



## Proposing a Culturally Sensitive Methodology for Studying Leadership for Learning in Indigenous Contexts

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**Background:** By the age of 15, more than one-third of Australia's Indigenous students "do not have the adequate skills and knowledge in reading literacy to meet real-life challenges and may well be disadvantaged in their lives beyond school" (PISA cited in Bortoli and Cresswell, 2004, p.11). Although nationally the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over who completed Year 12 increased from 18% in 2002 to 22% in 2008, these statistics do not equate to the national standards for employment and further learning for Indigenous people. In 2009 data collected from 40 universities shows that 4727 Indigenous students commenced university study while 1377 completed university (DEEWR website). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) shows that 15% were unemployed (a decrease from 22% in 2002), with a higher rate of unemployment in non-remote than remote areas (17% compared with 10%); 19% of those who were unemployed were long-term unemployed (52 weeks or more); 39% were not in the labour force. The 2012 National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN, 2012) shows that Indigenous students from remote areas of Australia were, on average, the lowest-scoring group, with 51.5% meeting minimum standards compared with 93.5% of metropolitan students. Indigenous students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in remote areas of the Northern Territory are worst impacted. Even in other areas where improvement is evident, mostly in cities, Indigenous students continue to fall below national and international benchmarks. Investigating success in the teaching and learning of numeracy in remote schools in the Northern Territory, Jorgensen & Niesche (2011) found two recurring themes: consistency in teaching approaches, and explicit teaching to students and communities.



Our proposal is to expand on those themes through a new approach to leadership for learning included nationally in the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) project. There is no doubt that student outcomes are impacted by quality school leadership (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe 2010); that Indigenous children learn, behave and perform better at school when they are taught by Indigenous teachers (Lowe, 1994; Sarra, 2003) and have consistent support at home; and that Indigenous families are least likely to be engaged in their children's formal schooling for a range of reasons (Jeynes 2005; OECD 2008; Hanafin & Lynch 2002). Empirical evidence shows significant academic benefits when they do (Bishop, 2011). The approach to be taken to respond to this pressing issue involves primary school principals working closely with Indigenous teaching assistants to take them through a program of explicit instruction in the teaching of reading that takes account of Indigenous ways of learning. That said, our approach goes much further than this, to work both inside and outside the school with Indigenous teaching assistants adopting leadership roles to help expand the capabilities of people within their communities to play significant roles in supporting children learning to read.

