



# Factors affecting the development of school and Indigenous community engagement: A systematic review

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## Abstract

School systems and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have long acknowledged the levels of social, cultural and epistemic conflict that has historically existed between teachers and schools, and Aboriginal students, families and their local communities. This relationship is both symptomatic and causal of the broader and highly complex field of issues and policies found to underpin the fraught histories existing between many Aboriginal communities and schools. This systematic review of the research literature reports on findings and insights into the everyday environments of these interactions and the possibilities of Aboriginal communities being able to affect the establishment of genuine and productive interactions with schools. The review looks to focus on those factors seen to either enable or act as barriers to this process, and comment on their impact on Aboriginal communities, their students and schools' capacity for purposeful engagement.

**Keywords** Australian Indigenous education · Indigenous community and school engagement · School partnerships · Community participation · School and community collaboration · Indigenous parents · Aboriginal education

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## Introduction

Evidence of the continual educational underachievement outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student is broadly acknowledged (Commonwealth of Australia 2017) as a blight on the capacity of all levels of government to close the educational achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (SCRGSP 2016).

The inability to lift student outcomes over the decade 2008–2017 (Department of the Prime Minister Cabinet 2017) has heightened government activity to seek strategies that can draw Aboriginal parents and communities into what governments have identified as the ‘common task’ of supporting school programs that improve school outcomes for Indigenous students (Department of Education Training and Workplace Relations 2010; NSW Department of Education 2015).

However, the level of school and community dissonance is evident, as shown in the development of policies such as the NSW Connected Communities Strategy (2012), which sought to shift onto Aboriginal families a level of responsibility to lift the attainment of their children. While government has sought to shift the blame for this policy failure, Aboriginal communities have argued that their experiences of schooling, their knowledge, languages and cultures have been ignored or tokenised by schools, and their children’s educational needs largely ignored (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2013). This emphasis on governments seeking to responsabilise Indigenous communities rings hollow when research both in Australia and abroad (Robinson and Timperley 2007; Munns et al. 2013; Ladwig 2010) identify the critical role that teachers have on Indigenous student outcomes. While evidence (Hattie 2012) has strongly suggested the critical place of teachers in shifting the learning trajectories of students, Aboriginal parents have argued that they too have a key role to play as a conduit to assist teachers understand their communities’ unique histories, concerns and aspirations (Lampert et al. 2014; NSW AECG and NSW DET 2010; Yunkaporta and McGinty 2009). This research highlights the importance of this support in lifting Indigenous students’ outcomes by working with Indigenous families to develop meaningful learning relationships and support teachers’ development of knowledge that effects changes in school curriculum and pedagogic practices (Guenther et al. 2015; Klenowski 2009; Lowe 2017).

While Australian school systems have developed policy frameworks to encourage schools to engage in partnerships with Aboriginal people, there is little evidence that these have produce any of the promised improvements to either students’ outcomes, or a shift in parents’ support for the schools (CESE and Goodall 2015). This review focuses specifically on these efforts, looking specifically at how these collaborations have been brokered and their impact on improving student outcomes, assisting curriculum development, developing teachers’ professional knowledge, and advising schools on policies and programs.

## Defining community and its engagement with schools

Conceptually, the construct of an ‘Aboriginal community’ is in many ways an evasive and conceptually ill-defined concept. It is weighed down by a history of ‘commonsense’ usage that has often misunderstood the unique concept of ‘Indigenous community’ which here is defined as those who ontologically ‘identify’ with their Country/Place, their kin and culture, and who hold a relationship, social identity and commitment to them (Lohoar et al. 2014). A consequence of adopting this particular understanding of ‘community’ is that it then impacts on the construct of each community’s engagement with schools and teachers (Hands 2005). Sanders (2003) has defined a community’s engagement as the purposeful act of interaction with schools, either as individuals and/or through local organisations for the purpose of affecting the schools’ capacity to engage and support their families to navigate their children’s pathway through school. Within the contexts of these studies, these acts of engagement were seen to be seen as collaborative and 2-way, purposeful, political, agentic and culturally bound within family and community standpoint positioning (Young and Warren 2003).

### Review questions

The following inquiry question was designed to shed light on the issues affecting Australian school and Aboriginal community engagement programs, as it focuses on identifying both barriers and enabling factors of this engagement, and their impact on Indigenous students, their communities, teachers and principals. The primary focus question was:

What issues affect the development of Aboriginal community and school collaboration and what impact have these had on schools and Aboriginal students, families and their communities?

## Methodology

### Review protocols and methods

This review commenced as an iterative investigation using subject based databases (both local and international) indexing Australian education research. In its second phase, the search narrowed to include theses, key government, NGO-funded reviews of programs that included community engagement programs and books and/or book chapters that reported directly on research findings. The database search terms emanated from both the inquiry question and the project protocols using the PICO<sup>1</sup> framework (Joanna Briggs Institute 2017) and focused specifically on Australian Indigenous students, their families and communities, within a K–12 school

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<sup>1</sup> PICO—population, phenomenon of interest and context.

environment (population K–12), and several phenomena that had a curriculum and/or pedagogic focus, including local cultural and language programs (PRISMA 2009).<sup>2</sup> Beyond these inclusion/exclusion criteria, a further appraisal occurred using evaluative framework outlined in Coughlan et al. (2007) and Long and Godfrey (2004) that enabled a qualitative evaluation of the research quality of the studies (Petticrew and Roberts 2008). The development and application of the exacting protocols and review methodology used in the Aboriginal Voices Systematic Review project is fully explained in the methodology paper in this special edition (Lowe et al. this edition).

### **Selection, inclusion and exclusion of studies**

Figure 1 highlights the sequence of strategies as identified in the review protocols, used to reduce the initial 1050 studies to a review of 32 studies.

### **Analysis**

This review is in two parts—the first focuses on findings that identified factors that either enabled or acted as a barrier to the purposeful engagement between Aboriginal communities and schools, with a second focus that sought to understand their impact across each stakeholder group. The analysis was coded as findings into NVivo using a thematic structure of themes, concepts and sub-categories (see Bazeley 2009).

### **Barriers to engagement**

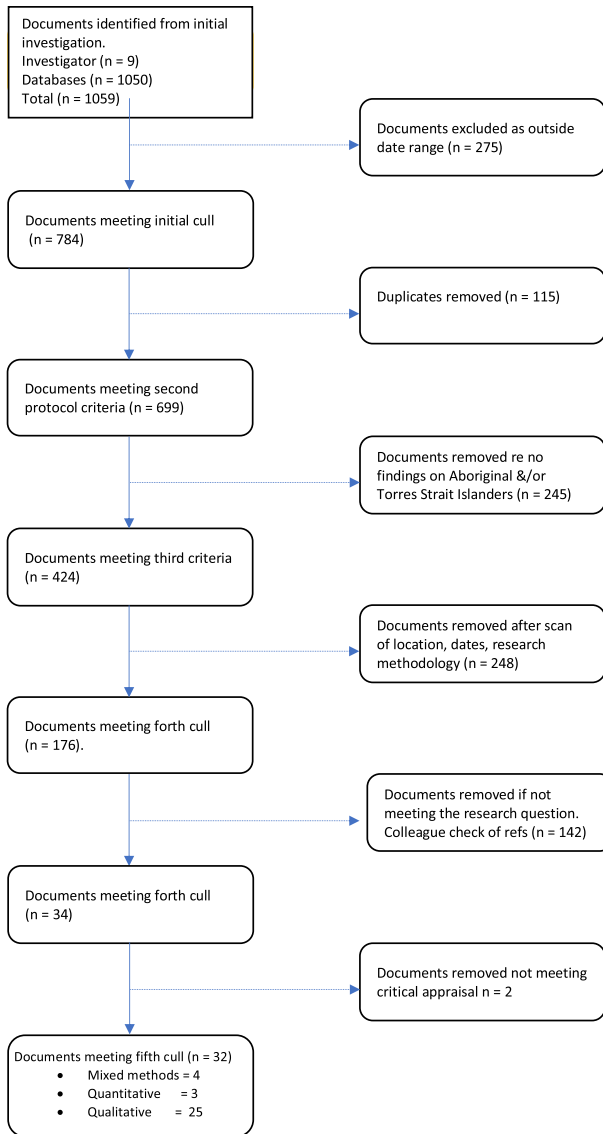
Overall, this theme revealed those findings that evidenced the many personal, structural or epistemic barriers shown to impact negatively on the capacities of Indigenous communities and schools to establish collaborations in support students' educational engagement.

### **Post-colonial experiences and their impact on community on school engagement**

Bond's (2010) study of the role of Elders in the education of Aboriginal students on Mornington Island highlighted the effect of systemic policies seen to support the breakdown of social cohesion between students and Elders which then diminished the intergenerational transmission of cultural practices and marginalised the Elders' role in the community. Bond's (2010) study further highlighted how the exercise of schooling after the removal of the mission had exacerbated a widening dysfunctional relationship between the Elders, the school and many of its teachers.

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<sup>2</sup> PRISMA—preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses.



**Fig. 1** Selection, inclusion and exclusion flowchart

Hayes et al. (2009) and Woodrow et al. (2016) also reported on Aboriginal parents identifying the legacy of schooling having the effect of dislocating student epistemic relationships with their families, elders and from their sense of connection to their Country. They also suggested that they and their children's experience of racism limited their trust in the schools, even when the schools had sought to engage them. Hayes et al. (2009) found that parents identified the primary cause of this mistrust as being the consequences of the local history of Indigenous schooling and

schools' constant failure to recognise the impact of this history on their capacity to relate to parents.

Muller and Saulwick (2006) and Hayes et al. (2009) noted that while Aboriginal parents often had expressed a desire to collaborate with schools, they spoke of an abiding mistrust in schools that manifested itself as a rejection of the schools' attempts to reach out. These findings were supported by Chenhall et al. (2011), Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) and Woodrow et al. (2016), who found that Indigenous communities identified the long-term impact of programs that they believed embedded deficit discourses about them and their children. Similarly, Muller's (2012) evaluation of school community programs found that families' experiences of schooling were impacted by these discursive discourses, teachers' unwillingness to shift their pedagogic practice, and the level of epistemic tokenism seen in classroom curriculum. Mechielsen et al. (2014) argued that as a consequence, schools and communities were locked into contested practices that trumped efforts of accommodation and in turn cemented practices that furthered community displacement from the school.

### **Controlling Aboriginal engagement: racism, deficit positioning and low school expectations**

Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) noted that while Aboriginal students often were the victim of low teacher expectations, there were cases where low expectations of a community's capacity actually emanated from within the communities themselves. They saw a small, but influential group of Aboriginal people who publicly questioned the value of local knowledge, its capacity to sustain student's needs to develop 'higher order thinking', and who claimed that this 'primitive' knowledge would have the effect of keeping students in the past. These findings provide an insight into how epistemological colonialism exercised with schools has had the discursive effect of creating epistemic doubt amongst Indigenous people and fostered the task of schooling to induce students to challenge their own unique epistemic legitimacy (Battiste 2004).

Hayes et al. (2009), Muller (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) identified the effects of racism, its impact on schools and communities' expectations, and its destructive impact on students' self-efficacy and well-being. They noted some of the effects of racism were students' liability to self-sabotage and reinforcement of students' sense of social 'shame' which evidenced by deliberate acts of student resistance and low student engagement (Martin 2006; Louth 2012).

Dockett et al. (2006) study found that schools' attempts to work with Aboriginal families with children transitioning to school were hampered by the level of community pessimism about the schools' capacity to improve the educational outcomes for many Aboriginal students. Conversely, Dockett et al. (2006) found that these schools often articulated powerful discourses of 'poor parenting' and resistant learner identities of Aboriginal students, which they argued were the primary cause of poor student outcomes.

Several studies identified the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on Aboriginal families' engagement with government. Chenhall et al. (2011), Chodkiewicz

et al. (2008) and Cleveland (Cleveland, Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Council, and Western Australia. Dept of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) found that schools argued that their capacity to engage Aboriginal families was limited by their communities' limited access to housing, health services and employment, which in turn they argued, exonerated them for the consistent low levels of students' outcomes.

While the O'Keefe et al. (2012) study argued that schools should co-develop 'wrap around' programs to support the broader needs of Aboriginal families, both they and Chenhall et al. (2011) also suggested that 'some' parents were themselves to blame for the level of student truancy being a consequence of the pervasiveness of disadvantage, which they suggested affected the schools' capacity to address the needs of students. Chenhall et al. (2011) further suggested that there was a link between Aboriginal families' limited social capital, their participation with the school and their children's poor success at school. This finding was supported by O'Keefe et al. (2012) who argued that Aboriginal family dysfunction was linked to an undervaluing of the importance of education and student achievement.

Muller's (2012) analysis identified that the level of social 'shame' was the consequence of fear and humiliation, which he suggested paralysed Aboriginal parents' ability to take an active role in their children's education. O'Keefe et al. (2012) juxtaposed this view of Aboriginal parents with the proposition that, even when student success occurred, it was primarily the outcome of good teachers, even though they later admitted that in many cases, teachers were ill-equipped to support Aboriginal students. In all, schools were seen as sites of low expectations, of enacting policies that did not advance change and leadership that was unable to affect the necessary changes in schools' engagements with Indigenous people.

### **Institutional policies and practices that impact on schools and Aboriginal communities**

Several studies highlighted the issue of the community's lack of social access to schools as having a negative impact on parents' engagement with them. Barr and Saltmarsh's (2014) research highlighted the levels of socio-cultural discord between schools and Aboriginal families and, along with Berthelsen and Walker (2008), noted the level of teacher resistance to parent engagement and the cumulating impact that this has had on sapping parents' capacity to connect to their children's schooling.

Eight of the studies reported on school and Aboriginal community engagement programs that were established to enhance the educational outcomes by their attempts to improve student attendance, retention and in-class engagement (Chenhall et al. 2011; Chodkiewicz et al. 2008). Several studies highlighted the two different types of engagement programs, those focusing on 'building' community capacity to improve parents' support for the school (Lea et al. 2011), and a second program type that sought to improve learning outcomes more directly through specific pedagogic and curriculum programs (Chodkiewicz et al. 2008; Guenther 2011; Woodrow et al. 2016).

Many studies noted the impact of the various institutional barriers which affected schools' capacity to establish genuine collaborations with Aboriginal parents and community, with several identifying the impact of parents' perceptions of the schools' ambivalence and/or hostility towards Aboriginal families. Lewthwaite et al. (2015) found that communities commonly spoke of these experiences, and highlighted the level of teacher ignorance amongst the many issues limiting students' achievement. Other studies identified the levels of parental angst about their actual access to the school, with Hayes et al. (2009), Lampert et al. (2014) and Lea et al. (2011) all speaking of the high levels of discord between Aboriginal families and school's non-Aboriginal front office staff who, parents often argued, acted as gatekeepers to engagement with the school.

The studies also reflected on community concerns that the actual partnership policies themselves were vague on detail, generalised and 'feel good' documents that, while speaking of inclusion, actually provided parents with little real access to schools (Cleveland 2008). Many parents were also sceptical as a consequence of the on-going failure of similar programs to improve student outcomes. In particular, Lowe (2017) found that many parents understood that the implementation of these engagement programs often had the effect of actually isolating them from the 'real work' of school by focusing their collaboration on 'busy' ephemeral programs such as policy making and parent meetings that had little or no impact on students' learning or access to Indigenous knowledge.

Overall, these studies identified the on-going impact of systemic and localised policies and practices seen to have the effect of limiting the capacities of Indigenous people to engage with schools. The findings from Aboriginal families point to the discursive consequences of their displacement from their ancestral Country, and epistemic knowledge and policies that excluded this from their children's education. Parents spoke of this unwillingness of schools to engage authentically as evidence of the schools' complicity in pursuing policies that perpetuate those educational structures, discourses and practices that actually underpin parental disengagement and student underachievement.

## **Enablers**

This second theme identifies those findings that recorded the practices of schools and communities that had the effect of enabling the establishment of productive Aboriginal community and school collaborations.

## **Beliefs**

Four of the 32 studies made explicit references to the impact that community engagement can have on teachers' beliefs and attitudes, and the formation of deep understanding about the importance of knowing and providing students with access to local Indigenous epistemologies, and the knowledge gained through developing close links with Indigenous families. The study by Lowe (2017) highlighted how



a number of teachers in his multi-site study were able to authentically embed this knowledge into their everyday pedagogic and relational practices. Ewing's (2012) study investigated how the fund of local numerical knowledge residing within Torres Strait Islander families could be used to assist student's understanding of complex mathematical concepts. Woodrow et al.'s (2016) study found that parents believed that local community knowledge was not only critical to students' Indigenous identities but also fortified them against the trend of homogenising their 'local', unique Indigenous identities. Concomitantly, Harrison and Murray (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) each pointed to how the establishment of quality micro-collaborations between teachers and local Aboriginal communities shifted classroom practice and deepened students' engagement in this local knowledge. These studies and within the theme on barriers to engagement have highlighted the impact of those teachers whose negative attitudes on issues such as student capacity and aspirations, curriculum access and teaching practices had the effect of limiting students' school engagement, while those findings above demonstrate how teachers' positive attitudes can positively affect students' schooling experiences.

### **Practices that enable engagement**

Many of the studies sought to identify the key elements of collaborations between Aboriginal people and schools. This review identified research that looked beyond deficit theorising, by identifying programs shown to facilitate families' exercising their social and cultural capital in support of their children's education. The exercise of this capital was shown by Chenhall et al. (2011) Chodkiewicz et al. (2008) and Lowe (2017) to build levels of trust and respect, underpinning deeper collaboration and in turn building greater levels of community and teacher capital. Lowe (2017), Lea et al. (2011), Lovett et al. (2014) and Bond (2010) further identified how these local learning partnerships built on this trust with schools to further support the establishment of 'high value' cultural and language programs, the inclusion of local community knowledge in the schools' curriculum and the enhancement of the educative role of Elders.

In particular, several studies recognised the particular potential of authentically developed engagement when schools approached the difficult but highly rewarding task of collaborating with communities in establishing a curriculum presence for local Aboriginal languages. Guenther et al. (2015), Kamara (2009), Lowe (2017) and Woodrow et al. (2016) highlighted the significance of these programs in lifting the communities' engagement with the schools. Guenther et al. (2015) and Ewing (2012), Muller (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) also identified that the teaching of local languages provided opportunities for cultural and epistemic exchange between the school and the community, in which it was shown enhanced teachers' broader understanding and opened possibilities for further engagement between teachers, students and their communities. Further, Lowe (2017) found that these programs provided opportunities to build pedagogic relationships, legitimate Indigenous knowledge within the classroom and support community's broader initiatives. These studies identified how the establishment of genuine educational programs that

address local histories and knowledge was able to underpin a significant shift in the forms of engagement and build a store of trust between the school and local Aboriginal community.

### **School and community Leadership**

A number of studies highlighted Aboriginal communities' agency in taking the leadership in establishing meaningful collaborations between themselves and schools. Bennet and Moriarty (2015) highlighted the initiatives of local Elders and Aboriginal education officers in identifying the needs of pre-service teachers to learn how to effect meaningful partnerships in support of the particular needs of their students. Owens' (2015) study on numeracy education evidenced a community's broader interest in garnering its school's broader support to establish a childcare program at the school. Bond's (2010) unique study also evidenced these agentic actions when she cited the deliberate role of Elders who sought to 'guide' her PhD research as an investigation of how they and the local language and cultural programs had been marginalised by successive school principals.

While a number of studies provided examples of community agency, much of the research focused on the role of school principals and their efforts in establishing partnership programs. Kamara's (2009) research with Aboriginal female principals identified their purposeful and very deliberate actions in establishing deeper collaborations across the many layers in their communities. These findings resonate with those in Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), Hayes et al. (2009) and Curriculum Services (2012) that identified the co-leadership capacities of both the communities and principals in supporting the establishment of school cultures of transformative change. Lovett et al. (2014) found that these school leaders exhibited an acute understanding of the histories of Aboriginal education and the impact of bureaucratic discourses that had had the effect of normalising the socio-political power exerted over Aboriginal people.

### **Mobilising capital: Marshalling resources to facilitate collaborations**

This category captures details of those deliberate actions of communities and teachers in support of their actions for purposeful collaboration designed to effect whole-school change. Berthelsen and Walker (2008) noted Aboriginal parents' aspirations for their children to access good post-school opportunities. Lampert et al. (2014) study demonstrated one community's role in generating the opportunities for staff involvement in cultural programs that in turn deepened their appreciation of the community's connection to Country, the importance of opportunities for intergenerational cultural transmission, and the positive impact that these connections had between the Elders and students. A number of studies further identified the positive effect of Aboriginal school presence on both the school and students. Dockett et al. (2006) and Lowe (2017) found that the presence of Aboriginal teachers and language tutors had a major impact on staff and students alike in their capacity to legitimate the presence of local knowledge and Indigenous pedagogies within the school.

Studies by Chodkiewicz et al. (2008), Muller and Saulwick (2006), Guenther (2011), Harrison and Murray (2012) and Woodrow et al. (2016) identified how co-constructed and productive partnerships were built on the elements of recognition, respect and purposeful engagement. These collaborations were seen as foundational to these schools' new understanding about the importance of establishing localised social capital and building relational trust, respect and reciprocity between teachers and Aboriginal people. In particular Bond (2010), Ewing (2012), Harrison and Murray (2012) and Lampert et al. (2014) identified the impact that even a small number of teachers can have in their classrooms after deepening their understanding about the socio-cultural needs of students. In particular, the findings distinguished the importance of teachers' relationships with Indigenous workers and/or families and the potential impact that this had on their beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and in-class relationships with students.

While the evidence highlights the role of principals in marshalling the human, cultural, structural and financial capital required in developing whole-school engagements with families, it also identified the seismic impact that localised agentic action of parents and community can have on establishing valued programs (such as language and cultural programs) in support of their children's education.

## Impact of collaboration

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

The limited impact of community engagement policies in affecting Aboriginal students' educational outcomes is seen as a major inhibiting influence on family's willingness to engage with schools. Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), Chenhall et al. (2011) and Cleveland (2008) noted this reticence to engage with schools, with many parents expressing a negative view about schools, which were seen as disinterested in 'real' collaboration, of having a deficit view of Indigenous children and demonstrating teachers' lack of understanding of how the pervasiveness of these attitudes impacted directly on their classroom practices.

However, Bennet and Moriarty (2015) and Guenther (2011) showed that when communities had a sense of ownership through their authentic participation, there was a significant shift in the communities' engagement with schools. These findings resonate with those studies by Lowe (2017), Mechielsen et al. (2014) and Muller and Saulwick's (2006), which also found that parents were more than aware that their engagement with teachers had a positive outcome in brokering a productive engagement between teachers and Aboriginal students. Chodkiewicz et al. (2008), Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) and Guenther et al. (2015) found that the success of their programs was reliant on parents developing trust in the school, and the programs' authenticity and purposefulness in addressing the needs of students. In particular, families highlighted the importance of leadership, with Barr and Saltmarsh (2014), Lovett et al. (2014) and Muller and Saulwick (2006) all identifying that the qualities of co-leadership were critical to families' willingness to be engaged with the school.

## Teachers, principals and the school

A number of studies focused on the impact of school collaborations with Aboriginal people, with several identifying the importance of collaboration and trust as being critical leadership qualities required by principals and teachers (Barr and Saltmarsh 2014; Lowe 2017). These leaders were shown to purposefully construct projects that promised school change, that understood the need to proactively manage teacher resistance and, as Bennet and Moriarty (2015), Bond (2010) and Lampert et al. (2014) highlighted, build relational connections to students. In this, Lampert et al. (2014), Muller and Saulwick (2006), Owens (2015) and Chenhall et al. (2011) evidenced Aboriginal families stridently voicing the view that teachers needed to accept the responsibility of reaching out to families and to seek opportunities to build relationships that would underpin students' educational success.

Lovett et al.'s (2014) research highlighted a community's desire to work with university to support the training of pre-service teachers. This research identified the potential of proactive community mentoring of pre-service teachers to address their fears about working with Aboriginal people and to develop impactful school programs for Aboriginal students. Similarly, Owens (2015), Bennet and Moriarty (2015) and Lowe (2017) also example successful interactions where schools established collaborative programs that systemically supported the building of trust and respect of/with students. These findings focus attention on the importance of schools proactively co-constructing programs that addressed the often-stated needs and aspirations of students and their families.

## Aboriginal students

Findings which specifically related to the effect of school and community engagement on students' learning outcomes proved to be sparse, contestable and largely illusory, other than Owens' (2015) limited study in a single site primary school numeracy program. However, although the claims of improved learning outcomes are made in several of these studies, these were unable to be sustained from the evidence within this Review. More generally there were findings that appeared to support more limited claims of improved student engagement in school. However even these may be challenged, such that while Muller and Saulwick (2006), and Owens (2015) indicated evidence of an improvement in student attendance and self-efficacy, Guenther (2011) contested this in his study in remote schools, suggesting instead that even these findings were largely illusory. Though evidence of a sustainable improvement in student's learning do not appear to be born out in the studies in this review, Bond (2010) did identify the impact of improved teacher–student relationships on these students' post-schooling employment, and Guenther et al.'s (2015) study made an interesting finding that community engagement with schools positively impacted on students' interactions with community elders.

While there was little overall evidence that school and community programs were shown to develop long-term engagements with Aboriginal families, or sustainable improvements in student learning, there was evidence that pointed to the positive

impact of authentic interactions on building deeper two-way knowledge between teachers and Indigenous families. The findings suggest that those teachers and principals who actively sought to establish purposeful relationships benefited professionally through the establishment of higher levels of reciprocated trust and respect, which in turn provided them greater access to community 'knowledge' about its history, aspirations and concerns about the schooling of their children.

## Discussion

### Purpose of engagement

While the purpose of school and community engagement was explicitly discussed in at least half of the studies, there was a variety of articulations as to what such a purpose should be. Bennet and Moriarty (2015) saw the purpose of community engagement as supporting the development of pre-service teachers' understanding about Aboriginal communities. Bond (2010), Maxwell (2012), and Harrison and Murray (2012) similarly positioned community engagement in programs that would enhance teachers' understanding of parental concerns and aspirations, local epistemologies, and understanding Aboriginal peoples' connectedness to Country. Lowe (2017), Bond (2010) and Owens (2015) highlighted the impact of community constructed collaborations that lead to the development of programs that had broad educational and cultural appeal to these communities. These findings have had the effect of countering policy assertions that position the purpose of school interactions with parents as primarily a tool to reduce student's resistance through having families enforce school attendance, undertake supervision and practise 'being the teacher at home' (Berthelsen and Walker 2008; Chenhall et al. 2011), even though there is little or no evidence that such policies, of themselves, have been shown to work.

### Critical challenges and findings

1. One of the issues seen to impact more broadly on our understanding of the phenomenon of school and community engagement may appear to be a problem of nomenclature; how these acts of interaction between families and schools are named, described and understood. While governments have largely identified 'partnerships' as the 'formalised' interactions that are bounded by structures, hierarchies, formal processes, and constructed as a 'contact' between the school and parent (see Epstein 1995), communities have favoured a more 'colloquial', inclusive terminology that speaks directly of localised co-operation, collaboration and engagement (Agbo 2007; Bond 2010). Auerbach (2012) in her text on the role of the school principal in developing partnerships sought to span this dichotomous terminology by introducing the concept of 'authentic' partnerships, which focuses attention on the form of these partnerships, where families are engaged in the whole process of conceptualisation, planning, enactment and evaluation. This definition, which conceptually speaks of shared, two-way engagement, appears

- to have greater traction with the many teachers and Indigenous families in these studies (e.g. Barr and Saltmarsh 2014; Bennet and Moriarty 2015; Bond 2010; Dockett et al. 2006; Ewing 2012; Guenther 2011; Lowe 2016) and, as such, challenges the reductionist approach which speaks of ‘consulting’, ‘listening’ and then taking ‘action’, as found in government policies (e.g. NSW AECG and NSW DET 2010).
2. As briefly discussed above, the issue of improving Aboriginal students’ educational outcomes looms large as the often-stated purpose of school and community collaboration. However, although this assertion of improving student achievement outcomes was the singular underpinning argument for these programs (Daniel 2015; Emerson et al. 2012; Harris and Goodall 2008; Muller 2012; Muller and Saulwick 2006), little evidence was tendered to support this contention. Chenhall et al. (2011, p. 38) noted the serious conflict that emanated from those wanting to make the claim that parent–school engagement programs were an easy-pick ‘remedy’ that would of itself lift the learning outcomes of students, even though there was little evidence to support this assertion (e.g. see NSW AECG and NSW DET 2010). However, while the nexus between engagement and improved outcomes remains unproven in this review, it should also be noted that there were no studies that set out to prove such a nexus existed. As such, a future challenge for research is for such a review to be conducted to test the veracity of this central tenant of this government policy.
  3. A third finding in this review is that while policies have exhorted schools to establish collaborations with Indigenous families, the realities of bringing these to actual fruition are problematic, except in those cases where schools demonstrated exemplary leadership in opening themselves to an examination of the policies and practices which have been shown to educationally and epistemically marginalise Indigenous students. In this, the capacity to enact these relationships needs to be seen as reflective of the complex and largely negative relationships that underpin the gulf between Australia’s first peoples and the state.
  4. Overall, this review identified findings that focus a spotlight on the underpinning elements of relationship-building between schools and Aboriginal communities. In respect to parents, the findings suggested that schools need to seek opportunities for authentic collaboration that transform students’ educational opportunities. The findings suggested that authentic engagement is linked to collaborative problem identification, authentic processes of engagement, a shared leadership framework that engaged families and teachers in all aspects of the program, and an acknowledgement of the importance of genuine engagement with community cultural programs.
  5. More specifically, the impact of engagement on teachers and principals found that the critical role of schools and teachers needs to develop meaningful relational strategies that build trust and respect between stakeholders (Australian Institute of Health Welfare 2014; Barr and Saltmarsh 2014; Bennet and Moriarty 2015; Berthelsen and Walker 2008; Lampert et al. 2014). Secondly, studies by Bond (2010) and Guenther et al. (2015) identified that quality relationships are based on relational factors, such as teacher compassion and programs that facilitated the empowerment of students’ families and communities. Thirdly, teachers were

shown to need significant support to effect the pedagogical changes needed to challenge the status quo of Indigenous underachievement, to influence school policy and establish opportunities for the inclusion of local Indigenous knowledge (Bond 2010; Guenther et al. 2015; Lowe 2017). In this, parents speak of teachers needing to reflexively engage in affecting individual and collective pedagogic and curriculum practices that support students' classroom success (Lampert et al. 2014; Lowe 2017; Owens 2015).

## Conclusion

This systematic review of recent situated Australian research on school community engagement has explored the question of the impact that Aboriginal community and school collaboration has on schools and Aboriginal students, families and their communities. What emerged from these 32 studies was that the issues are complex, bounded by the uniqueness of sites, the on-going impact of community histories, economies and location, the history of interactions, and students' experiences of educational success and engagement. Further issues focused on the qualities and capacity of school leaders and their impact on facilitating purposeful collaborations and co-constructing opportunities with Aboriginal people to participate in key decisions that affect their children's education.

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