CHAPTER 3

Motutapu: A Relational Space for Collaborative Research-Practice in Oceanic Education

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Abstract

This chapter upholds the significance of context in understanding the domains of social relationships—'the context behind the context'—within which school communities exist (Sanga, cited in Airini et al., 2010). Fundamental to the 'relationality' theme which underpinned the research-practice education intervention informing this and other chapters, is the recognition that cultural identity formation within indigenous Oceanic societies is relational rather than individualistic. Education is acknowledged as a relational activity, one in which the space connecting researcher-practitioners and educational communities focuses on the development of contextually appropriate and robust research practices that can lead to the generation of new knowledge and understanding for improved learning. *Motutapu* is posited as a relational space for the interventions which brought together researchers and practitioners from small island 'developing' countries and from New Zealand. With particular reference to the Literacy and Leadership Initiative (LALI) in Tonga, the chapter recalls the dialogue and actions that progressed and challenged the relationships within the team and with school communities. Central to this is the notion of *vā*—the socio-spatial connection between persons, a relational concept which articulates the connectedness between people and between people and their environment, and which must be *tauhi vā* (nurtured) and *tauhi vaha'a* (protected)—so it remains strong (Thaman, 2008).

Keywords

Motutapu – relational – research – practitioner – collaboration – *vā* – socio-spatial – connectedness

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1 Introduction

The title of this chapter refers to a 2016 article in which I proposed a metaphorical *Motutapu*, a relational space for educational researchers to co-explore new and more authentic dialogue and conscious action for educational development in Oceania (Johansson-Fua, 2016). In doing so, I drew on Epeli Hau'ofa's (1993) call for an alternative view of the Pacific islands within Oceania which provided a path to reimagine 'development' from a renewed perspective. Key to Hau'ofa's essay is the inclusive approach to Oceania, that it is a space for all who call the region home. This Oceanic philosophy positioned itself on respect for the diversity of cultures, languages and peoples within the region, and the relationships between them, as the bases for a more holistic sense of 'regionalism'.

Motutapu, in most Polynesian languages, translates literally as sacred island. In almost all Polynesian archipelagos, one can identify an island called *Motutapu*. There is a *Motutapu* at the entrance to Tongatapu, at Te Avanui in Bora-bora, and at the entrance to Rarotonga. There is also a *Motutapu* at the entrance to the Waitematā harbour in New Zealand (Taonui, 2008). According to our Polynesian oral history, *Motutapu* are places of safety for travelers to rest before they continue to journey beyond the reefs, or where outsiders come to negotiate entry to the safe lagoons. It is a sacred space in that it is a middle ground. *Motutapu* is posited here as a relational space for a literacy and school leadership intervention program which brought together researcher-practitioners from Pacific Islands 'developing' countries and New Zealand.

With particular reference to program undertakings in Tonga, one of the educational contexts participating in the intervention, the chapter will recall the dialogue and actions that progressed and challenged the relationships within the team and with national communities (ministry of education and schools). By exploring the relationships within the team and across the extended partners, I give attention to the emerging lines of interconnectedness and interdependence in these relationships. In doing so, I draw on Konai Helu Thaman's elaboration of the processes of *tauhivā*, and *tauhivaha'a*, the nurturing and protecting of 'the spaces between' in order to strengthen relationships at various levels across and within contexts (Thaman, 2008), thereby fulfilling Hau'ofa's (1993) imagining of a strengthened Oceanic collectivity and connectivity.

The chapter takes a case study approach to gaining access to the Tongan context through which I aim to demonstrate the value of relationality in educational development. The case study also highlights the interconnectedness of people and the socio-cultural contexts within which they live. My interest in examining the processes of gaining access and maintaining relationships

within a research-practice team is related to issues of ontology and epistemology; in particular, those related to the nature of knowledge and knowledge production and the key questions of 'What can be known?' and 'How can it be known?'. I agree with Baily, Shah, and Call-Cummings (2015) that epistemological issues in relation to power, ethics, access and relationships require further consideration if we are serious about methodologies that hold us accountable and able to reap authentic knowledge that can be transformational for the researched. In this case study, I examine my own positionality as well as that linked to researcher-practitioners who are outsiders, who are insiders, and who are the 'inbetweeners' (Milligan, 2016).

2 Case Study: Gaining Access

Gaining access to a context is often not as easy as it is perceived. In fact, gaining access has a lot more to do with building relationships—*vā*—than research often permits. There are multiple levels involved in gaining access to a context and in particular to an 'education for development' context. At the first level, there is access to national ministries of education, curriculum units, examination units and teacher education institutions. At this level also are the various development partners and donors who are operating in the education sector (see Chapters 9 and 10 for more detail) and at times are involved in delivering development projects in the same field. Related to this first level is the second level of access, to the provincial or island educational authorities. The third level of access is that of the participant schools and classrooms which includes participation of school principals, teachers and students.

At the fourth level of access is the surrounding communities that host the school and include the parents and guardians of the school children. The community level is often ignored and neglected when examining education for development in Pacific countries.

In this particular case study, I wish to demonstrate the complexities within and across levels and illustrate the interconnectedness and interdependent relationships that cut across all levels of access. By doing this, I wish to demonstrate that the 'context behind the context' is far more complex than often perceived within Pacific countries. Drawing on the Literacy and Leadership Initiative (LALI) in Tonga, various intervention learnings, events and activities will be referred to in elaborating this complexity, including the following: the nature of relationality in Tonga; my own positionality as the senior insider member of the intervention team; issues arising from insider-outsider relationships within the team; and those focused on gaining access to, and nurturing

and protecting the *vā* within, the relational spaces of participant schools/classrooms and school communities.

2.1 *Relationality in Tonga*

Tongans are deeply relational people; their whole identity and being is defined through the collective. Thaman (2008) notes the "importance of *vā* as the basis for Tongan social interaction" and that this "is reflected in the high regard people place on rules governing different kinds of interpersonal relationships and social interaction" (p. 464). She explains that "*vā* is used to denote interpersonal relationships" and that within these relationships there are behavioral expectations and social norms that are expected to be played out (ibid.). Consequently, the maintenance of the *vā* is also contextual, depending on the people involved (individuals, families, social groups) and the place (home, village, formal social event, work-place etc.). Thaman (2008) further highlights the importance of protecting relationships, or *tauhi vaha'a*. For Tongans, it is important to maintain harmony and peace between those connected through relationships, and as such being relational requires knowledge of the social context and the existing networks between individuals and groups. The 'knowledge' that is required to maintain good relationships in the Tongan context is socialized early in young Tongans and embedded in the ethical systems of Tongans.

Gaining access to the LALI schools and seeking the consent of school leaders and teachers to participate in our design-based research intervention, required also an understanding of Tongan ethical systems (Johansson-Fua, 2014). In the Tongan context, the four core values that define ethical systems are *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *feveitokai'aki* (reciprocity), *lototo* (humility) and *mamahi'i me'a* (loyalty). All relationships in Tonga are centered around these four core values. These values are expressed through *anga faka- Tonga* (behavior) and *lea faka- Tonga* (language). When these four core values are examined closely, it is clear that each core value is relational in itself, insofar as it involves a process of learning, gaining and giving. Further to this, the four core values are interconnected in that one cannot be practised without the others. Those in a relationship cannot practise *faka'apa'apa* (respect) without *lototo* (humility). Relationships within organizations, including schools, within communities and amongst *kainga* kinsfolk aspire to demonstrate these core values. Relationships are woven on these core values, *tauhi vaha'a* (maintained) and when broken or strained, relationships are mended and reconnected through the same core values. As such these core values are publicly discussed, expressed and in fact are taught to school children from a very young age. These core values are the values that teachers and school leaders in Tonga are held accountable to

by their communities and their peers (Johansson-Fua, 2008). Understanding these four core values is key to understanding the 'context behind the context' for Tonga.

2.2 *My Positionality*

In establishing any given relationship within the Tongan context, people need to know 'where are you from' in a literal and figurative context. The question of your origin or the place where you stand is linked to your identity and your position in the socio-political context. Your socio-cultural rank and 'where you are from' determines how others respond and relate to you. In a highly ranked society, figuring out where one stands is key to establishing any relationship. The question of 'where are you from' refers to one's connection to the *fonua*—a term that refers to both the land and the people. The land that you are connected to also means that you are connected to the people of that land, either in the present time or through your ancestors from many generations ago.

As a researcher-practitioner who is 'native' (here I use the term native to describe my positionality from a socio-cultural perspective, rather than as a researcher) to this particular context, my own socio-cultural identity was the first positioning of 'where I stand' and my relationship to the *fonua,* being the land and the people. My socio-cultural identity included kinship ties as well as the religious community I am connected to. In this particular case, the *fonua* specifically referred to the island communities of 'Eua and Vava'u and the central district of Tongatapu where the participating schools were located. The second level of my positioning was related to my professional identity—where I work and what my 'status' is within that organization. In a small island community, there is very little separation of professional life from private life—thus one's socio-cultural identity and professional identity are in this context interconnected and interdependent.

Once the socio-cultural and the professional identity of the researcher-practitioner is identified the participating school leaders and teachers allocate a certain positioning to this person. I wish to highlight here that while there is considerable attention in the research literature drawn to defining the positionality (insider/outsider etc.) of a researcher (see for example, Lee, Liu, & Ham, 2017; Milligan, 2016), there is very little consideration of how those researched, the participants, may have defined the researcher.

The socio-cultural rank of the researcher-practitioner, once defined by the school leaders and the teachers, defines the level of interaction in the relationship. Is the researcher-practitioner someone of high status? Does this person have credibility? Can the person be trusted? Who are the people that are associated with this person? Who will benefit? Is this person qualified? Basically,

the key question is 'What *right* does this person have to access our school and our communities?' These are some of the questions that would have been discussed amongst the LALI school leaders and the teachers to determine the eligibility of the researcher-practitioner to gain access. The judgement of the school leaders and the teachers over the position of the researcher-practitioner, to a large extent defined the initial period of developing a relationship.

2.3 *Insider/Outsider Relationships*

But what of the researcher-practitioner who is not native to the context, who is an 'outsider'—how is the outsider guided through the process of gaining access? Again, when using the term 'non-native', I do so from a socio-cultural perspective, as a means to differentiate sub-groups within the researcher-practitioner team working in Tonga who were either Tongans or New Zealanders. In doing so I am mindful of increasing attention to the notions of 'insider' and 'outsider' in recent comparative and international education discourse (see for example, Arthur, 2010) and the call for alternative definitions and reconceptualizing of the classic dichotomy of 'insider' and 'outsider' research-practitioner positions. McNess, Arthur, and Crossley (2015) argue for the need to go beyond traditional boundaries of culture, language, gender, to include epistemological, ontological and disciplinary boundaries. These same writers have further argued for a 'third' liminal space that may have the potential to encourage new meaning and "which is constructed on the boundary between worlds where historical, social, cultural, political, ethical and individual understandings meet" (p. 295).

Others draw focus to the increasing blurring of boundaries between the local and the global (Baily et al., 2015) in an increasingly neoliberal environment and what this means for the shifting positionality of researchers. While I agree that the boundaries between the local and the global are increasingly blurred and merged, particularly in the areas of certain global discourses, I also contend that there is still a need to be specific about positionality with focus on the context (Crossley, 2010). To uncritically accept the increasingly blurred boundaries and the transnational nature of research and 'development', would be a mistake.

In support of McNess, Arthur, and Crossley's (2015) argument for an alternative view of the researcher positionality, Milligan (2016) argues for the notion of the "in-betweener", who has become the "knowledgeable outsider" (p. 249). Through Milligan's (2016) use of participatory methods and support for co-construction of knowledge to shift the power dynamics of data to also include the participants, she has put emphasis on multiple and shifting identities in different contexts. Similar thoughts have been argued by this writer

(Johansson-Fua, 2016) when I proposed the *Motutapu* relational space for Oceanic researchers—a space that reflected the Oceanic philosophy of Epeli Hau'ofa (1993) in his call for a more inclusive approach to a diverse region. Increasingly, there is a growing critique of the traditional 'insider' versus 'outsider' dichotomy for researchers and a search for an alternative and perhaps more authentic recognition of researchers' different positioning.

With regard to the LALI intervention, although access was granted for researcher-practitioners to enter the schools, whatever their positionality, that did not necessarily mean that the task of acceptance and access was completed. Like all relationships in Tonga, there is constant work to *tauhi vaha'a,* maintain the relationships and mend them when required. Gaining access for initial engagements does not necessarily mean that you are accepted into the field for the duration of the program. At various points in LALI, the teachers asked for a particular researcher-practitioner over others and they gave their reasons for the request. At other points, teachers expressed their concerns to particular team members, but not to others. The question of 'to whom access is granted' and the need to interrogate the influence of the researcher identity (Baily et al., 2015, p. 144) was constant throughout LALI. There was a continual process of negotiation and repositioning of the researcher-practitioner that was conditional on a range of events and other people during the course of LALI. This confirms reports of others, that "their positions as insiders were conditional and required continual negotiation" (Lee et al., 2017, p. 130) and demonstrates the dynamic interconnectedness of intervention events and activities, school leaders and teachers, and the researcher-practitioners involved.

While the team of researcher-practitioners involved in the LALI included some who met the traditional definition of either insider or outsider, it also included those who are outsiders but also insiders, and those who are insiders but also outsiders; they have learned to operate effectively at all the levels identified in this case study, and across the diversity of the Oceania region. Therefore, I would go beyond Milligan's definition of the 'knowledgeable outsider' to highlight those who are 'knowledgeable insiders'. They have recaptured Hau'ofa's Oceanic world and can move confidently between one Pacific country and another, build relationships at ministerial level as well as at school and community level, and importantly, because of their in-depth understanding of 'education for development' discourse, they are heard by and can influence development partners. They often speak multiple languages, have been educated inside and outside of the region, have conducted research in a range of countries and have expansive relationships across the region. These are the Oceanic researcher-practitioners who operate in a space that is inclusive, expansive and innovative. With regard to the increasing recognition given by

comparative and international development theorists in education and other areas, they are the researchers best able to facilitate both south-south and north-south dialogue. They are the 'scrutinizers' as defined by Sanga (2005): Pacific and non-Pacific people who "as a group understand both worlds; the metropolitan and the Pacific; the city and the village. They appreciate the tensions, complexities, and dilemmas of both worlds. As leaders, they see the need for change and aspire to develop a vision for the change" (p. 16).

2.4 *Accessing Schools and Classrooms: A Strengths-Based Relational Approach*

During initial visits to each of the participant schools, I took the time to introduce myself and explained the purpose and scope of the intervention program. I thought it was important to link the program to the wider national education agenda and how it contributed towards the Ministry of Education's mission. There were two key messages that were shared during this first visit. First, was to establish that the LALI was developed upon the invitation of the Ministry and that it was to support the Ministry's overall agenda for improving literacy in schools. A key focus of these conversations was to demonstrate that the program, although it may seem new, was to build on the existing work of the schools—that unlike many aid-funded interventions its adoption of a design-based research approach meant it was not aimed at replicating education programs from another country (see Chapter 4). It was very important from the start to clarify that LALI was to strengthen existing structures such as the national curriculum, weekly professional development sessions, and the overall mission of the Ministry. Although this may seem like common sense, this strengths-based approach and the commitment to working from existing structures went a long way towards building a sense of ownership and contributing to the sustainability of literacy improvement in the participant schools and across the education system.

The second key message was to establish a relationship between the schools and the researcher-practitioner team. Building relationships that are based on trust and respect supports the collection of more authentic data (Milligan, 2016; Johansson-Fua, 2009, 2014). One of the key strategies of the LALI program was the use of data to inform practice and intervention. A few months after the first data collection of teacher practice and student performance, we called the schools together in their clusters to collectively analyze the data. In one particular cluster, there was some resistance to accepting that the data could be a reflection of their practices. This was especially so for the school principal and teachers of one school that claimed a 'good' reputation and were very proud of the fact that they had a relatively high number of students who passed the

secondary school entrance exam. The resistance from this particular school to accepting the evidence that many of its students were not well served by the school's structures and processes went on for quite some time; while they continued to be part of LALI, they made it clear that they did not need the 'help' on offer. However, about midway through the initiative, this same school was the first to invite intervention team members to several of their classrooms to demonstrate a specific teaching approach they had learned from cluster workshops. This shift in attitude came about, after much thought and effort going into developing a meaningful relationship with the school. Another key factor contributing to the shift in attitude arose from the strengths-based approach underpinning the intervention; the team members ensured that the existing strengths and good practices of that school were identified and given due recognition during workshops and other meetings. Subsequently, the same school took on several suggested strategies from the intervention team and with their own modifications ran the program in their school.

For the school to have moved from a resistance stance to one of acceptance and innovative adaptation of new strategies, speaks to the learning that took place for both the school and the intervention team, the researcher-practitioners. The teachers and school principal learned to trust the team, to accept that they were in a safe place for their learning and trialing of new ways of teaching literacy. An example of this was demonstrating to the intervention team members their application of a school wide approach to writing stories, an initiative that went beyond the expectation of the program. And, importantly, once teachers and the school principal began to see improvements in the data on their students' literacy outcomes, this school completely turned their school vision from targeting only the top students to focusing on shifting all students' learning with a particular focus on 'at risk' students (Auckland Uniservices Ltd [AUL], 2016).

The researcher-practitioners' understanding of the nature of relationality in this context encouraged them to practise appropriate *tauhi vā* in giving the required time to building a positive relationship with the staff of the school. The school was not rushed into adopting new ways; rather the researcher-practitioners took time to understand the school context and identify existing strengths through profiling activities and the sense making sessions. As part of appropriate *tauhi vā*, the intervention team held back until they were invited to the classrooms by the teachers. The example from this one school demonstrated what we hoped would occur when relationships are authentic and collaborations are worthwhile. It is through such examples that we can appreciate the time dedicated to building and nurturing relationships on the basis of deep understanding of the context.

2.5 *Community Access: Talanga Laukonga*

One of the key challenges of the insider/outsider relationship was when we worked towards a common school leadership development framework. Given there were multiple countries involved in the overall intervention program, there were debates on whether we design a school leadership framework that was regional in nature or one specific to each country context. Each of the key researcher-practitioners came to the intervention with pre-determined preferences for a school leadership framework, based on experience and knowledge from their own contexts. However, in each of the intervention sites involved there were already existing school leadership frameworks which reflected thinking about school leadership development for each context. In essence, we had access to multiple school leadership frameworks to choose from and use. The debate and negotiations within the team revealed the cultural differences and the power dynamics within a team that consisted of both insider and outsider. Because the outsider researcher-practitioners were also residents of New Zealand, the country that provided the funding for the intervention, it was easy for the insider team to associate them with the donor. As such the power dynamics within the team, despite the best of intentions, became clouded by the 'association' and seen as reflective of the unequal power relationships often perceived in aid-funded programs. Moreover, the conversations and debates over the preferred school leadership framework had also challenged some of the relationships within the insider team, revealing our assumptions, weaknesses and strengths.

What is reported above is by no means an unusual interaction found amongst a diverse group of researcher-practitioners, particularly those working in an 'education for development' context. The work of Anderson-Levitt (2012) focuses on the global/local nexus and asks how power influences "the diffusion of ideas around the world and contests over their reinterpretation in local settings?...whether in their interest or not...nations and international organizations actually do exercise power both overtly and in hidden, subtler way" (p. 448). Further to this, Baily et al. (2015) pose questions that are relevant to this discussion on the tensions that are present in various interactions amongst comparative education researchers. They ask, "What role does indigenous knowledge play in the research process? Who defines what is indigenous?" (p. 148). Baily et al. further stated that "the lines between the powerful and the powerless are relational, shifting depending on who is in relation with the other" (ibid.). With each stage of school visits, however, the insider researcher-practitioners grew to appreciate the new knowledge and skills that were shared by the outsider researcher-practitioners. With each boat ride and delayed flight, the outsider researcher-practitioners grew to appreciate

the complexity of the context and value the knowledge and guidance of the insider researcher-practitioners.

The turning point in this relationship for the insider team, was the opportunity to visit schools and to share ideas with communities through *Talanga Laukonga* (talking about literacy). It was not until the later part of the program that we interacted with the school community. In this particular context, the primary schools are located in a village with the community being responsible for general maintenance of the school property and fund raising to meet other costs of running the school. As part of the program design, the involvement of the community came about as a result of the schools' desire to see greater support from parents towards the children's learning. While most of the schools enjoyed the financial support from the surrounding villages, the teachers and the school principals recognized that parents could do more in terms of supporting their children's learning.

The *Talanga Laukonga* initiative was introduced as a platform—modeled on the traditional *fono,* a community gathering where ideas are discussed—for the researcher-practitioners, the school principals, the parents and the community to share ideas about supporting literacy at home. To access the community and use the *fono,* the school principal was the primary guide for the team to gain access. At the first meetings of the *Talanga Laukonga,* it was evident when the school principal enjoyed a strong relationship with the community; it was a full house. In earlier sections of this chapter, I made reference to four core Tongan values and that most leaders are held accountable to these core values. This is particularly the case for small village communities where private and professional lives are seen as one and the same. The participant schools on Tongatapu had school leaders who were often from another town or village and did not necessarily have kinship ties to the communities. In such cases, the school principal had to work harder to gain the support of the community.

A highlight of the visit was when one of the outsider researcher-practitioners actively participated in a *Talanga Laukonga.* Although the *Talanga Laukonga* was in the local language, through translation she was able to share knowledge and experiences with the community. It was an opportunity for the team to re-evaluate the guiding school leadership framework and to observe another dimension to the role of a school leader in a village context. In this instance and many other instances, the team "became present to each other", in ways highlighted by Todd (2011) who drew attention to the "meeting point of different ways of life, when researchers become present to each other. A space of relationality where we become present to each other. A space of transformation that raises ethical issues of facing otherness and political openness for

new beginnings" (cited in Allen et al., 2013, p. 125). As indicated earlier, it is through the long hours of being together that we get to know each other and discover our complementary strengths and our compensatory weaknesses. It was through travelling together—by road, plane and water—and, notably, the sharing of food that we grew to know each other as 'who' rather than 'what' we are. As summarized by Allen et al. (2013):

> The idea of "becoming present" to each other is not something we can know in advance. We cannot know beforehand "who" we are, as our "who" is not an essence. "Who" we are, is created in a relational process with the other through our talking and intra-acting with them. Put another way, our differences are not essences born of identity, but created in moments of relation with others. (p. 125)

Through the *Talanga Laukonga*, the interconnectedness by way of dialogue about literacy, between school leader, teachers, parents and the intervention team members (both insider and outsider) was made obvious and strengthened. What we learned is that the *Talanga Laukonga* encouraged a stronger relationship between school leaders and the parents, a key point that was absent from the educational leadership framework that we had debated early in the program, and one borne out by findings of the intervention's final impact evaluation which demonstrated a significant shift in school leaders' connectedness to their communities (AUL, 2018).

3 Concluding Comments

The concern with understanding the 'context behind the context' is more than a concern with improving aid effectiveness. For me it is related to issues of epistemology, specifically those concerned with the nature of knowledge and knowledge production. The search for authentic knowledge that can be transformational for both the so-called beneficiaries of aid interventions, in this case the participant school communities, and the researcher-practitioners charged with delivery, requires a re-articulation of the methodology adopted, with particular attention to matters of power relations, ethics and processes for gaining access.

It is in this concern with re-articulation of a research methodology that we draw attention to relationality as a space for deeper engagement with, and learning *from*, the context. Through LALI, we have attempted to un-learn assumptions about the transfer of models from one context to another, to

problematize the notion that because it works in New Zealand it should work in Tonga or in Solomon Islands. Through a willingness to be engaged in a relational space, the outsider and the insider became 'present to one another'. Through the act of tauhi *vā*, practising relationality and demonstrating respect for the people and the land, outsiders also became part of the context. What was learned through the LALI was transformational for the schools—for students, teachers, principals and parents; for the staff of the national ministry of education; and, importantly, for the research-practice team. Collectively, they formed new understandings and knowledge of improving literacy learning within the schools of a particular context. The new understandings and new knowledge enabled transformation because the relational space was authentic.

The learnings from the LALI drew on a range of knowledge sources such as local school knowledge, organizational knowledge, and the educational knowledge of the research-practitioners within the intervention team. However, in my view as a researcher-practitioner, the key learning from the LALI was that it is *within* the context that solutions can be found, that in order for longstanding problems identified within the comparative education and international development literatures to be addressed, 'education for development' must be contextualized. For this to happen effectively in the small 'developing' states of Oceania, it is maintained here that the utilization of indigenous knowledge systems is essential. Although the potential role of traditional knowledge in research and development work is still relatively unexplored, I consider that the LALI intervention team's attention to key concepts from the Tongan knowledge system both held the team together and ensured meaningful relationships with the schools and the communities, and, consequently, reaped the transformation and learning that took place in the schools.

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