

# Community solutions for schooling engagement: Two Australian case studies

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## ACCEPTED VERSION

This paper draws together data from two separate projects on schooling dis/engagement in Queensland, Australia. One project had a focus on mainstream schools and the strategies employed to retain and engage young people in learning, whereas the other looked to the growing sector of alternative and flexible education for similar solutions. While these two sectors are considerably different in terms of governance, size of school and culture, we found interesting parallels. For example, rich, relevant curriculum delivered through innovative pedagogies alongside positive staff/student relationships were key elements in schooling engagement across both sectors. These findings have been published elsewhere. This paper explores data from two remote Queensland schools from these broader projects to explicate the ways in which they partnered with local communities in mutually beneficial and authentic ways. These case studies were chosen because of the added challenges posed by their remote geolocations. The strategies employed at each school provide important examples for other schools in terms of tapping into the wealth of human and material support systems in their local areas.

Key words: Community and schooling; schooling engagement; rural and remote schooling; Indigenous communities

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with the ways in which schools develop ways-of-working with local communities. It utilises data from two projects based in a diverse range of urban, regional rural, and remote schools in Australia. Our aim in both projects was to determine a schema of factors and practices that support schooling engagement. Of specific interest in *this* paper are the ways in which two schools successfully engaged their local communities as partners in that endeavour. Additionally, we have narrowed our focus to regional, rural and remote areas (RRR) of Queensland because young people living in those areas face greater educational challenges than their urban counterparts (Balsamo and Robinson 2000; Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987). Hence there is a pressing need to find exemplars of successful practices and policies in those areas.

An extensive literature review (Halsey 2021) commissioned by the Australian federal government points to a long-standing, systemic gap between the achievements of RRR and urban students. Halsey (2021, 4) notes that ‘the national statistics show there is a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated’. As recognised in this report and elsewhere (e.g., Eacott 2019; Hardwick-Franco 2019; Heffernan 2018), quality school leadership and community building are essential to the success of students and schools. Indeed, state governments across Australia have policies targeting the support for the recruitment and retention of staff in RRR areas of the nation (e.g., *Rural & Remote Education*, Queensland; *Rural & Remote Education*, New South Wales). However, the distances between RRR schools and larger cities and towns are immense<sup>1</sup>, and despite multiple initiatives by governments, isolation of staff, many of whom may be beginning teachers, poses an ongoing challenge.

Young people comprise a very important part of RRR communities, as the future of the towns and economies in these locations depend on them for sustainability. Thus, the

importance of the youth sector—which comprises an eclectic mix of social, youth and community services personnel who provide support to young people in various capacities—cannot be overestimated when looking to support RRR students. Whether they assist schools or run independent centres, they are often privy to the personal struggles of young people during the challenging times experienced by families and communities in Australia’s outback.

Sharp downturns in the economy in communities heavily dependent on one industry have consequences for schools (Connell and Dufty-Jones, 2016). It is the young people from the most marginalised family backgrounds who suffer from negative changes in the labour market. The failure to address youth disadvantage in regional areas of the state is often based upon a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by young people living in such areas. While boys tend to have higher suspension and expulsion rates than girls, caution is needed as gender intersects in complex ways with race, ethnicity, and poverty. Thus, expulsion rates, for instance, of Indigenous girls are higher than for middle class white boys (Lingard et al. 2009). Understanding complex issues of gender/gender identity and sexuality while at school (e.g., Francis and Monakali 2021; Paechter et al. 2021) is necessary to address the challenges facing young people in RRR locations. According to the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, young people (16–25) who identify as LGBT[Q]I[A+]² are five times more likely to attempt suicide and twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder (CRRMH 2021).

### **Geolocational inequality**

Many young people who fail or do not complete school are located in RRR areas of Australia where ‘stark inequalities’ exist across ‘a range of outcomes, such as NAPLAN and PISA, secondary school completion and university participation’ (Perry 2018, 59). A significant

proportion of Indigenous people live in RRR areas of Australia, and Lamb et al. (2015) indicated the significant gaps in NAPLAN results, where > 60 per cent of Indigenous students do not meet the international benchmark, compared to 27 per cent of non-Indigenous students. Only 25 per cent of Indigenous students reached the National Proficient Standard in mathematical literacy compared to 57 per cent of non-Indigenous students. Similar proportions were found for reading and scientific literacy (Thomson and Bortoli 2016).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2018), one in five young Australians do not complete high school. For Indigenous, RRR, and low-SES students the outlook is substantially worse, exemplified by a 59% completion rate in the Northern Territory. People who live in urban Australia are twice as likely to have a university degree than those who live in country Australia (ABS 2018). According to Perry (2018):

There are three equity groups in Australia. These are the groups of students that consistently experience lower educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes. They are students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, Indigenous students, and students who reside in rural/remote areas (59).

The challenges facing young RRR people are next situated within the context of the broader Australian story of city vs country.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with almost 90 per cent of the population living in capital cities. In the same census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People represented only 2.8 per cent of the population but their geographic distribution across Australia is quite different. Only 37 per cent of Indigenous people reside in major cities; 44 per cent in inner and outer regional areas and 19 per cent in remote and very remote areas. ABS (2016) data indicated that in *very remote* areas of Australia, 47 per cent of the total local populations identified as Indigenous. The Australian Outback is characterised by sparse populations

within which there are significant socioeconomic disparities between wealthy pastoralists and miners and the less well-off working class and Indigenous Australians. Research has identified a concept of a ‘disadvantaged’ rural and regional nation (Pritchard and MacManus 2000) and there is ample evidence of this rural/urban educational gap (e.g., Halsey 2021; Maple et al. 2019; Perry 2018).

Traditional agricultural economies in Australia have restructured to incorporate mining and given rise to a ‘patchwork economy’ (Connell and Dufty-Jones 2014) in which there are winners and losers. While some areas have benefited from the mining boom and capital investment, other smaller farming economies have stagnated, which has led to shrinking towns and associated services; a spiral of de-population, decay, and economic downturn (Connell and Dufty-Jones 2014). Additionally, Australian RRR communities have had to contend with drought, debates about mining, the threat of climate change and all of the environmental issues that flow from these factors. Ageing populations and failures to retain younger people have continued to challenge these regions.

This is a snapshot of the circumstances within which our two case study schools were located. Out of the schools studied in our broader projects, our interest was drawn to the differing ways-of-working with communities that these two schools had negotiated. Before turning to this data, we now present a brief overview of research perspectives on the benefits and challenges of establishing strong school/community relationships, particularly with predominantly Indigenous communities.

### **Communities and their schools**

The research literature confirms the mutually constitutive nature of schools and their community ecologies (Lawson and Lawson 2020), with the benefits of school–community partnerships well documented. Two decades of evidence have demonstrated the role of

communities in enhancing student engagement to achieve positive and sustainable personal, educational and community outcomes, including improved student engagement and learning outcomes; increased attendance and retention; improved pathways to employment; stronger relationships between schools and their communities; positive school cultures of achievement; social inclusion; and well-being in terms of educational and social equity (Bottrell and Goodwin, 2011; Leonard 2011; Valli et al. 2016).

While the benefits of school–community partnerships are not in question, the reasons for the extent to which such partnerships succeed or fail are not necessarily well understood (Leonard 2011; Graham et al. 2021), although contemporary formations of school–community partnerships seek to move beyond a one-way information flow to a genuine relationship of investment in the wellbeing and education of young people (Graham et al.). However, creating sustainable community partnerships can be challenging, especially for communities and families that have had negative experiences of schooling, speak languages other than English or who live with complex social and economic disadvantage (Lampert, 2021).

Zipin et al. (2012) argued for a *funds of knowledge* approach to school–community engagement, drawing upon the rich lifeworlds of young people, families and communities, together with the curriculum and pedagogical work of teachers and schools. Such an approach rejects the deficit discourses that permeate school–community relationships, especially in RRR and Indigenous communities (Lowe et al. 2019a). Instead, the lives of young people, their families and communities are firmly enmeshed in the daily practices and cultures of school (Smyth, 2012).

Young people need to be recognised as equal stakeholders (Groundwater-Smith 2011) in the ways in which schools engage families and communities to create partnerships that are meaningful and sustainable (Zacarian and Silverstone 2020). Understanding disengagement

as a ‘whole of community’ issue, rather than a ‘within-school’ issue (AUTHOR) acknowledges that ‘when school improvement is walled in, family, peer and community resources ... are walled out’ (Lawson and Lawson 2020, 3). However, current conceptualisations of school–community partnership are broad and difficult to define, given that *community* and the politics of communities and schools are themselves difficult to pin down (Lampert 2021). This is reflected in multiple school–community partnership models that have been trialled in Australia and internationally, which differ in purpose and scope as well as the theories that underpin different approaches (Bottrell and Goodwin 2011; Valli et al. 2016).

Stefanski et al. (2016) define school–community partnerships as ‘intentional efforts to create long-standing relationships among schools ... and organisations in the local community’ (31), while Leonard (2011) argues that partnerships involve a deliberate association, which results in an exchange of knowledge, goods, or services, to effectuate benefits for students. Importantly, Valli et al. (2016) note the general theory of action for school–community partnerships is valuing partnerships that enhance schools’ capacity to address the needs of students and their families. Drawing from the work of Merz and Furman (1997), Valli et al. (2018) argue that ‘typical’ approaches to partnering with communities all too often ‘fail to connect to the community members themselves. What results is greater bureaucracy ... and the treatment of community members as clients to be served rather than valued members in a shared mission’ (p. 33). Conversely, Leonard (2011) argues that a strong presence in the microsystem through building grass-roots relationships with students but failing to communicate with teachers and administrators causes projects to operate in isolation, even digressing from the core work of the school. In summary, the literature indicates some key criteria for effective school–community engagement:

- Partnerships should involve a *deliberate* association that is meaningful and sustainable.

- Partnering should be recognised as a *mutually beneficially* relationship that addresses broader interests that impact on all community members of which the school is one part.
- Partnerships should *value all members* in a *shared mission* and recognise young people as equal stakeholders.
- Partnerships require *clear lines of collaboration and communication* among all members—administration, teachers, students and community stakeholders.

For communities that include Indigenous students and families (most in RRR areas), it is important that in addition to the above points, the schools should address issues highlighted in research specific to working with Indigenous communities.

### ***Working with Indigenous communities***

Given White Australia’s colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples, it is not surprising that relations between Indigenous communities and institutions such as schools are plagued by mistrust. Schooling for Indigenous peoples has frequently involved low expectations and endemic racism from staff and students (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016).. There are thus many historical, personal and cultural barriers preventing effective collaborative relations between schools and Indigenous communities. Indeed, the very notion of what constitutes the local ‘Indigenous community’ may be premised upon erroneous beliefs and misunderstandings about connections to Country and kinship ties. In a systematic review of the literature<sup>3</sup>, *Factors affecting the development of school and Indigenous community engagement*, Lowe et al. (2019a) used a specially developed set of exacting protocols and review methodology used in the *Aboriginal Voices Systematic Review Project* (see Lowe et al. 2019b). The authors concluded that the following issues were of paramount importance:

- *Modes of engagement*: Governments have largely identified ‘partnerships’ as the ‘formalised’ interactions that are bounded by structures, hierarchies, formal processes ... communities have favoured a more ‘colloquial’, inclusive terminology that speaks directly of localised co-operation, collaboration and engagement.



- *Authentic engagement*: ‘authentic’ partnerships ... where families are engaged in the whole process of conceptualisation, planning, enactment and evaluation.
- *Recognition of marginalising policies and practices*: Policies have exhorted schools to establish collaborations with Indigenous families, however the realities of bringing these to actual fruition are problematic.
- *Improving student outcomes*: The findings suggest that schools should seek opportunities for authentic collaboration that transform students’ educational opportunities.
- *Quality relationships based on relational factors*: Teacher compassion and programs that facilitate the empowerment of students’ families and communities.
- *Support for teachers*: 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. (Lowe et al. 2019a, 265–267)

There is no doubt that developing school–community partnerships with RRR communities, which have historically been marginalised and disadvantaged, is difficult work, which requires school leaders and teachers to engage with ‘community-identified skills, knowledge, and dispositions’ (Lampert 2021, 455). Any attempt to engage in more community relevant and culturally responsive forms of schooling with Indigenous and RRR young people requires the recentring and sharing of power and knowledge with young people, their families and communities in collaborative and deeply contextualised ways (Bishop, Vass & Thompson, 2021)

## **Methodology**

### ***Research methods***

The two research projects from which these two case studies were selected utilised a mixed-methods approach that included a survey, historical document analysis and semi-structured interviews. For Project L<sup>4</sup> we looked to the flexible/non-traditional schooling sector for lessons on schooling re-engagement (see authors). These registered schools are non-fee paying and cater to young people who have left the mainstream sector either voluntarily or through in/formal exclusions. Online surveys were undertaken with 79 workers (i.e., teachers and youth workers) in 13 alternative education sites to determine how referral processes work

and to ascertain their views on effective programmes and practices. Additionally, online surveys were conducted with 154 young people in 15 flexible education sites and programmes to explore their experiences. Thirteen telephone interviews and 16 online surveys were undertaken with key personnel from the youth sector<sup>5</sup> (social workers and youth workers providing youth-specific support) in RRR areas of the state. The rationale for the telephone interviews arose from public data that indicated that in RRR areas of the state, there were far fewer alternative schools. We therefore looked to the youth sector for additional information about optional pathways and/or insights into how young people coped. Following these interviews, we selected eight case study sites.

We aimed for diversity in terms of the following factors: location; target students; programmes; governance and funding. We conducted on-site observations and 68 semi-structured interviews with administrators, workers, teachers, and community volunteers and 81 semi-structured interviews with students. This data provided a basis for a major report on flexible and non-traditional educational provision in Queensland. From the eight case studies we have selected Wakarri<sup>6</sup>, a remote Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) serving predominantly Indigenous students. Wararri FLC was selected for this paper because of its innovative strategies for engaging with Indigenous communities in authentic ways that were mutually beneficial to students and communities.

For Project H<sup>7</sup> we accessed publicly available aggregated statistics on attendance rates and improved academic and vocational outcomes in Queensland state schools and used them to identify 30 secondary schools serving low-SES communities throughout metropolitan and regional Queensland that had utilised positive strategies for improving schooling engagement during the previous five years (see authors). 30 online surveys were conducted with purposefully selected school principals or key personnel. From the 30 participating schools, we selected five school case studies for fieldwork that included school visits and semi-

structured interviews and document collection. From this data we selected Kuungkari<sup>8</sup>, a remote government State High School (SHS). As with Wakarri FLC, this school had successfully engaged with its local community to engender significant schooling reengagement that was of mutual benefit to the local people.

The data from Projects L and H were rich and varied. For purposes of this paper, we focus only on two case study schools that had negotiated and developed a range of effective and meaningful school–community relationships. There was no further data collection.

### ***Research analysis***

The case studies in this paper were subject to the same analytical approaches used for all the data generated in Projects L and H. Surveys conducted were a mix of closed and open-ended questions, with the former being analysed predominantly using Likert scales. Closed-ended data were statistically analysed using relevant tests (e.g., Spearman or Pearson in SPSS).

Open-ended data from surveys and interviews were thematically analysed using a six-step process: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (see Braun and Clark 2013). Examples of emergent themes included: leadership practices; re/engagement strategies (pedagogical and curricular); school cultures, and the topic explored in this paper: school and community engagement. We have written elsewhere about other themes.

The two case studies in this paper found ways to tap into rich resources in their local communities in order to respond to important issues confronting their students and local communities. They are both geographically remote from urban centres. Wakarri FLC from Project L illustrates ways of finding ‘common ground<sup>9</sup>’ between the school and the local Indigenous community. Kuungkari SHS, from Project H exemplifies how school and community partnerships may provide training and employment opportunities for students that not only benefited them but the whole community.

## **Research findings**

### ***Wakarri Flexi School***

Wakarri FLC was established in 2010 in a remote mining town in north-west Queensland. In the 2016 census it had a population just over 30,000 of which 52 per cent identified as male. Approximately 24 per cent of the population identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (ABS 2016). It is almost 2,000 km from the capital city of Brisbane and the nearest town of approximately 200 residents, is 100 km away. Like all schools in remote areas, Wakarri FLC was challenged by its geolocation and attendant socioeconomic issues. Enrolments hovered around 40–50 students and the young people came from the disadvantaged areas in the town. With a 94 per cent Indigenous clientele, students were connected to five major Indigenous communities, ranging between 350–750 kilometres (217–465 miles) leading to a significant mix of languages and family groupings. For many students, English was their second language. Most often, the young people resided with a relative or were in out-of-home care. A significant proportion of the young people were involved with the Department of Youth Justice. The main employer in the town, a mine, used mostly fly-in/fly-out workers so investments in the local economy and associated jobs had decreased. Flow-on effects for residents included greater reliance on welfare and the many social problems connected to poverty. The next section explores the ways in which the school formed authentic relationships with their community to increase learning engagement.

### ***Finding ‘common ground’***

The young people at Wakarri FLC faced significant economic and social alienation from the broader community along with geographical isolation and the accompanying lack of personal choices. They had to contend with an historical legacy of racism and colonialism and the dislocation and the resultant generational alienation of Indigenous populations. According to the Head of Campus, Lynette, one of the traditional owners of the land around Wakarri FLC,

the most appropriate response was to strive to connect young people to their language and culture: ‘Look, I think cultural competency or cultural embedding of Indigenous perspectives certainly needs to be maintained. Strong links to communities, but also maintaining Indigenous staff is a fairly high priority’. Research (Lowe et al. 2019a) shows that an authentic partnership with Indigenous communities must start with these factors as Lynette further explained, ‘Making sure that they are connected to country and also to family is a major goal and to have that engagement of families and with different skin groups’. Family and community connections extended to some staff members as noted by Lucy, a teacher, ‘I am actually related to some of them, some of their families. Being Indigenous myself and being a local, I know their communities’. This provided a good foundation upon which to build trust and positive relations (Lowe et al. 2019a) with Indigenous Elders.

Greg, a non-Indigenous principal of a cluster of flexi schools, including Wakkari FLC, commented upon the importance of language and lore:

Well, for the kids here [English is] their third, fourth/fifth language, so there're issues in doing schooling in English, for a start. [The school population is] transient in nature. We have a lot of kids from all the communities around us. It's a real mix of clan groups or nation groups. There're even some problems in integrating some very traditional Indigenous kids with traditional upbringing, lore, culture/understanding and then some urban Indigenous kids.

The solution to the cultural and language barriers was sought in the knowledges of local community Elders who provided strong support for the young people:

We have a lot of Elders come into the school for a whole range of things. We have run men's and women's groups with Elders. The Elders come in—we have had some come in to do ballroom dancing, so very western, but others have taken them out on the country and talk about bush tucker and lore and all that sort of thing. Very traditional involvement of Elders but also just great support from the Elders' community here as well (Greg).

In this example we see how as well as the Elders' contributions to the school, the school gave

back by providing a safe space for men's and women's groups and social events. As well as providing social and emotional support to the students, the Elders frequently bridged the divide between the western curriculum and Indigenous knowledges. One student, Ellie commented: 'They [Elders] come in and do cultural activities, like each day a different class. Elders come in when we have yarning<sup>10</sup> day. Each class has time out bush. We also have an induction programme [at the school and the Elders help out]'.

Teacher, Lorna, also explained how the school had adopted Indigenous ways in the classroom by modelling their pedagogies on the Elders' approaches. Thus, they provided vital support to teachers in their efforts to engage the young people in learning:

I sit down with them. We sit in a circle. I don't stand up, like a teacher; we are on the same level, you know. Because that's a big part of that barrier, the authority-figure. For them, for a lot of them, authority figures, are the police. So, you are trying to break down that, 'I'm not that person. I am a safe person. You can talk to me'.

Given the small enrolment at the school, such classes may comprise 1–5 students. That plus the personal 'safety' of these culturally appropriate spaces allowed staff to build relationships and trust and thereby teach the curriculum. However, the young people were also encouraged to reengage with the broader community as well, as evidenced by their social enterprise lawn-mowing business that saw them achieve finalist status in a competition run by a major bank. As well as helping students to develop entrepreneurial skills, members of the broader local community who supported this endeavour forged stronger links with the school thus helping to build the resources that contributed to the wrap-around material supports that some students required.

One of the important initiatives of the school was its outreach service to young people who were so disengaged from school that they had to be gradually transitioned back. 'Bridge' programmes jointly funded by the Queensland government and local charitable sponsors, operated alongside the flexible learning centres in the region. As their name indicates, the aim

was to 'build a bridge' between where young people were at (e.g., out-of-home care, youth justice) and relevant forms of education and training. The young people we met at Wakarri FLC confronted a range of debilitating life issues such as discrimination, racism, dislocation, poverty, and neglect resulting in anxiety, abuse, homelessness, substance abuse and involvement with the youth justice system. Despite the comparatively small numbers of enrolments, some were not comfortable coming to the school campus and therefore the youth workers, transition teachers and Elder-volunteers met them in parks or out bush—wherever they were willing to meet. Lorna, the Bridge teacher, described her work:

Basically, we go out there [find] any young people who have been completely disengaged from school for a period of time. [These] young people have a lot of problems building relationships with people, trusting people. A big thing was coming to school. The flexi has a big fence. To come into a fenced area, you have to prove to them, 'You know what, the gate is open. We are not locking you up'. It is also [a problem] coming into the classroom. The ones [teaching spaces] in the bush were perfect because you didn't have walls. So, breaking down fear, taking that fear away. I guess you could say what we are doing is bridging the gap for them ...

A recurrent theme in the data was the importance of culture which was the foundation of the family communities. Mara, one of the teachers in the induction programme, noted:

We do a lot of stuff here out of the classroom, off the campus, like go out bush, fishing, and stuff. You would be amazed at the knowledge that these kids have outside the classroom! I learn a lot more from them. We are doing, for example, a bush tucker garden at the moment. We are trying to set up a bush tucker garden out there with the help of community volunteers.

Celina, one of the student support teachers, saw connections between the principles of the school ethos, for example 'respect' and culture, 'My big belief is teaching them respect. If they don't respect themselves, they won't respect others. Mum taught me a lot about culture and how respect is a big part of that'.

While the links between the Indigenous community and the school were clearly strong, there was evidence of racial tensions between the largely marginalised Indigenous inhabitants and the white population of the town. Initiatives to build bridges between the two included annual commemorations and celebrations, the award-winning lawn-mowing entrepreneurial start-up described previously, and engagement with support services and businesses. The students commented on their progress at the school:

Male student: It's [Wakarri FLC] been helping me out. Like, they don't tell us to do it. They ask us if we want to do it, or not. If we don't, they will give us something that we want to do. We are not forced to do anything. Like, not even forced to come to school. If we have had bad days, you tell them, and they will help you...

Wakarri FLC aimed to break down barriers between young people and adults by facilitating 'common ground' and its associated sense of community that was lacking in the wider context of the students' lives. In responding to the specifics of this location, the staff at Wakarri FLC engaged their local Indigenous community of Elders in conjunction with an intensification of other material resources and supports. A study by Bishop et al. (2021) provides a succinct summary of the immense value of this form of engagement:

The learning that took shape was cyclical, reciprocal. Teacher, student, community member—learning, sharing, growing. Humble in what is known and yet to know. These examples speak to a shift in traditional power dynamics and classroom practices; challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies and whose knowledge is valued (205).

Thus, if we return to the insights gained from Lowe et al.'s (2019a) systematic review of literature in this area, we can identify a synergy between the Wakarri FLC/Indigenous community partnership and factors noted in the review. For example, there is evidence of authentic forms of engaging the local Indigenous community (*It's more culturally inclusive in terms of how we structure the curriculum*); informal modes of communication (*So we sit around, talking, and so forth, have a yarn*); recognition of marginalising policies and



practices (*We sit in a circle. I don't stand up; we are on the same level, because that's a big part of that barrier, the authority-figure*); improving student outcomes (*You know...back there [previous school], all the kids, they just smoke. All the young kids, they just smoke dope. [Wakarri FLC] they give us opportunities ... like music and other programs ... like, apprenticeships and mechanics*); quality relationships based on relational factors (*Elders come in when we have yarning day*); and support for teachers (*Each class has time out bush. We also have an induction programme [at the school and the Elders help out]*).

Thus, despite the common barriers of institutional ‘blindness’ to authentic engagement with Indigenous communities, Wakarri FLC was able to find ‘common ground’ with the Elders in the shared mission of engaging their young people in learning. This was not a one-way process but a rich dialogue within difference that allowed the ‘institution’ and the ‘community’ to engage in a rich dialogue of mutual respect and learning—‘both ways’. (Living Knowledge).

We now turn to Kuungkari SHS from Project H to explicate their unique ways of engaging their local community for mutually beneficial results.

### ***Kuungkari State High School***

Located 650 km (400 mi) from Wakarri FLC the town of Kuungkari has a population of about 3000 residents. With a hot, semi-arid climate, it is situated 700 km (430 mi) from the East coast of Australia and lies in the tropics. Kuungkari is 1,200 km (735 mi) away from Queensland’s capital. The main industries are cattle and sheep production and tourism. Unlike the mining town in which Wakarri FLC is sited, Kuungkari’s population is 52 per cent female, 47 per cent male and Indigenous people make up just 6 per cent (ABS 2016). The focus of the community engagement of Kuungkari SHS involves four other ‘local’ high schools: Barramundi SHS (108 km, 67 mi), Mado SHS (127 km, 79 mi), Bass SHS (214 km,

133 mi) and Wahoo SHS (179 km, 111 mi). Note the vast distances that must be negotiated involving 1–2 hours of driving each way. Under discussion here, is a community initiative working to overcome isolation and targeting educational engagement, training, employment prospects, retention of young people in the region and the creation of community ‘spirit’.

As noted earlier, there are periodic droughts and economic downturns in Australia’s RRR locations. When things become too challenging people are forced off the land leading to a downward spiral of shrinking towns, fewer employment opportunities for the next generation and slow depopulation of these areas, particularly with regard to young people. In response to this, Kuungkari SHS came up with a bold plan that would involve five other ‘local’ high schools within an average radius of approximately 160 km (100 mi).

### *The Kuungkari community*

Data from interviews with staff and community members pointed to existing close links between the high school and the people who lived in surrounding areas. Teachers commented about shrinking social and youth services and how the community tried to step up to help. They also worked closely with the local agricultural college and Distance Education.

According to the Head of Curriculum, Brenda:

So, it is a nice—a good community. It allows us to engage everyone. It is amazing! For a community that struggles economically, we have no problem ever placing all of our students on work experience. They are willing to put them on and give them a go.

The Coordinator of Student Services, Therese, also noted the willingness of local industries to support students:

So, our community—even though we are a drought-affected community, our community always puts their hand up to take a trainee of some kind or an apprentice—mechanical, electrical, tourism, hospitality. Even though a lot of businesses are actually going

bankrupt, the community still puts their hand up because they want to keep some of the kids here, to actually continue—to become an apprentice or trainee and stay here.

Long-time member of the Parents & Friends (P&F) Association of Kuungkari SHS, Allen, corroborated the close relations between the high school and the local community: ‘I think the school has got a quite good reputation ... There is always a good relationship between the school and the community’. He acknowledged that while many of the young men transitioned to work on the land, girls were more likely to leave but to return later in life:

The rural industry does soak up a lot of the young kids. Like, they go out contracting and mustering or whatever they need to do. I also know there’s a couple of young girls that left town, have got university education and now they are back here. I find girls leave more often than the boys do. But I do see some of the kids coming back, which is good.

Parents of students noted other material aspects of community support, particularly during times of drought. According to Jan:

We have been in drought out here for a number of years now and there's been a lot of [community] funding. The last couple of years, we have been given—like, a \$50 voucher each, to contribute towards schoolbooks at the beginning of the year.

It was within the context of these strong community ties that an idea was born that would contribute to educational outcomes, employment and encourage a *stickiness* to the local region.

### *The Orange Express*

The ‘Orange Express’ refers to a B-Double, 29 metres long, \$2 million truck<sup>11</sup> that was transformed into a mobile industrial grade kitchen. This initiative would deliver the hospitality component of the tourism curriculum to five schools in a cluster of geographically distant high schools that lacked the individual resources to install this at individual schools.

In describing the evolution of the initiative that was to become the Orange Express we draw upon data derived from John, the school principal and Allen, who as well as being a member of the P&F Association, had worked at the school as janitor for 28 years and was a former student. He was also a qualified motor mechanic. At the time of our research, he had transitioned to being the school's facilities' manager and driver of the Orange Express. John was relatively new to the position but was originally from the town. He explained how the pressure to react to changing industries created a space for their project:

So, industry-wise, [it] used to be very agricultural, so sheep and cattle ... lots of people involved. That's really dropped off with wool prices and labour costs, and stuff like that. I have family connections out this way. So, I know a lot of the history [and] connection with the country. We have experienced drought—this would be about the sixth year, so, it's a long-term drought—that has made us more reliant on other things. So, now, the three main industries are tourism, healthcare, and agriculture. Agriculture will always stay here, but it's definitely less focused. So, the tourism bit, that's increasing. They need skilled or semi-skilled workers for that.

However, with small populations and minimal infrastructure, the principal continued:

'There're industry employment opportunities and that's where the Outback College of Hospitality<sup>12</sup> (Orange Express) came in. So, it actually came in to address tourism and is delivering Certificate 2 in Kitchen Operations in Hospitality'.

It is important to note that this was not just a school venture, but as a *community focused one* within which the P&F made up of community members was a key player, which was 'characterised by mutual respect, common goals and recognition' (Graham et al. 2021, 1247). As Smyth (2012) notes, such ventures engage communities and schools in innovative and genuine ways. Here, Allen noted the beginnings:

Initially, the first meeting that I ever went to, my idea was, it was to teach tourism/hospitality to [all the] schools. Obviously, they weren't going to put a commercial grade kitchen in each of the schools ... the smallest has 49 students. So, we

ended up—with the idea of the truck. It just sort of grew and grew. Initially, I was going to tow the trailer. So, when it became a B-Double, 29 metres long, \$2 million truck, they must have caught me on a good day because they come and said, ‘Do you want to learn how to drive it?’ And I was only one driver's licence away. So, I went and got a B—like an MC Class truck licence and that was it.

John also stressed that this was an initiative firmly based within the needs of the community:

So, it's been really good because the community saw the need for it as well. *So, the school identified the need, the community supported it* and then we were fortunate to get Commonwealth funding to help, essentially seed funding to establish it. The now updating and operating costs rest solely with the five cluster schools, which is—that's the sustainability side of it—a challenge and will be a challenge well into the future, because we are funding it entirely now (*emphasis added*).

He talked about how the project aspired to retain young people in the community:

So, what it's done has been to provide a programme where students can see real relevance to actual employment and industry here. It's created really strong links with current businesses, in all of those towns. And it's also provided a social network as well. It will also do anywhere from four to probably six community events per year. And they are large community events. And our students love to participate in those because they may be employed by that organisation to work for that event.

When asked about the ongoing engagement of the local community, John replied, ‘It underpins the absolute success of everything we do. And I think it’s because of the community engagement that we have really high success with our students’. Both John and Allen emphasised the economic and social benefits flowing back to the local community:

John: So, partnerships have been formed. You know, in my short time here, I know that business—you know, even the council and things like that, the community just wants to be involved. They see the importance of it. Probably in a small, regional community, it is felt more, and it is more embedded here ... If they don't have kids that can fulfil work roles here, then they can't do it [run businesses/create industry] and it has a flow-on effect of people leaving town, and so on. So, councils and other organisations/groups are

very keen to partner with us because they just see it, *everyone is connected; no-one is in isolation.*

Allen highlighted how the Orange Express had become an important community asset:

They catered at a recent event for 812 people, a sit-down meal. So, without that Orange Express, that event wouldn't have went ahead—and, of course, *we earned money to keep it on the road.*

Thus, the significant factors for successful school/community partnerships noted in the literature (see for example, Halsey 2021; Baker and Harris 2020) are evident in the data from Kuungkari SHS. For example, this was a deliberate and meaningful association that became sustainable (*So, the school identified the need, the community supported it and then we were fortunate to get Commonwealth funding to help, essentially seed funding to establish it*); it became a mutually beneficial partnership (see García-Carrión et al. 2018) based on mutual respect, communication and shared vision (*So, what it's done has been to provide a programme where students can see real relevance to actual employment and industry here. It's created really strong links with current businesses, in all of those towns*); and its success was grounded in these elements plus the clear lines of leadership (Eacott 2019; Krumm and Curry 2017; Mills et al. 2021). For both the community and its young people, there were many mutual benefits to establishing an educational and economic ecosystem (see Hardman et al. 2010) that met the needs of all. (*If they don't have kids that can fulfil work roles here, then they can't do it [run businesses/create industry] and it has a flow-on effect of people leaving town, and so on. So, councils and other organisations/groups are very keen to partner with us [the school] because they just see it, everyone is connected*).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have demonstrated two different approaches to schools engaging with their

local communities to respond to some of the complex challenges that come with living in RRR areas of Australia. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ response. Each community is different with very different needs. However, what *is* fundamental to a successful partnership is the construction of a mutually beneficial, respectful working relationship between the school and its local community (Graham et al., 2021). Additionally, there must be concrete plans and achievable goals that yield benefits for students and the community. We can observe this in Wakarri FLC through the ways in which community Elders partnered with the school in engaging young Indigenous people through outreach, bush learning and establishing ‘common ground’. As John said of his community in Kuungkari SHS, ‘everyone is connected, no-one is in isolation’. Working with the young people at Wakarri FLC, the Elders were reclaiming their culture and strengthening their community by passing their knowledges on to the next generation. The theme of ‘common ground’ underpins the working towards for reconciliation as inherent in its meaning finding points of mutual understanding. Importantly, the genuine involvement of Elders in the life of the school has implications for more culturally responsive forms of schooling, which centre relationships, reciprocity and sovereignty for communities (Bishop and Vass 2021).

In the economically struggling town of Kuungkari—typical of so many in the Australian Outback—the Orange Express strengthened the bridge between the school and the local communities of five small RRR towns. The combined efforts of local businesses and groups, students and the school staff created a *stickiness* to learning, employment and local industry that everyone hoped would create a future for the town. This is an example of *community becoming*, in which schools operate as sites of community capacity building and form a core part of the social imaginary for different community futures (Zipin et al. 2012). We do not claim that all problems in these two communities were ameliorated by the initiatives discussed; for example, the racial divide in the town where Wakarri FLC is

situated persisted, and in Kuungkari, addressing economic needs via the Orange Express was not a panacea for other challenges. However, what we *do* claim is that there is power in collaborative action. Schools sit at the hearts of communities and these two examples provide blueprints for what *could* be achieved with the will to work together for young people and their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> See comparative geographical dimensions: <https://www.ga.gov.au/scientific-topics/national-location-information/dimensions/australias-size-compared>

<sup>2</sup> While terminology continues to evolve, at the time of writing this stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual.

<sup>3</sup> 1050 initial studies reduced to a focus of 32.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.qld.gov.au/youth/family-social-support/youth-support-services>

<sup>6</sup> Local Indigenous word for emu, a native bird.

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<sup>8</sup> Local Indigenous word for 'dry'.

<sup>9</sup> The shared interests, beliefs, or opinions identified between two people or groups of people who may disagree about most other subjects.

<sup>10</sup> Yarning is an informal conversation that is culturally friendly and recognised by Aboriginal people as meaning to talk about something, someone or provide and receive information. Yarning Circles are designed to allow all students to have their say in a safe space without judgement.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nhvr.gov.au/files/201901-0977-national-class2-b-double-operators-guide.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Official name for the Orange Express