

# **OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND? BRINGING INDIGENOUS PARENT-BOARDING SCHOOL COMMUNICATION TO LIGHT**

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## **Abstract**

Despite numerous reviews, strategies and programs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students still have lower academic achievement levels than non-Indigenous Australian students (as measured by NAPLAN). Educational research suggests that parental involvement in their children's education significantly contributes to improved academic, social, personal and professional outcomes for students, parents, and educators alike. However, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote and very remote communities are educated at boarding schools or colleges in larger cities or regional areas, with a recent push to expand this. The limited ability for parental involvement for such students has largely been ignored, yet requires detailed consideration. The purpose of this paper is to highlight this need by defining and exploring the barriers to, and potential improvements for, parental involvement and the role of parent- school communication in educational outcomes. The paper is written as part of a PhD research project that considers the importance of cultural and educational contexts in parental involvement and communication, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

## **Background**

An abundance of literature demonstrates the complex realities of education in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts within Australia. A persistent gap exists in educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian students, demonstrated in the 2011 Census, with less than 30% of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders completing school to year 12, as opposed to more than 70% of non-Indigenous Australian students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The difference between outcomes for very remote students and others is even greater (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013). In recent years the focus in Indigenous education has started to shift from a deficit-based model to recognising the strengths and abilities of Indigenous students, and examining educational systems and their role in this gap, rather than blaming the students or their circumstances. Schools that can approach Indigenous students with responsive and positive environments for their learning and educational progress have the potential to contribute to a positive change (Godfrey,

Partington, Richer, & Harslett, 2001; Nelson & Hay, 2010). The premise of non-deficit based programs is that when provided with resources, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve at levels comparable to students who already have access to these resources. Resources may be financial (e.g. scholarships), physical (e.g. sporting academies, laptops) and human (e.g. tutors, mentors and role models) (Maughan, 2010). Alongside this shift has been an increase in funding and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attend boarding schools in urban areas so they can 'access high-quality education in culturally inclusive environments, giving them the tools and confidence to take full advantage of the opportunities before them' (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2014). In addition to the small percentage of students receiving such scholarships, many other Indigenous students across Australia are attending boarding schools or residences away from their home community to access or complete high school. Examples of boarding facilities include residential colleges, family group homes, and youth hostels.

The dispersed nature of the Australian population renders boarding necessary for many remote families, where typical school options are not available. Of the Australian Indigenous population, standing at over 548,400 in 2011 (approximately 3% of the total population), 24% of people live in remote or very remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Schools in remote Australia face multiple challenges associated with distance including access to high speed internet, availability of infrastructure, and quality teachers and school leaders who will commit to the long term (O'Keefe, Olney, & Angus, 2012; What Works, 2011). In light of the challenges in remote education contexts, many parents choose to send their children to major cities or urban centres to board, with some advocates suggesting that they *should* go away (ABC, 2013; Pearson, 2013). The recent 'Indigenous Education Review' in the Northern Territory (Wilson, 2014) details recommendations for increased numbers of boarding facilities across the Territory, yet little is known about the long-term effects and outcomes of boarding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities. Boarding facilities can provide a more stable and consistent environment for their children, with better access to educational opportunities that are not hindered by the constraints of remoteness. However, the boarding context presents complex factors that work against family involvement and communication with the school. This is concerning, as the literature on Indigenous Education clearly demonstrates that it is vitally important to bridge the gap between boarding facilities and family. In order to do so, perspectives must be gained from all involved in and affected by boarding, including parents, teachers, boarding staff, and of course, students. Parent perspectives are particularly important considering the literature on parental communication with schools.

Parental involvement in their children's education has been internationally shown to contribute to improved outcomes for students, teachers, and parents alike (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). However, few studies have examined parental involvement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (some notable exceptions include Chenhall, Holmes, Lea, Senior, & Wegner, 2011; Lea, Thompson, McRae-Williams, & Wegner, 2011). Through analysis of the literature, this paper will define and explore the manifestations of parental communication and involvement in their children's education. Although studies vary in these definitions, commonalities exist and will be summarised. Barriers to parental involvement exist in almost all school communities, and these have also been identified and discussed in the literature. The potential implications for, and the similarities or differences amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations will be explored. Furthermore, this paper aims to highlight the compounded complexity of the boarding situation, in which large distances may separate children and their schools from parents for long periods of time. The questions raised will inform the direction and data collection of the doctoral research being conducted by Tessa Benveniste.

## Parental communication with schools

### Benefits of parental communication

A large body of literature has developed over several decades that identifies and acknowledges the

influence of the link between home and school. Extensive evidence reported in reviews and meta-analyses of the international literature reports the effectiveness of parental involvement in facilitating children's academic achievement (Cox, 2005; Froiland & Davison, 2014; Jeynes, 2012). Benefits have not only been demonstrated for children, but also for parents, teachers, and overall school management (Christianakis, 2011; Rege & Almeida, 2013). For children, involvement of their parents is reported to lead to improvements in attitudes, mental health, behaviour and attendance at school (Christenson, 2003; Hornby & Witte, 2010). Furthermore, higher test scores, student learning and achievement, positive social and emotional behaviours, motivation, aspirations, social competence and peer relationships have also been linked to increased parent involvement for children (Christianakis, 2011; Rege & Almeida, 2013). These findings are consistent with Vygotsky's argument that learning does not occur in isolation within an individual but takes place in socially mediated contexts (McCormick & Ozuna, 2012; Vygotsky, Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978). Bronfenbrenner and Morris further argue through their bio-ecological model of human development that the family system and the relationship between the family and school also provide important developmental contexts for youth (Froiland & Davison, 2014). For parents, the benefits from involvement in their children's education include increased confidence and satisfaction in their parenting, and increased interest in their own education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby & Witte, 2010). Benefits to families overall include better connection between parents, children and communities, and an increase in support and services to families (Rege & Almeida, 2013). For teachers and schools, improved parent-teacher relationships, higher ratings of teachers by parents, teacher morale, better school reputations within the community, better performance of school programs, and an improved overall school climate have all been reported as a result of effective parental involvement (Hornby & Witte, 2010; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Rege & Almeida, 2013). Programs that engage parents and families in supporting learning at home are also linked to higher student achievement (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Thus, as would be expected, the better the engagement between the parents, families and schools, the greater the positive impacts for all involved.

### The cultural context

The positive outcomes outlined above have been documented in families across diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, demonstrating the universal importance of parent and familial involvement in a child's learning. A New Zealand study by Mutch and Collins (2012) identifies an important consideration in discussions of 'parental involvement' in modern society, which contains a range of family configurations; noting that family members beyond a child's parents often have a role as a child's caregiver. This is particularly relevant in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, where a child may have a number of familial or community caregivers. Grandparents, aunties, uncles, sisters, brothers and other members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship systems can all be vitally important to a child's upbringing and community life. Therefore, it is acknowledged that despite the consistent focus on 'parents' in the literature, focusing solely on a child's biological parents is not always appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Both in Australia and internationally, the literature indicates that schools that employ models of shared governance between the school (principals, teachers, students), the community (parents, Elders, wider community), and others (education department personnel and researchers) result in improved outcomes for Indigenous students (Maughan 2010). In light of the complexities of Indigenous education in Australia, and the strong focus on 'improvement', researchers, educators and governments alike should take into consideration the strong evidence that the involvement of parents, families and communities in schools is important. However, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders, being schooled in major cities or regional centres can mean isolation from family structures, a fundamental part of Indigenous life. These extended networks, if severed or weakened, may leave students no family support system (Sonn, Bishop, & Humphries, 2000). When Indigenous children are so far away from home and separated from direct cultural influences and education, it is left to the boarding environment and school to facilitate the maintenance of a connection to this aspect of their Aboriginality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and cultures are taught in schools across Australia as part of the curriculum of each state and territory. However, a large amount of variation exists between states, territories and schools in how

strongly cultural identity is embedded throughout the school and curriculum. When people are striving to maintain and transmit to future generations their cultures and languages in a modern, global world, the less economically relevant those cultures and languages are to the imperatives of the modern, global world, the more serious the effort needs to be made to communicate the importance of such cultures and languages (Noel Pearson, 2009). It is therefore pertinent that the ability of boarding schools to transmit such knowledge needs to be assessed, and that the involvement of parents and communities in this cultural education and connection must be optimised.

### What is parental communication/ involvement?

Before discussing in finer detail the implications of parental involvement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents of boarders, it is necessary to first define it. In addition to cultural nuances, parental or family communication and involvement is an ambiguous concept, which has many possible manifestations. School communication with families usually comes in written (memos, lists, forms, permission notes, report cards, school calendars, notices of special events) or oral (parent-teacher conferences, open days) form. Through such communication channels, teachers and families tend to exchange information and ideas about a child's development or progress both at school and at home (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). In addition to formal communications, informal contact and communication also provides teachers and parents opportunities to gain insight into the other's perspective. These informal communications can occur as casual conversations before or after school, meetings after school, emails, or telephone calls. Such informal communications imply the ongoing and easy presence of parents in the school, which does not occur in the boarding model. They are less likely to be spontaneous, and often have an ulterior motive behind them, occurring due to a problem or incident. Boarding also presents a unique situation in which parents have two sets of carers (teachers and boarding staff) to communicate with. Not only do parents need to be informed of their child's academic life, but also their home life in the boarding residence. Some studies have begun to discuss forms of communication between families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders and schools, (Perso, 2012; Perso, Kenyon, & Darrough, 2012), however a more focused and extensive discussion needs to be developed, incorporating perspectives from parents, families, schools and communities. Invitations from schools for parent participation and communication can both be presented explicitly, with open school nights and parent-teacher conferences, as well as implicitly, through written communication being presented in accessible language to the parents, providing welcoming greetings when parents drop their children off, and otherwise creating a comfortable environment for parents and family members (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Implicit invitations from boarding residences should also be investigated, such as allowing family members to feel comfortable visiting the boarding house if they wish, and potentially providing consistent staff at the boarding house, so there is always a familiar face for parents to recognise on such visits. However, parent and boarding staff views and definitions of what they believe the best forms of communication and involvement in the boarding house are currently missing but needed in this discussion.

McKenna and Millen (2013) define parent or caregiver engagement as encapsulating both 'parent voice' and 'parent presence'. Their term 'parent voice' implies that parents naturally both have ideas and opinions about their children, but that educators must be receptive to this voice for an open, multidirectional flow of communication to occur (McKenna & Millen, 2013). Defined in McKenna and Millen's study as 'the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their thoughts and understandings of their child's experiences in and out of school', it is believed that parent voice must hold weight within educational settings in order to be able to positively influence their child's educational experience. A large scale review of research into Indigenous education by ACER further emphasises the importance of finding a means to include Indigenous voice and conversation into the wider educational policy and research literature (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). If these voices are purely heard and not listened to, we are at serious risk of perpetuating attitudes from the past that disempower Indigenous Australian families (Hayes, Johnston, Morris, Power, & Roberts, 2009; T. Lea, A. Wegner, E. McRae-Williams, R. Chenhall, & C. Holmes, 2011). 'Parent Presence' refers to the actions that are associated with the voices of the caregivers, and unfortunately can be misconstrued or misjudged by

teachers and other school personnel. Assumptions derived from perceptions of parental involvement can be quite harmful when put into the context of low-income or minority parents, as in many cases, these children have fewer opportunities to prove such assumptions wrong (McKenna & Millen, 2013). Parent presence can be complicated for Indigenous families, as the idea of the school as a 'community' is difficult to convey when Aboriginal parents are only invited into discussion to support and become involved in schools that run based on existing structures, and based upon decisions they were not involved in making, in largely assimilationist environments (Hayes et al., 2009). Furthermore, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, given the historical legacy of the stolen generations and racial discrimination in school, may not trust schools or school systems entirely. It is thus imperative that in understanding parent presence and involvement, schools must employ an expansive appreciation of the nuances that varied cultural, economic and geographic circumstances present (Jeynes, 2012).

Other studies discuss parent-school interactions or parent presence as 'parent involvement'. Certain parental behaviours and types of involvement have varied levels of importance at different times across a child's education. Parental involvement with a younger child is more likely to involve home literacy and cognitive stimulation such as reading with a child, counting objects, or playing with puzzles, and has shown positive effects on children's development (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). For most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families from remote and very remote communities, the opportunity for parental involvement is much greater in these younger years, where access to primary schooling is more widespread and delivered locally. With an older child approaching middle and high school, certain types of parental involvement, such as checking on grades, helping with or checking on homework have been shown to have a negative rather than positive impact on some adolescents, who are more likely to find this involvement overbearing. Whilst traditional parental involvement activities include helping with homework, attending school events, responding to notes or queries from teachers, or committee membership, it is important to acknowledge unconventional, less visible and more personal spaces of parental involvement in school life. This can include finding ways of engagement despite language barriers, cooking food or volunteering behind the scenes at school events, or simply negotiating safe living and transportation options related to schooling (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; McKenna & Millen, 2013). Additionally, Lea and colleagues (2011) found that some of their participants (Aboriginal parents) believed that getting the child up and ready for school was sufficient involvement, and that they were satisfied to only engage in contacting the teacher to discuss concerns about student achievement or behaviour. The sheer act of enrolling their child in a boarding program may be the clearest indicator of an Aboriginal parent's involvement in their education. Parental involvement with children who are boarding is less likely to be obvious and visible to boarding and teaching staff. Inability to see their children on a daily basis restricts the ability of a parent to perform some of the more 'traditional' tasks of involvement, however there are likely to be many other ways that these parents find to keep connected to their children and their schooling. Some parents may find this more difficult than others, or be unaware of the need for them to remain closely involved, yet as discussed, this is yet to be made clear through empirical research.

Christianakis (2011) investigated teacher's perceptions of parental involvement at an inner city school in Northern California with a culturally diverse population. She found that teachers believed various types of help to represent parent involvement at school, identifying particular 'helpful' parents (who were able to act as pseudo-teaching assistants during school hours) as more involved; those who were unable to help carry out tasks in the classroom were not described as helpful. In fact, negative assumptions were placed upon such parents. This is unfortunately evident to be common in other studies and schools (Bloom, 2001). Of course, parents who are able to help out during class hours or even have a stronger presence outside school hours at functions are parents who have the capacity to be available, generous and flexible with their time. In today's society, this does not describe the majority of parents, especially from lower-income households; therefore teachers may be imparting unreasonable expectations upon parents with limited access to financial and familial resources that facilitate involvement (Christianakis, 2011). Furthermore, cultural and personal nuances may influence a parent's perception of what their level of involvement should be. Teacher perceptions are

particularly important to note in the boarding context, due to potentially less understanding of the time and financial cost to parents of travelling to the child's school. The less a parent may be available to attend school events, the less likely the teacher will have the opportunity to create stronger connections and understandings of a family's situation.

### What are the barriers to communication/ involvement for boarding schools?

Despite the overwhelming evidence that parental involvement at home and school benefits students, parents, and schools alike, actively involving parents, particularly in lower-income communities, has been one of schools' greatest challenges (Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Teachers and administrators, with increasingly diverse student and family populations, find building partnerships with families to be an important issue (Lim, 2012). Although lower-income and cultural minority families are frequently mentioned in the literature as being more difficult to engage with, research and discussions have moved beyond the 'blame game' which often claimed that these families care little or less about their children's formal education than majority or higher income families (Christianakis, 2011). Authors such as Biddle (2001) and Yosso (2005) have challenged such deficit approaches by illustrating the Eurocentric cultural interpretations of families that have dominated the literature on parental involvement. Recent, more culturally relevant discussions propose more focus on how and why minority or lower income parents may come to feel isolated, ignored or unwelcome in the school environment (Lawson, 2003). Such discussions refrain from making white middle class families the standard of comparison; such a comparison, in effect, perpetuates tacit structural classism and racism through ignorance of cultural and ethnic diversity (Christianakis, 2011). Despite this acknowledgement in the literature, many home-school engagement practices can often seem predicated on the notion that parents do not naturally operate in ways that are caring and involved with their children. Perpetuation of common assumptions that educators must 'teach' parents how to be involved and 'train' them in ways to care for their children is not only insensitive and insulting, but does not acknowledge the realities of different parenting styles. Ultimately, this approach is completely unproductive to the development of successful models of engagement (McKenna & Millen, 2013). One study in particular found that teacher's assumptions can extend beyond what parental involvement should look like, to why parental involvement appears inhibited in remote Aboriginal communities. This study, by Lea, Wegner, McRae-Williams, Chenhall & Holmes (2011), found that in one instance, a teacher had assumed the school fence to be intimidating and a deterrent for Indigenous parents to visit the school, whereas the parents emphasised the benefits of the fence in its added security. This further highlights the need for comprehensive and localised understanding of the needs and perceptions of families and school personnel.

Furthermore, McKenna and Millen (2013) performed a qualitative study that found that educators often lose opportunities that would allow them to more fully understand and relate to students, particularly when perceptions of parental involvement are based on assumptions or inaccurate representations that do not acknowledge the nuances of varied cultural, economic or geographic circumstances. This is an important point to acknowledge in the context of boarding, as parents and students are likely to be from towns, communities, or remote properties that are large distances from the boarding residence. This makes it particularly hard for staff to truly understand the context of the child's home environment, or the constraints that may be placed upon parents in being involved in the child's school or boarding life. Inaccurate assumptions or representations of any family, whether they are lower income, minority, or boarding families, can consequently mean they are assumed to have the same resources and life experiences as white, middle class, local families. Educators and researchers alike must move beyond stating that parents from economically disadvantaged or ethnic minority groups are the least likely to become involved in school activities, into more useful and productive discussions of what their limitations may be, and how schools can reduce or acknowledge the effects of such limitations. This can and must be applied to parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island boarders as well, despite the complexities of distance.

Williams and Sanchez (2013) have begun this process, and identified five key factors that may be

attributed to lower parental or familial engagement with schools; limited knowledge and resources, time poverty, lack of access, lack of financial resources, and lack of awareness. In addition, studies have found that despite many schools attempting to establish practices that facilitate effective two-way communication, it is actually more likely that the school largely dominates the flow and content of information to families (Epstein et al., 2002; Symeou et al., 2012). Goldkind and Farmer (2013) also identify that the structure and quality of the school environment is believed to play an important role in facilitating opportunities for parental involvement, with large, impersonal schools believed to present many barriers to involvement. The physical structure of the school may not be as much as a deterrent for Aboriginal parents as some propose, with Lea and colleagues (2011) finding their informants (Indigenous parents) to not be intimidated at all by this. This should be explored further in the boarding context, however, as boarding parents may have limited opportunities to become familiar with the boarding environment and this may yield different perspectives.

### How can parental communication/ involvement be improved in the boarding context?

Successful partnerships between parents and teachers require the development of common understandings and expectations of the benefits as well as challenges of parental engagement. Mutch and Collins (2012) isolated six factors in particular that are crucial to effective engagement; leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks and communication. These six factors should be analysed in the context of boarding, in order to establish whether they are all as relevant, as well as to identify any further factors that apply solely to boarding. Those believed to be particularly relevant in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are community networks and communication. Perso (2012) highlights that good communication between schools and Indigenous communities is key to cultural responsiveness throughout the whole school environment. One suggestion for including Indigenous communities include potentially establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee or council to assist in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within the curriculum and school programs (Perso, 2012). Despite most State and Territory education departments recognising the importance of parental involvement and community engagement as strategies for improving Indigenous education, the precise means by which this should take place are rarely articulated. Beyond department funding for non-curricular personnel, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education workers, strategies for engaging with parents and communities are left to the individual school (Lea, Wegner, McRae-Williams, Chenhall, & Holmes, 2011). Some suggestions for this include the setting up of relaxed parent areas in schools to enable discussion and informal meetings of parents, teachers and administration staff (such as barbeques with guest speakers) (Appleyard, 2002).

Effective communication was also identified by Williams and Sanchez (2013) to be crucial in facilitating parental involvement, with open door policies at schools, parents informing schools of changes to home life, and parents and teachers sharing mobile phone numbers or email addresses suggested as ways to expand communication channels. As Osborne (2014) discusses, however, listening, hearing and understanding in the complex environment of remote Aboriginal communities takes more than a single visit or conversation, thus this needs to be recognised and appropriately acted upon. Perso, Kenyon, and Darrough (2012) found that one staff member was particularly effective in their communication with families, phoning them frequently, concerning both positive and negative behaviours, or to simply update them. This staff member also took the opportunity to visit families of boarders whenever possible, showing genuine interest in her students and their lives outside school, while valuing the input of their families.

Goldkind and Farmer (2013) found that smaller schools are more effective in providing opportunities for parental participation than larger schools, however it is often the case that boarding residences are part of the latter, therefore this is a potential barrier to parental communication and involvement with boarding schools. Low-cost interventions such as Bennet-Conroy's (2012) study to engage parents in parent-teacher communication have demonstrated that parent involvement can be improved and is feasible in some cases with simple homework tasks that require parental interaction, as well as with

teacher outreach to initiate communication with parents. While this may be effective in regular schools, the boarding situation once again is in need of a different solution. An interesting aspect of boarding houses is that students often receive homework help from tutors or boarding house staff. The relationship between the students and such staff is not that of a parent and a child, however it may be possible that this assistance is contributing to improved academic outcomes at a higher level than what could be achieved with parental homework help. Further research into staff and student relationships and the potential benefits/ downfalls is also required in the boarding school space.

Parent partnership and parent empowerment models also aim to improve parental involvement in schooling. Parent or family empowerment models may be particularly useful in improving communication and trust between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families of boarders, as they seek to neutralise the power imbalance that is generally in favour of schools, whilst anticipating misunderstandings and building on children's home cultures, giving families the ability to contribute to and participate in school decision making. Partnership models generally recommend that schools shape and influence home practices and rely heavily on collaboration between parents and teachers, therefore are less likely to be as effective in the boarding environment, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Empowerment models, however, ask that parents not only collaborate to meet school requirements, but also define their community needs by assisting to shape school practices, policies and pedagogies. Thus, empowerment models move beyond partnerships that simply accomplish school goals by supporting parents to influence policies, practices and power structures (Christianakis, 2011). However, parent enactment is not without complications, and requires a high degree of social interaction and networking, often necessitating onsite community liaisons to assist parents in advocating for their children (Christianakis, 2011). Such models also require parents to use their time and social capital to negotiate school spaces such as conferences, events and meetings (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004).

## Discussion

It is evident in the educational and psychological literature that parents and family play a significant role in children's academic potential. Parental communication and involvement in school has been shown to improve outcomes for children, parents and schools alike, across culturally and economically diverse backgrounds. Studies have examined parental communication and involvement in regards to defining and identifying their forms, as well as acknowledging the barriers that can prevent parents from optimal involvement and communication with schools. This has led to identification of strategies to break down such barriers and strategies, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for all involved. Whilst continuing these discussions is vital in improving educational outcomes and wellbeing for parents, children and schools globally, two particular groups have been so far excluded from the research field. Through examination of the literature it has become clear that for parents and families of boarders, parental communication and involvement in schooling will look different to that of local parents. In Australia this is particularly important to acknowledge, due to the geographical distances and high percentage of rural and remote areas, which are often where boarders come from. The mechanisms by which parents and schools communicate in light of this distance should be assessed in order to identify any improvements that must be made. The effects of parents being unable to remain consistently involved with their child's schooling, such as helping with homework, should also be examined, as well as the ways in which boarding houses compensate for this.

Families from cultural minority groups as well as lower socio-economic backgrounds have consistently been identified in the literature as having lower levels of parental involvement and communication. This paper has discussed this in relation to current evidence, and that which is yet to be established. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, a large amount of pressure is placed upon them in contributing to 'closing the gap' and improving 'educational outcomes'. Unfortunately, the sole measure of 'educational outcomes' in Australia is the NAPLAN, which arguably does not accurately reflect upon Indigenous student's achievements. Prominent Aboriginal lawyer and activist,

Noel Pearson, has previously called for Indigenous parents to 'step up their game';

To parents, we can't tell our kids to do well in school and then fail to support them when they get home. You can't just contract out parenting. For our kids to excel, we have to accept our responsibility to help them learn. (Pearson, 2009)

However, more recently, as the chairman of the Cape York Partnership, Pearson has been advocating for improved access, uptake and achievement in education, including the promotion of secondary education through boarding programs. Interestingly, these two concepts are conflicting. While boarding is purported as enabling children to be bi-cultural, improving competency in their own community and in the mainstream world, there is no acknowledgement of parent or family role in this process. Beyond the application for and agreement to send their children to board, what does Pearson, who has specifically addressed the need for parental involvement, suggest this looks like once your child is halfway across the country? How can parents still engage at the level he is implying? Pearson is just one example of many voices that are recommending boarding programs, without engaging in the deeper and more complex discussions required of this educational model.

Of course, the responsibility does not lie completely with the parent. Outlined in the South Australian Government's 'Aboriginal Education Strategy' (2013), recent studies also suggest many teachers want improved pre-service education and professional development to assist their work with Aboriginal students and families. High expectations for Aboriginal students must be accompanied by specific knowledge and skills that inform classroom practice. A lack of confidence in mainstream services held by some Aboriginal communities, combined with evidence of systemic racism towards Aboriginal people not only in education, but in welfare, public housing, healthcare and the criminal justice system, turns the spotlight to non-Aboriginal service providers to contribute to closing the gap (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2013). It is vital that all schools and boarding residences build bridges between culture of home, the school or residence, and educational research (Hayes et al., 2009). Unfortunately, dominant cultures in society are widely seen as possessing the most social and cultural capital; therefore purposeful engagement can often have assimilationist undertones. If schools are simply reaching out to or valuing cultural beliefs of families and communities in a tokenistic manner, they are still perpetuating dominant cultural beliefs. Many schools in Australia, New Zealand and the US that have high participation, retention and academic achievements of Indigenous students have embedded cultural identity throughout the school and the curriculum. This whole-school philosophy, embracing Indigenous values and ways of working, should be extended beyond the school into the boarding house, and should have synchronisation between the school and boarding residence. The cultural, social and cognitive resources that Indigenous children naturally possess should not only be recognised but capitalised on (Nelson & Hay, 2010). Traditional educational pathways and trajectories need to be challenged so as to celebrate the cultural wealth of these young people, their families and their communities, in order to avoid isolating or marginalising Indigenous students within education and boarding systems.

Finally, difficulties for parent enactment and participation in school decision making are likely to be exacerbated in boarding environments, where rules, regulations and 'traditions' have formed and often remained largely untouched since the schools' conception. Tradition is a large component of many prestigious boarding schools, many of which are based on the English Public School (boarding) system (White, 2004). Therefore, the ability for any parents at such schools, let alone parents from minority cultures, to engage with school policy and enact change is likely to be limited. Ironically, these are precisely the kinds of policies and practices that have prevented or prohibited disadvantaged students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds accessing and successfully navigating such school environments, thus contributing to intergenerational underachievement. Furthermore, the motivations of such schools for engaging with and providing scholarships to Indigenous Australian students should be explored. While merit should be attributed to boarding schools and scholarship funding organisations for their effort to provide equal opportunity for and access to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their motivations may not be purely altruistic. Boarding schools who provide places to these students also stand to gain financial support and status from 'helping children in need'. Schools should be made accountable to their motivations, as they are likely

to affect their willingness and capacity for reflexive engagement with parents in shaping school policies and practices. Understanding this and engaging schools in genuine conversations and development of practical strategies to overcome such issues is vital, and the parents and families of students absolutely need to be part of such discussions. It would be a worthwhile exercise for boarding schools to consider the practical ways that parent empowerment might be achieved for families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, whether this purely allows schools to gain an understanding of these families' perspectives on expectations of the boarding experience, or leads to effective shared governance in development of policies and practices within the boarding school or residence.

## Conclusion

Given the above discussion highlighting the need for engagement between parents/carers and boarding school staff, it would be helpful for all boarding school stakeholders to understand how the relationships between parents and boarding schools can be strengthened. How can effective communication be fostered when the distances between home communities and schools are great? Should we consider some of the following strategies?

- More effective use of mobile and video technologies to link students, families and teachers;
- Regular visits from teachers/boarding staff to remote communities;
- Regular, planned visits from parents and carers to schools;
- Use of social media to connect schools and families;
- Language or cultural competency training for boarding staff;
- School exchanges to communities where students come from;
- Regional hostels or residences—perhaps as annexes of boarding schools in urban areas.

Each of these strategies contains individual potential benefits and limitations, which, while touched on briefly above, are largely beyond the scope of this review to discuss in detail. More importantly, while we can hypothesise about what *might* work best for remote students, the real challenge lies in understanding what parents and carers want or need and advocating for including them in decisions that affect their children. Once their perspectives are heard and understood, collaboration with school and boarding staff and administration boards can begin to explore and implement such strategies, and better align school practice with students, parents, families and communities needs.

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