation and change"*
- *"Leading management of the school"*
- *"Engaging and working with the community"* (AITSL, 2011, pp. 5-11)

Themes that seek to describe the essence of leadership potentially beneficent for Indigenous education in each of the five areas of principals' professional practice were identified and are found at the end of each of the forthcoming professional practice sections of the paper.

Professional Practice: Leading Teaching and Learning

The most common finding about principals' leadership of teaching and learning was about development and implementation of personal learning plans for each Indigenous student. A personal learning plan outlines future educational aspirations, goals and activities for a student. The development and implementation of the plan *"is more important than the paper product"*, being a conduit for *"establish[ing] trusting & honest relationships with parents, caregiver, extended family & student"* (extracts from school report). Inherent in the processing of the

personal learning plan is the establishment of a discourse between each student, their teachers, and their parents and caregivers; therein is developed an understanding for all about “*how people share work in collectives*” (Drath et al., 2008, p. 636). Putnam (2000, p. 362) identified characteristics of “*familiarity, tolerance, solidarity, trust, habits of cooperation, and mutual respect – across the racial divide*” as contributing to leadership for the generation of ‘bridging’ social capital. Similarly, an interpersonal perspective is evident through the authentic leadership lens whereby “[a]uthenticity emerges from the interactions between leaders and followers” and leadership “*does not result from the leader’s efforts alone, but from the response of followers*” (Northouse, 2010, p. 207).

Implementation of curriculum where Indigenous perspectives (“*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*”) are included across all learning areas and all year levels was commonly recommended in the reports (ACARA, 2013). Purposeful attention to cultural bias in the curriculum by leaders and teachers through inclusion of “*experiences of Indigenous peoples*” was suggested (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 88). Inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum provides an Indigenous voice and a presence, albeit sometimes under-represented, in what is essentially a curriculum “*discussed within the context of western knowledge systems*” (Ma Rhea, 2015, p. 9). Notwithstanding, it does provide opportunity for Indigenous students to see themselves within the curriculum (Letts, 2016, p. 196).

The search for the ‘way, manner or means’ through which principals’ activities led to implementation of these approaches to teaching and to the generation of Indigenous students’ learning resulted in the identification of three themes about principals’ leadership of teaching and learning.

- Developing and nurturing collaborative relationships throughout the school community is central to leadership of teaching and learning.
- Each Indigenous student’s learning goals, aspirations and cognitive development provide essential guidance for the leadership of teaching and learning.
- Leadership that facilitates curriculum and learning experiences that acknowledge and are aligned with local Indigenous beliefs and cultural heritage supports the cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Professional Practice: Developing Self and Others

The findings from the analysis of the area of professional practice associated with principals’ development of self and others were mainly about advancing staff knowledge and understandings about Indigenous cultures and histories, often with a focus on the local Indigenous community. Extensive and sustained interaction between local Indigenous people and the staff of the school for this purpose was indicated.

With his experience as a school principal, the first author expressed a view that developing the expertise of staff is profoundly important for building a school’s capacity for improvement and is consistent with research about the effectiveness of principals’ engagement in practices associated with the professional development of staff (Robinson, 2007). Alignment with the core concept of authentic leadership, whereby leaders “*work with followers, fostering positive self-development*” was also identified (Walumbwa et.al., 2008, p. 94) and is consistent with research that “*... suggest[s] that building teacher confidence in Indigenous matters [is] more effective where the Principal [is] highly sympathetic*” (Ma Rhea, 2015, p. 124) and with whole school action learning approaches (Whalan & Wood, 2012).

Consultation with, and involvement of local Indigenous Elders and other community members and agencies supporting Indigenous people was identified in the reports as being essential to the

richness and efficacy of professional learning programs for school staff. Through involvement of Indigenous people, the school's staff are afforded an introduction to and connection with the community. A mediated relationship and future means of interaction with the community is established. Through their involvement Indigenous leaders act as couriers of cultural consciousness through the school gate, facilitating staff understanding of Indigenous culture, in both an aesthetic and anthropological sense. Elders and community leaders subsequently engage their community-based networks with enhanced understandings of a school's endeavours with, and for Indigenous students. It is the reciprocity found in this exchange that generates leadership that creates social capital through securing high levels of "civic engagement" (West-Burnham et al. 2007, p. 131).

Through using the four lenses to interrogate principals' activities in this area of practice, the following theme emerged.

- Leadership of Indigenous education is founded on building cultural consciousness throughout the school community.

Professional Practice: Leading Improvement, innovation and Change

The findings in this area of professional practice were found to be aligned with the leader-follower leadership ontology. Practices that position the principal as a central figure in communicating and advocating for change within the school and with its community were found in the reports.

The reports provided some insight into how principals should conduct themselves in the activities associated with initiating and managing change and improvement in their schools. The necessity for principals to communicate, collaborate, and network within the school and in the wider school community, was regularly indicated. Principals were advised to lead with openness and candour, to make themselves "available without formal invitations in the community space on a regular basis. The engagement of community has to start with [them], outside the school, without an agenda and a request hanging off every meeting" (extract from school report). Fostering "organic, participative, open, iterative and evolving" (Sterling, 2001, p. 80) processes leading to sustainable change and improvement for Indigenous education was suggested.

In summary, the data analysed in the study indicated that principals have a vested and pivotal role as leaders of change for the improvement of Indigenous education. Principals have responsibility and authority to lead change, that authority being "a function of knowledge and competence as well as role" (Hornstein et al., 1971, p. 349). It appears essential for principals to possess capabilities to generate "open, sophisticated networks engaging in rich conversations and dialogue [that] are elemental to securing understanding and commitment" in the wider school community (West-Burnham et al., 2007, p. 165).

Development of understandings about how principals' lead improvement, innovation and change resulted in description of a further theme.

- Principals play a significant role in promulgating change in their school. They do this through effectively communicating and by facilitating collaborating networks where information exchanges are prevalent.

Professional Practice: Leading Management of the School

Northouse (2010, pp. 10-11) indicates that management “*produces order and consistency*” and leadership “*produces change and movement*” with a recognition that the two constructs overlap, albeit that “[*b*]oth processes involve influencing a group of individuals toward goal attainment”.

The findings from the analysis of this area of professional practice were mainly about attending to systems and processes that establish efficiency and effectiveness around matters such as student attendance, management of student behaviour and ensuring the physical, cultural and psychological wellbeing of students. These practices and routines support establishment of “*broad agreement*” and “*shared understanding*” whereby “*the work of individuals and groups [in the school] is generally coherent with the work of other individuals and groups*” (Drath et al., 2008, p. 647). The ethos and culture within a school is somewhat intangible; however, it is emergent, shaped by the interactions amongst the people, groups, relationships and networks found within the school. The interactions shape what becomes understood as the acceptable norms and mores of the school community. Social capital is generated and contributes to the heritage and identity of the institution over time. In summary, such practices are implicitly about leadership that builds relationships and establishes a cohesive, reliable and trustworthy culture within the school.

A theme associated with leading school management was identified.

- Prioritising Indigenous students’ physical, mental, cultural and spiritual wellbeing is essential for the establishment of a school ethos and culture that is fully inclusive of Indigenous students.

Professional Practice: Engaging and Working with Community

Findings from this area of professional practice were about the development of collaborative and mutually respectful relationships between the school and its Indigenous community and the agencies that are integrally involved with Indigenous people and families.

Principals of schools in this study demonstrated an awareness of the westernised cultural hegemony that is a dominant feature of their schools. Australia’s schools are founded on curriculum, pedagogy, language, architecture and systems, all derivations of western culture and colonialism that form a dominant schooling ideology and ecosystem. Principals were modifying elements of the school’s ecosystem to respect and appreciate local Indigenous heritage and culture. The inclusion of local Indigenous culture in the school was typically attended to through the incorporation of a range of Indigenous artefacts and iconography (Indigenous flags, art, murals, and gardens) into the school’s physical environment. By doing so, principals were developing a visual environment that is welcoming of Indigenous students and their parents. Schools were further shaping their school ecosystem by increasing the presence of Indigenous employees in the school, or through Indigenous volunteers or visitors assisting with teaching or supporting Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A broader understanding about Indigenous culture and heritage emanates from these practices within the school, leading to growth in social capital supporting the education of Indigenous students.

Principals were also engaging in processes and practices beyond the physical boundaries of the school, seeking to further generate social capital in the form of knowledge and understanding about the purposes, functions and social nature of their schools, for the betterment of the education of Indigenous students. Practices such as making home visits, conducting meetings in community settings, and engaging the school in significant community-based cultural events and activities, are all connective, relationship building activities. Activities such as these establish and build networks that “*increase the density of contact and support*” whereby “*community building benefits from a sense on the part of participants that they are part of something important and*

growing” (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 277). It is through these network building activities that “bridging social capital” is initiated, grown and sustained and is regarded as being “especially important for reconciling democracy and diversity” (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 279). Principals and staff can engage in more personalised “[g]rass-roots, bottom up approaches that knit together local knowledge within a national framework” (Reconciliation Australia, 2016b, p. 5).

Three themes emerged:

- A form of intercultural leadership is evident (d'Arbon, Fasoli, Frawley, & Ober, 2009). It is leadership that establishes the school as a community beacon, emphasising the value, agency and culture of Indigenous people.
- Relationships founded on reciprocity, trust, cooperation and civility provide opportunity to connect and engage Indigenous families and communities with their children’s schooling experiences.
- In RRR communities, where the Indigenous community is commonly more identifiable and interconnected, the “combined strength and power of community members” or social capital is high (Otero, 2012, p. 10)

Framework: Leadership of Indigenous Education in RRR schools ... No Boundaries to Learning

How then could the themes identified in the previous section of the paper be comprehended to inform current and future RRR school principals’ leadership formation and practice? This question was responded to by developing and proposing a framework for leadership of Indigenous education in these schools. The identified themes associated with the domains of professional practice were considered whereby four underlying and enabling characteristics of principals’ leadership of Indigenous education in these schools were identified:

- They demonstrably value the culture, agency and beliefs of local Indigenous people
- They actively develop collaborative relationships and networks based on reciprocity, trust, cooperation and civility with the local Indigenous community and the wider school community.
- They place Indigenous students’ physical, mental, cultural and spiritual wellbeing at the centre of the school’s activities
- They are sustained and guided by humanistic endeavour and attend to professional leadership practices in a holistic manner

Three observations about the context of these schools also evolved as significant considerations when developing and proposing a framework for guiding leadership of Indigenous education in RRR schools:

- Indigenous students were represented as a minority cultural group in all thirty-one RRR schools in this research study.
- These schools, as is most often the case for Australia’s schools, are modelled on western education constructs with nearly all educators, including principals, having a non-Indigenous cultural background (Howard, 2007; Anderson, 2011). “Racial imbalances in the demographic profile of those in positions of power”, in this case school principals, are evident (Schulz, 2018, p. 47).
- Through schooling, Indigenous children and young people are located “betwixt and between” the Indigenous culture of their community and the culture of their school, i.e. “simultaneously belonging to two or more social or cultural groups” (La Shure, 2005).

With these characteristics and observations in mind, alongside the previously identified themes emanating from the research, a framework to inform principals' leadership of Indigenous education in RRR schools was proposed. (see Figure 1)

Eliciting the Role of Principal

It is proposed that principals leading Indigenous education in RRR schools enact their leadership through adopting a role as 'protagonists', best described as principals that lead by example and with strength and conviction (Blackley, 2012). School principals, irrespective of their location, possess authority vested through their appointment to the position, and as such are leading figures in their schools and communities. Visibility of their leadership, accessibility to it, and its influence is significant in the locale and milieu of RRR settings where the nature of the community is generally widely understood and appreciated. Strength in these communities "*is found in their culture, their relationship to the landscape and their dedication to creating a positive future...*" and what they have is "*rich interdependent relationships to each other and with the environment*" (Otero, 2012, p. 15). Developing and building social capital about Indigenous education is the way forward in these communities. "*Social capital is the combined strength and power of community members*" (Otero, 2012, p. 10).

It is the opportunity afforded by the milieu found in RRR contexts that is generative of 'principals as protagonists' for the benefit of the education of Indigenous students. Principals' leadership authority is best utilised as "*protagonists*" who "*understand and emphasise the centrality of relationships and interpersonal connections*" (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 269). Protagonists act with authenticity, consistently displaying their humanism, passion and compassion, a strong sense of purpose, and sustained commitment to establishing relationships that assist others in pursuit of common goals associated with the education of Indigenous students. These attributes, capabilities and qualities are similar to those attributed to "*value leaders*" by Hallinger (2011, pp. 137-138) and are foundational to "*the relational and contextual nature of leadership*" whereby "*[L]eaders should be living and working with people rather than seeking to own or control them*" (Giles et al., 2012, pp. 13-14).

At this point it is important to acknowledge that suggesting such a protagonist role for principals sits within an education system that "*is informed from a western, neoliberal philosophical position*" that is argued to be "*... at odds with the axiologies, epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies*" of Indigenous people (Osborne, 2013, p. 5). The concept of 'principal as protagonist' recognises the role as being integral to a western model of schooling and is proposed as a pragmatic means of "*explor[ing] how the sovereign voices of Indigenous peoples may be asserted into theorising dominated by liberal rights discourse*" (Moodie, 2018, p. 34). Principals' attention is drawn to "*the cultural interface*" that provides "*recognition of the hybrid, modern, liminal identities which create new and located possibilities for renewal*" (Moodie, 2018, p. 40)

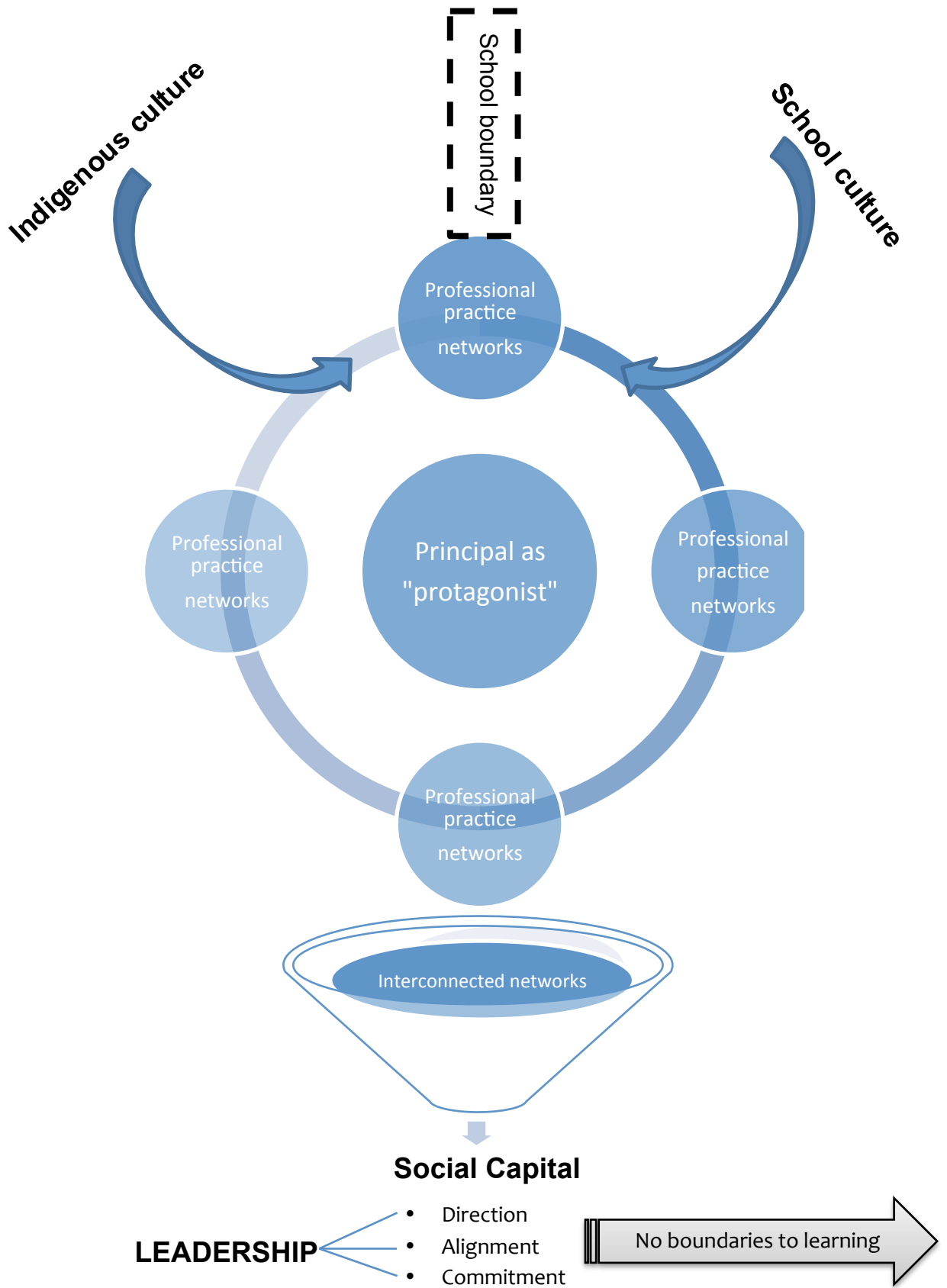


Figure 1. Leadership of Indigenous Education...no boundaries to learning

Enacting the Role: Professional Practice Networks

Principals' actions in this framework *"are understood as collective enactments... that include and transcend individual behaviour"* (Drath et al., 2008, p. 645). In this framework, professional practice networks (school community members with common interests) are created around professional practices such as those identified earlier in this paper. These professional practice networks build social capital by *"fostering social [and cultural] ties that reach across social [and cultural] divisions"* (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 279). Each network contributes to bridging social capital through facilitating exchange within the school and between school and community, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, and between educators, students and parents. The relationships formed in these networks *"must not only recognise but privilege Aboriginal ways of being and knowing, be culturally based, and be collaborative in both purpose and practice"* (Lowe, 2012, p. 23). The networks are designed to be interrelated and interconnected creating *"virtuous circles of human connectivity that are basic to the organization's effectiveness"* (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 270). Communication, collaboration, reciprocity, civility and development of mutual trust through *"yarning up, not down"*, characterise these networks (Burchill, Higgins, Ramsamy, & Taylor, 2006, p. 52) thereby improving permeability across cultural and physical boundaries commonly found between schools and their Indigenous communities.

Leadership

The four characteristics of principals' leadership identified in the introduction to this framework are vitally important to the achievement of quality educational outcomes for Indigenous students. The characteristics are founded on a set of beliefs and a moral perspective that guides leadership behaviour: *"a belief is a disposition to behave; a practice [leadership activity] is the playing out of that disposition"* (Drath et al., 2008, p. 644).

Leadership in this framework is organic, iterative, incremental and cumulative; therein building social capital. *"[L]eadership has been enacted and exists wherever and whenever one finds a collective exhibiting direction, alignment and commitment"* (Drath et al., 2008, p. 642). Direction is found throughout the generated social capital when there is a shared understanding of, and valuing of, what is aimed for. Alignment is found through coherence of the work within and across multi-stranded, interrelated and interconnected networks. Drath et al. (2008, p. 647) indicated that commitment occurs when individuals *"subsume their own efforts and benefits within the collective effort and benefit"*, hence the role of principal as protagonist.

In this framework, commitment will also be extant through *"reconciling democracy and diversity"* amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the school community (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 279). Beneficent leadership for optimising the education of Indigenous students will exist when there are no boundaries to their learning.

Conclusion

The authors of this paper share and endorse the vision of Australia's Education Council that *"[a]ll Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity as Australia's First Nations peoples"* (Education Council, 2016, p. 2).

The development of the 'Framework: Leadership of Indigenous Education in RRR Schools... no boundaries to learning' was cognisant of the leadership principles outlined in the *National*

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (Education Council, 2015) and the *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001). Of particular importance is leadership that establishes high expectations for, and with, each Indigenous student, in each school setting. Leadership that is grounded through respectful acknowledgement and understanding of Indigenous culture and heritage via engagement and collaboration between schools, local Indigenous people and the wider RRR community is required. Lessons learned through this research may be of use to practitioners leading, or about to assume leadership, in RRR schools with Indigenous students.

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