

## Reflections on Implementing an Education Support Programme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Secondary School Students in a Non-government Education Sector: What did we Learn and What do we Know?

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*This is a reflective paper grounded in the domain of practice. It presents some of the strategies used to design, implement and establish an education support programme across sixteen (16) non-government residential (or boarding) schools. The aim of the programme was to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary school boarding students from rural, regional and remote areas of Western Australia (WA) with the experience of studying away from home and family. This paper is divided into three main sections: 1. A brief background of education policy and surrounding context. 2. Approaches and strategies undertaken to establish the programme. 3. Reflections on the lessons learned during this process. We identified that no single strategy could avert students from disengaging with education at residential schools. Instead we contend the provision of effective support requires the implementation of multiple strategies targeting the multiple social systems or levels which contribute to a student's overall experience at a residential school (e.g., the student, peer, parent, school, and community levels). We emphasise that it is vital to involve students in the implementation and development of programmes so as to make support relevant to their needs.*

### Acknowledgement of Country

We wish to acknowledge the 'Wadjuk People' who are the traditional custodians of this land that we write these words on. The Wadjuk people are one of fourteen clan groups that make up the collective Nyungar nation of the South West of WA. We also thank and pay our respect to the many families, parents and students from the numerous lands and language groups across WA that we have worked with.

### Education and the surrounding context in Australia

In Australia, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) was launched in 1989 (Commonwealth of Australia) and provides the original framework around which all government funded education support programmes specifically targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are structured. The overarching emphasis of the AEP is to bring about equity in education and training outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through the articulation of 21 national goals endorsed by all state and territory governments. The AEP is legislated in the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000

(Commonwealth of Australia) and is also the foundation upon which the body responsible for coordinating strategic educational policy at a national level, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), developed the Australian Directions in Indigenous Education (ADIE) 2005-2008 policy (MCEETYA) initiated in July 2006.

Unfortunately for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly students located outside of city or regional centres, education in WA is further situated within a broader social context of 'overall-life-disadvantage'. This disadvantage embodies social issues such as poverty, unemployment and welfare dependency, poor health and

housing conditions, a situation which has been perpetuated by many decades of inconsistent public policy by all political persuasions at local, state and federal levels (Beresford & Grey, 2006; Nakata, 2002). Worryingly, reliable information regarding these circumstances has been available for some time. For example, the Gordon Inquiry (GI) published in 2002 indicated that issues of family violence and child abuse in its various forms was prevalent and in some instances reached the proportion of being an epidemic in some Aboriginal communities (Gordon, Hallahan & Henry, 2002). The inquiry linked the endemic nature of these issues to marginalisation, dispossession, loss of land and traditional culture and a history of forced removal of children that has left ongoing and generational trauma within a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Similarly, the Western Australian Child Health Survey (WACHS) identifies the current lack of equitable access to educational opportunities available to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as a foremost factor that preserves the continuation of a disturbing cycle of intra-generational disadvantage that embodies negative social issues such as alcoholism, domestic violence, gambling, substance use and abuse (Zubrick et al., 2005).

Despite the clear outcomes of the GI (2002) and WACHS (2005), a cycle of disadvantage is still experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and is acknowledged to have manifested into a life expectancy difference of 17 years between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and the rest of the Australian population (Rudd, 2008). Education is just one factor in a group of many (e.g., health, housing and employment) that is deeply unsatisfactory in terms of overall national outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (De Bortoli & Cresswell, 2004; Thomson, McKelvie, & Murnane, 2006).

Many education support programmes

intended to offer additional assistance to students (and parents) have been launched over recent decades specifically to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to engage effectively with education (Appleyard, 2002; Beresford, 2001; Beresford & Gray, 2006; Doyle & Hill, 2008; Storry, 2007). However, and for all sincere efforts, many key decisions about the specific intervention or prevention strategies to be used have been made in a 'top-down' direction, rather than in a 'bottom-up' consultative approach involving people at a local level. Historically, and still today, this decision making process has severely disenfranchised many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, as numerous interventions have been endorsed with limited dialogue, consultation and permission sort from representatives of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In addition, persistence with this model of decision making inadvertently increases the risk of a support programme being endorsed that misses the mark or is seen as another government directed (enforced) intervention, rather than being seen as a support programme that shares the same aspirations and goals of parents, families and communities (Beresford, 2001; Reynolds, 2005, Vicary & Bishop, 2005).

Similarly, a number of education support programmes have tended to be based upon the assumption that one size fits all, rather than acknowledging that localised and contextually relevant support programmes tend to better fit and be embraced more quickly (Chaney, 2008). It has been noted that many support programmes have also tended to be controlled from capital cities or regional centres, with key governance decisions being made by an appointed expert or group of experts rather than being locally developed and coordinated (Appleyard, 2002; Beresford & Gray, 2006; Collins, 1999; Sarra, 2007).

When consultation has taken place, both federal and state governments and their respective departments, have tended to do so with a small, highly selective group of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patrons who are assumed to be familiar with, fluent in and fully comprehensive of the context, needs and perspectives, and are expected to speak on behalf of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their respective clan groups. There are an estimated 500 clan groups and 250 languages across Australia, with approximately 35 clans in the Pilbara region of WA alone. In taking this role these patrons have to contend with the significant pressure of trying to guide policymakers and programme designers so that they are inclusive of diversity, while contending with the knowledge that both government and education frameworks still tend to categorise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as one homogenous group 'Indigenous' (Beresford & Grey, 2006; Merlan, 2007).

It is well documented that both government and education frameworks in Australia and WA remain largely modelled on knowledge constructs and institutional structures imported from European and North American tradition (Bourke & Bourke, 2002; Groome, 1998; Johns, 2006; Nakata, 2002; Trudgen, 2000). For example, the educational experience in WA still remains largely founded around a text based knowledge exchange process, which is primarily based upon the learning of a symbol system, in this case a set of 26 letters. Assessment of learning is then largely centred on the reproduction of knowledge using this symbol system via paper and pencil techniques, delivered in a classroom setting by a person (e.g., teacher) who is external to the learner's family unit.

History clearly shows us that past WA education frameworks have purposefully ignored, devalued and excluded traditional knowledge exchange practices such as customary language, dance, painting (Broome, 1994; Collard, 1999), relationship with country (Vicary & Westerman, 2004) song, storytelling, totemic ancestors (Bourke & Bourke, 2002) and cultural protocols such as

ceremony, rites of passage and lore (Mellor, 1998). It is crucial that both educators and designers of education support programmes are conscious of the significant difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples knowledge exchange practices and Western based perspectives of education.

For decades many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, leaders, academics and educational practitioners have repeatedly voiced the challenges created for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students when education frameworks are heavily based upon Western taken-for-granted ideals that are considered as absolutes in service delivery methods (Bin-Sallick, 2003; Nakata, 1997a & 1997b; Pearson, 2004; Sarra, 2005 & 2007; Valadian, 1980). To presume the superiority of Western concepts of education when working within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, lends itself to the provision of an education support programme that is of little relevance to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Nakata, 2002).

Some positive progress has been made as in 2008 there were 151, 669 school students across Australia that identified as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, representing a 42% increase from the 1999 total of 106, 628 (ABS, 2008). A national 117% increase in Year 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments also occurred between 1999 and 2008 from 2,206 to 4779 students. However, although retention rates for both male and female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from Years 7/8 to Year 12 increased between the 1999 to 2008 period, frustratingly a significant difference in retention rate figures persisted when contrasted with their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait peers. For male and female students of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent the retention rate between 1999 and 2008 was 67% and 82% respectively, whereas for male and female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, retention rates during the same time period were 43% and 50% respectively.

With a deeply unsatisfactory and persist gap remaining in retention rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers, it is not the time for education sectors and governments to start patting themselves on the back for a job well done. Instead what is clear is that the task at hand has just began and the challenge for the future is to find ways of creating both a more relevant and positive experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students so as to better support more young people to remain at and be successful at school for longer.

From the above brief overview, it is clear the subject of how best to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from rural, regional and remote regions while at school remains firmly located within a social, economic and political context that is fraught with many competing antecedents (Beresford & Grey, 2006; Dockett et al., 2007; Johns, 2006; Reynolds, 2005). In the following section our personal reflections on some of the salient processes we undertook during the establishment of an education support programme in a non-government education sector are shared and how we attempted to build inclusive practices into an already predetermined and rigid programme funding structure. These reflections are our own as the two principle people who were employed to deliver this programme daily and should not be taken to represent other stakeholder views.

### **Contextualising the education support programme: Background**

The aim of the programme was to offer additional support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from rural, regional and remote regions of WA who were studying away from home at sixteen (16) non-government residential schools across the Perth metropolitan area. At this point it is important to note two significant differences between government and non-government education sectors. *1. Constitutionally government schools remain the responsibility of state and territory governments, while*

*funding distributed to non-government education sectors is the domain of the federal government. 2. Government education sectors are systems, which rely on system policy during the implementation of new support programmes in schools, whereas in the non-government education sector participation with new programmes by schools, students and parents is voluntary.*

In other words, education support programmes provided in the government education sector are implemented under departmental policy or regulation and schools are required to comply with this. In the non-government education sector, education support programmes tend to be provided and regulated by the individual schools and their own governance boards. In some instances, multiple non-government schools will jointly identify a common gap in an education support services they are offering and will collaborate to address this issue. Nonetheless, although a school may advocate for, support and jointly contribute to the establishment of a certain education support programme in collaboration with other schools, the decision to engage and the level of engagement with a programme remains at the discretion of each individual school.

The programme being discussed here originated from the latter pathway and was a collaborative effort involving 16 residential schools. The concept of the programme derived from one residential school wanting to minimise the dissonance that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experienced with the transition from rural, regional and remote remotes areas of WA into the residential (or boarding) school lifestyle. The prevalence of this issue was assessed across other similar residential schools and the non-government education sector identified that 16 schools equally expressed a similar desire to offer better support. Subsequently, an application was submitted on their behalf as a group to the relevant federal government department to establish a shared programme to help assist with this issue. The submission was successful in

acquiring funding to initially pilot the programme in 2004 and was refunded from 2005 to 2008.

The programme involved two fulltime positions being funded, one male and one female employee, who were responsible for every aspect of day to day operations. Each of the 16 schools were allocated and matched according to the gender of the two employees and schools. Hence, the male employee was responsible for providing support to the seven participating male residential schools and the female employee was responsible for supporting the nine participating female residential schools. It was a contractual agreement imposed by the federal department funding the programme that an advisory committee was established to monitor the programme's progress. Committee members constituted representatives from participating schools, two parent representatives who had a child currently enrolled at any of the 16 residential schools, the federal department funding the programme, representatives from tertiary and industry sectors, and a representative of the non-government education sector. A senior education consultant was allocated as a nominal, part-time line manager for the two fulltime employees however, the development of key initiatives was left to be generated and implemented by the two fulltime employees.

At the beginning of 2008 over 120 students across the 16 schools were accessing some aspect of the support offered by this programme. An important adjunct to note at this point is that we also provided support to Year 12 students that had graduated with the transition into post-school destinations. For instance, we would help former students with the preparation and collation of applications for tertiary institutions, as well as with gaining employment (e.g., resume and interview preparation) and also with locating suitable accommodation (e.g., understanding lease agreements).

When funding was reapproved after the initial piloting period in 2004, only a rudimentary programme framework and support service was in place and being offered to students, parents, and schools. It is from this point from which we return to and begin our reflections.

*Mapping the landscape: Implementing a support programme across multiple residential schools*

At the beginning we conducted a basic scoping and profiling exercise to gain a better understanding of student numbers, demographics and geographic location from which students were drawn across the 16 schools. This involved creating a database that identified each student's status as a residential or day student and collating information such as gender, year group, scholarship/bursary or fee paying status, starting year and graduation year, as well as parent/guardian names, siblings in other residential schools, home address details and email accounts.

This process significantly assisted us to become more familiar with the diversity of students and of contexts from which students originated (e.g., location, family, clan and country). This amalgamated information was also useful in other ways as previously unseen trends across the 16 schools became visible. For example, the database anecdotally suggested that those students who started in Year 8 at residential schools had a greater tendency to graduate in Year 12, in comparison to students that entered into the residential school experience in later years (e.g., Years 10 & 11).

An important discovery from this process was we found that a significant number of day students were actually from rural, regional and remote regions of WA but had relocated to stay with relatives, friends or in hostel accommodation in Perth during the academic year. In a number of instances the whole family had relocated and moved to Perth to support their child's educational needs. The decision making process of whether to relocate children during the academic year represented a

significant challenge being confronted by many parents residing in rural, regional and remotes areas of WA and involved considerable disruption to the family unit. It equally illustrated to us the strong commitment and lengths that many parents went to, to exercise their right to be able to choose the educational pathway they wanted for their child.

It was quickly realised the services offered by the programme needed to be inclusive of all students (e.g., both day and residential students) across the 16 residential schools rather than only focusing on supporting the residential students from rural, regional and remote regions. This was a challenge as the programme was initially funded only to support residential students, not day students. To address this we successfully highlighted with the federal department funding the programme that like residential students, many of the day students although not in enrolled as boarding students were also adjusting to a new environment and experience where a temporary new home, city and school are merged together during a school term and they were similarly spending an extended period of time away from their original home, traditional country and family (i.e., both immediate and extended family).

*Supporting individual students across multiple residential schools*

Previous research has highlighted that new residential students face a number of significant challenges while studying and living away from home (Fisher, 1990; Morgan, 1993). Adjustments for many of the residential students included moving away from a context where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children compose the majority of students at a school, into a situation where they were now the minority. There was also a significant reduction of physical contact with family members from daily contact, to a situation where for extended periods of time physical contact was not possible and communication was limited to telephone,

email and other means rather than through face-to-face interactions.

Although previous research has shown that some students adjust quickly and gain a greater appreciation for routine and discipline while living away from home, for other students the residential setting with reduced freedom, specific rules, including new and different value systems, is a difficult adjustment to make (Downs, 2003). To address this issue, we established and undertook regular one-on-one or small-group, face-to-face meetings at each school with students. This involved developing a roster of school visits where regular weekly group meetings across the 16 residential schools were held to listen, to talk and to discuss issues students were contending with while studying away from home. For example, meetings would involve talking about day-to-day factors including completing homework and developing study skills (e.g., goal setting, prioritising tasks and time management) and school activities, while also providing support with living and family issues, peer relationships and during times of homesickness, loneliness and longing for country. During these meetings we positioned ourselves with students as more of an educational mentor looking holistically at the overall educational experience for each student rather than just focusing on sequential educational milestones.

As colleagues we shared a common philosophy towards working with young people which was to first and foremost (before 'all' else) invest time and establish a trusting relationship with students. How the relationship with each student evolved was different depending on individual needs, wants, interests and expectations. To achieve the best relationship possible with each student we worked hard at steadily fostering a positive micro-environment around our meetings by being genuine, non-threatening and non-judgmental. It was essential from our perspective to ensure that each student was recognised and felt valued as an individual. Importantly, we encouraged students to take an

active role in their own education (e.g., particularly in decision making processes) and to identify and develop their own solutions to both perceived and real issues.

Making a positive first connection with students was imperative. On too many occasions we had observed staff members at schools asking students what was wrong with them when they were feeling down but before the student had the opportunity to talk, the teacher would answer the question for them or would quickly lose attention during the response and minimise the significance of the response with a dismissive statement such as 'don't worry mate it will be alright by tomorrow'. So our approach regularly involved reversing roles and encouraging students to be the teacher and ourselves the learner. This meant positioning ourselves at the student level and learning about the deeper meanings attached to situations, feelings, thoughts and issues shared with us by students when they occurred. Good listening skills were imperative to achieve this. Anecdotally we noted this strategy served as a powerful nexus through which to connect with students, as they knew that while away from home there was someone they could share their experiences with on their own terms.

This strategy also facilitated for students to build a feeling of ownership and control over problem solving, decision making process and their own educational pathway. Prior research has demonstrated that collaborative practices encourage a greater connectedness with pro-social activities such as engaging with school and have been found to act as a protective-factor against the development of risk taking behaviour in young people such as substance abuse and drug use (Benson et al., 1999; Jessor, 1993; Pittman et al., 2001; Resnick et al., 1997). By establishing a strong relationship based approach at the onset of supporting students, we found it much easier to maintain students' connectedness with education and to more effectively target and tailor support for individual students over the

long-term.

As the programme and its staff were not attached to one specific school but rather operated across 16 schools with many students, it was particularly critical to establish limits and boundaries early in the relationship building process and to explain clearly the type of support that could be offered. Previous research has illustrated that adults who provide, as a part of constructing relationships with children, clear standards, guidelines, encouragement, nurturing and high expectations, are better able to support young people to develop optimally (Catalano et al., 2002; McNeeley, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). In conjunction with these strategies and to further facilitate this process, we also found it was essential to be consistent, reliable and to have the ability to effectively communicate. By taking these steps it minimised the potentiality of putting our relationship with students at risk ourselves by not following up on information shared and decisions made by a student, due to over-stretching our own individual capacity.

As relationships were established with students, pressure was occasionally applied on us to act in a disciplinarian role when schools experienced a difficult issue (e.g., a weekend curfew was broken by a residential student). However, we did not see our role to include the duplication of pre-existing systems but rather directed towards the enhancement of understanding. Hence, being a disciplinarian was a particular role that we would not undertake as schools already had existing pastoral care structures in place. Instead we supported students to develop solutions for themselves and also supported schools to enhance existing pastoral care structures. For example, on many occasions school staff reported instances where students were apparently 'not following instructions and were not doing what they should be doing'. In a number of these cases students had actually constructed different interpretations of the instructions given to them or did not know when and where the application of these

instructions started or stopped while at school. We found that miscommunication was created by multiple factors such as the type of language used or the speed and tone used during the delivery of the instruction or the body language of the person delivering the instruction just to name a few. To check that both student and school staff understandings were congruent, we would work slowly and explicitly through each step that gave rise to the circumstance. The reason and meaning behind a particular instruction would be discussed and both the student(s) and staff members perspective would be shared, such as why an instruction might be considered very embarrassing or 'shame' for a student. This assisted both students and school staff to identify points of communication that generated misunderstandings in pastoral care structures. Importantly for staff members it also helped to highlight how and why certain previously invisible meanings and understandings were constructed by students and how staff could use this deeper insight into understanding certain types of behaviour or the style of support students preferred.

Both role modelling and two-way sharing were essential strategies we used as they demonstrated in action to students that we were reliable and could be trusted as we put into practice with ourselves what we asked students to do. Where appropriate, we regularly shared, discussed and role modelled how we solved everyday problems both at work, in our own everyday lives and within our own family structure. To achieve this we often involved our own families in weekend events such as barbeques, excursions and sporting carnivals. Research has established that role modelling helps a developing child to learn new skills by watching others perform them (Ben-Arieh, 2005; De Winter, Baerveldt, & Kooistra, 1999; Doyle & Hill, 2008; Ungar, 2005). It became apparent early on that engaging in two-way sharing in both actions as well as in words across all areas of life, helped to consolidate ourselves as a dependable and

valued support option by students. Importantly, it provided a safe and supportive environment that allowed students to talk about, identify and practice coping skills that suited them, which assisted with adjusting to a residential lifestyle and living away from home and family.

#### *Supporting peers across multiple residential schools*

From a psychological and developmental perspective, research has demonstrated that children's participation in decision-making processes can also act as a protective factor against participation in risk taking behaviour by young people (De Winter, Baerveldt, & Kooistra, 1999). Unfortunately it is the norm in many education support programmes for the voices of children and adolescents to be absent from the initial design and development process. Ben-Arieh (2005, p.575) explains that

*if society accepts children as equal human beings, then the study of their quality of life should accept that other human beings cannot simply by virtue of their age decide what children's well-being consists of...*

To ensure support programs are relevant they must be based on children and adolescent's experiences (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Stumpers, Breen, Pooley, Cohen & Pike, 2005) and not solely on what adults perceive as risks for them (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Ungar, 2005). Ben-Arieh (2005) maintains that it should be of great concern that policy makers and program developers ask one group (adults) to report on the behaviour of another group (children) and assume it will be more valid than speaking to the second group directly.

We noted from the scoping and profiling exercise that it was common for brothers and sisters, as well as cousins and relatives, to be concurrently enrolled at different residential schools across metropolitan Perth. By facilitating opportunities for siblings to catch up and support each other (e.g., barbeques during weekends) this significantly helped to address difficult feelings such as homesickness and



cultural isolation experienced by some students while studying away from home. This strategy was initially instigated in response to students wanting to spend some down time during weekends away from the boarding house environment and in a more relaxed family or home orientated context away from some of the daily peer social pressures of living in a boarding house. (e.g., such as feeling like they had to act or behave in a certain manner).

An initiative that became a core aspect of the programme's overall structure was the establishment of an Indigenous Boarding Student Council across the 16 residential schools. The student council involved the Indigenous students at each school nominating a representative to attend four council meetings each year (e.g., one meeting per term) and required students to attend meetings in their own time, during an evening after school. To encourage as many students as possible to participate and contribute to the council process, the representative role was rotated between students within each individual school. If a nominated representative initially felt intimidated, self-conscious or shame about participating in the student council on their own, they were encouraged to bring a peer from their school to share this experience with. The council meetings were hosted on a rotational basis between the residential schools and also alternated between male and female schools, with all students at the host school invited to the meeting.

The council encouraged students from across the 16 residential schools to meet, network and share experiences with other students at other schools undertaking the same experience of studying away from home. Importantly, the council was charged with the responsibility of raising awareness and developing ideas to address issues such as homesickness and cultural isolation experienced by their peers. From our perspective, the council was also an opportunity for students to have contact with a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander role models. Accordingly, each council meeting involved a role model being organised and integrated into the council's agenda as a guest speaker. Guest speakers were selected from a diversity of backgrounds, such as university, private business, sporting icons, industry and government. Interestingly, during a survey on the topic of role models the student council made it very clear that they also viewed each other as role models, as they were sharing the same experience of living away from home and family while completing their secondary education.

As a representative body the council naturally became the initial consultation point on all aspects of the programme including overall direction as well as annual activities and events. The nominated council members always took ideas from the other students at their school to each meeting and on their return would share back with their peers what happened at each meeting. The council's participation in decision making processes and its contribution to the overall programme direction was an important step towards students developing a sense of identity and connection with the programme. Equally, the council's establishment validated the programme with new students and also helped us to swiftly identify issues or areas that required better targeted support. As the council members rapidly grew in confidence, students would urge their council representative to organise for their school to host the next meeting as students were proud of their schools and wanted to share this experience with their peers.

To date, council has developed ideas for regular social, cultural, educational and sporting activities, promoted reconciliation events, and assisted in the hosting of planned programme events. It has also acted in a consultancy capacity within the programme's own steering committee on topics such as role models and also with external programmes at a national level. It is worth restating here, that student participation in the council was voluntary.

*Supporting parents, family or guardians of students across multiple residential schools*

Previous literature has clearly highlighted that a lack of familiarity with the expectations of both government programmes and education systems among a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families continues to shape the educational futures of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children today (Beresford, 2001; Zubrick et al., 2005). In this instance, we offered to parents an independent, supportive and alternative link between school and family, to discuss aspects such as subject selection, post-school destinations and pastoral care issues. The main challenge confronting us in effectively supporting parents was geography. The ability to commute to parents residing in rural, regional and remote regions of WA for regular face-to-face contact was heavily influenced by traveling costs, distance, diversity of locations and time.

To address this, multiple home visits were planned each year usually during the last weeks of school holidays or in the school holidays. Visits were organised in consultation with families and/or community representatives to build relationships and to promote the type of support the programme offered to parents (e.g., trips to the East and West Kimberley, Pilbara and Southwest regions of WA). In addition, newsletters, CDs with photos of recent events and activities, posters and mass-mail-outs via both email and the post were undertaken. For example, information about tertiary institutions, scholarships, apprenticeships and traineeships options were regularly disseminated to continually expose parents to the diversity of post-school opportunities available for their children.

One of the most important strategies was to make telephone calls home to parents and to also make ourselves available via the telephone to parents. Many parents have explained to us how reassuring it was to be able to contact someone regarding their child's wellbeing and

safety, as well as receiving telephone calls updating them on their child's progress. To best facilitate this we needed to be available both during and outside of normal school hours, as it gave parents a more flexible time period to phone and talk (e.g., ask questions and address issues). An outcome of this strategy was that it contributed to breaking down the traditional stereotype that a school or education body only contacts parents when a problem or something bad had occurred. Importantly, it helped in building a rapport with parents and also gave us the opportunity to talk with them about how they were coping with having their child studying away from home. Many parents communicated to us they found it very comforting to receive a phone call from another person who had seen and valued their child do well at something (e.g., in a sports carnival) at times when they were unable to attend.

All these strategies contributed to increase awareness with parents of children engaged in the programme and notably these strategies also encouraged two-way communication between parents and the programme staff to increase. For example, an issue of great concern identified by a number of parents was the need to organise alternative accommodation arrangements during mid-term breaks in which the accommodation facilities at each residential school closed for a long weekend break during the middle of each term. Some parents explained that it was not always feasible (e.g., money, time, work commitments) particularly when living in regional and remote parts of WA for their child to travel home during this short four day break (e.g., for some students it took over 12 hours and three plane flights to travel home). However, it was also equally difficult for some of these parents to locate suitable alternative metropolitan accommodation as they had no extended family or friend networks based in Perth.

In close consultation with the student council, this issue was addressed by developing camps which ran during these mid-term breaks to offer a safe and supervised alternative. The

overall aim was for the camps to be relaxing and fun with activities that encouraged positive interpersonal development such as building confidence and self-esteem. In addition, an itinerary of structured activities that encouraged the development of other skills such as teamwork, communication (both talking and listening skills), leadership and problem solving, were built into the camps.

The camps were voluntary and open to all students in the programme, however Year 8 and new students to Perth were especially encouraged to participate in the first camp of each year. This created the opportunity for new students to become more familiar with programme staff and to meet other residential students making the same transition. Older or returning students participating in the camps were expected to help with encouraging younger students and by taking on role modelling opportunities such as leadership roles in teamwork activities and positively support younger students, this expectation allowed older students to practice and master leadership and role modelling skills in a safe but applied context.

#### *Supporting staff across multiple residential schools*

Working collaboratively with key staff members within residential schools was vital and a number of strategies were initiated to allow and encourage staff from across the 16 residential schools to effectively network with each other.

As with students and parents, we positioned itself as an alternative link for school staff to utilise if assistance was required. One-on-one support was provided to teaching, residential, administration and medical staff. A majority of staff greatly valued using us as sounding boards so that they could explain and talk about issues with students and parents that arose. Our position in this instance slightly changed into more of a mentoring role through which we provided constructive feedback (e.g., information about cultural awareness and protocols, models of

best practice) and encouraged skill development. To compliment this, access to relevant professional development and training opportunities in the areas of cultural awareness, literacy, numeracy, and vocational education were also facilitated, as well as a quarterly newsletter, health folder outlining alternative and in some instances more culturally appropriate health services, as well as the development of a specific webpage were supplied.

An email-network was also formalised that encouraged multiple links to be forged between staff at participating schools, to network and communicate with colleagues in similar roles about various aspects of supporting students. This assisted with issues from sharing transportation so that students could attend organised events (e.g., university open days), to schools exchanging information about more complicated matters such as student selection procedures, policies, scholarships and pastoral care structures. An important step was the facilitation of bi-annual networking sessions for staff across the schools, which allowed them to come together and share, network and discuss the challenges and success they have experienced in supporting students with the transition into residential schools.

Successful intervention programmes which produce optimal outcomes for young people are those which prior to commencement identify context appropriate strategies for use during the initial implementation phase (Hall & Hord, 2001; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). The development of an annual calendar of planned events and scheduled activities developed with the support of participating schools was a significant strategy that helped us to implement this programme. The calendar created a positive synergy between planned programme activities and important school based activities each year, with important academic dates such as examination weeks or school carnivals being avoided.

The calendar also allowed the programme to implement essential transitional activities

such as having all students from across the schools attend a traditional 'Welcome to Nyungar Country' delivered by a local community representative and/or Elder at the beginning of each year. The majority of residential students in the programme were conscious that they were traditionally considered as visitors to Nyungar Country in the Southwest. By following and respecting correct cultural protocol early in the first term of each year, students could acknowledge the heritage of the Country in which they studied on and also learn about the relationship, connection and cultural practices that the traditional owners have with the region. The calendar similarly facilitated the planning of activities for other significant dates each year such as Sorry Day and NAIDOC Week.

By collaboratively planning the programme's annual calendar with schools this strategy served the dual role of providing a direct avenue through which schools could voice what they considered as successful over the previous year and in turn helped guide us to better target areas where more support was required. It allowed for excursions to post-school career forums, as well as to university and TAFE open days to be effectively planned across the schools. Notably, the annual calendar allowed organised events to be well attended by students, as schools had plenty of time to prepare and plan for them (e.g., to arrange supervising staff and make transportation arrangements).

An important issue identified by school staff was the establishment of an annual careers evening specifically for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled across the sixteen schools. A firm ambition of the programme and all the schools was the deconstruction of prevalent stereotypes about post-school destinations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through exposing students to diverse career pathways and promoting the message that anything was possible. The career evening format and content was developed through close

consultation with the student council, as well as from feedback received from parents and school staff. The consensus was for the careers evening to be a dynamic and high impact evening that reinforced the benefits of education and encouraged students to actively engage and take responsibility for exploring potential career pathways they were interested in pursuing.

The careers evening consisted of two separate parts. The first part was a sharing format that was initiated by a warm 'Welcome to Nyungar Country' delivered in both language and song. This was followed by a well-known Aboriginal comic performer from the Kimberley region of WA who discussed on stage with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models, their secondary education story as well as inviting them to share their experiences of taking the next step into post-school destinations. This sharing process involved much humour however, during each discussion the ability of each young role model to successfully overcome the various challenges they confronted in their lives was reinforced and celebrated. This process created an atmosphere of positive affirmation around the benefits of completing secondary education. To extrapolate this positive atmosphere to its fullest potential, the programme involved young role models from a diverse range of backgrounds, with a wide range of interest areas and who took different pathways to reach their goals. We found this strategy increased the careers evening appeal to students and significantly contributed to breaking down perceived stereotypes and barriers to potential post-school destinations.

The second part of the careers evening involved information stalls manned with personnel from a range of government departments, non-government agencies, tertiary institutions and industry sectors displaying specific information about how to access existing transition pathways into post-school destinations. Anecdotally, we noted the positive momentum created during the first part of the careers evening created an uplifting atmosphere

that flowed into the second part, which contributed to students feeling more motivated and comfortable to explore, listen and talk with prospective organisations about the various career options they offered.

*Developing supportive links with the wider community*

We activity initiated and developed networks with the wider community such as tertiary institutions, as well as with relevant government, non-government and industry organisations in WA. Relationships were established with national initiatives such as the Indigenous Youth Mobility Programme (IYMP), Indigenous Youth Leadership Programme (IYLP) and the National Indigenous Cadetship Project (NICP). These programmes were particularly targeted because they offered direct support to students with the transition from completing secondary schooling into entering post-school destinations. Similarly, networks were also established with key people responsible for delivering other vital educational support programmes such as the Remote Indigenous Students Tuition (RIS), Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and Abstudy through Centrelink, as well as with local health professionals.

To assist with the promotion of the programme and to make information available more broadly, a webpage providing relevant information and links for all stakeholders about the programme was developed. It listed upcoming events and activities, career development opportunities, as well as provided additional information on culturally sensitive community based support services in areas such as health, accommodation, other youth support services and legal advice. We also published an information brochure for students, parents, school staff and community members explaining areas where support was offered, and most importantly how to contact us.

Connecting with the wider community was central for the success of the programme

as it equally provided a voice and representation for the students, families and schools, while also allowing the wider community to identify a point to initiate contact and consult with.

**Final reflections**

From our experience, no single component of an educational support programme can avert students from disengaging with education at residential schools. Instead, multiple strategies operating in a coordinated and collaborative manner but which are also tailored to meet individual needs rather than just using a blanket approach is required. It was clear to us that residential students benefited most from when families, schools, peers and programme staff work together to strengthen each other's efforts rather than working independently to address perceived needs, expectations and deficits. To achieve this goal, the non-government education sector, policymakers (e.g., government) and the actual staff of education support programmes are required to have a strong commitment to ensuring that all stakeholders, particularly the residential students undertaking the lived experience, feel that they are able to contribute to and share in the direction and decisions that guides education support programmes.

It is vital for education systems in the future to be better at being inclusive of student perspectives (voices) during the initial consultation process of education support programmes. The current approach of including minimal student perspectives in programme design and development was initially the circumstance in our experience. The instigation of an Indigenous Boarding Student Council, conducting weekly student meetings at each participating school and facilitating regular opportunities for students to network and support each other, provided a valid and valued avenue for students to contribute through.

From our experience, an effective support programme should actively encourage and celebrate the student role (participation) in identifying and implementing solutions to deliver better targeted support to their fellow

peers. We found that students represent a highly valuable and accurate source of information and knowledge that can be utilised to develop innovative and effective solutions for difficult issues (e.g., homesickness, loneliness and peer conflict). Moreover, students have a strong sense of what is likely to work or fail in practice, subsequently effective education support programmes are those that have the flexibility to incorporate these ideas into their overall operations.

By firmly establishing from the onset a student focussed and relationship-first environment around the programme, we were more effectively able to target support and support student's adjustment into residential life while they lived and studied away from home. We found that students greatly valued and appreciated this relationship as it presented as an independent alternative which students could access on their own terms and in a manner that they were comfortable with. Over the long-term, we found this relationship fostered the development of responsible and respectful attitudes, as well as creating the opportunity to encourage students to explore and appreciate the perspectives of others.

Previous research has identified that effective programme implementation is significantly mediated by factors such as a programme provider's personal efficacy, ability to communicate programme content, warmth, empathy, humour, relationship skills and decision making processes (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003; Weissberg, Kumpfer & Seligman, 2003). We strongly concur with this and feel that senior education administrators need to recognise the recruitment of highly trained, qualified and committed staff is essential to the overall success of any education support programme. A distinction that we would like to add is that working in an education support programme such as this required a strong proficiency in specific interpersonal skills such as attending skills, reflective listening skills, assertion skills, body language and conflict management skills.

As qualified professionals from disciplines other than teaching (e.g., youth work and psychology) at times we found some aspects of working within education disempowering. On a number of occasions we found that issues and models of practice that we identified as important, were at times minimised and overlooked (e.g., sexual health, mental health, risk taking behaviour and identity). Similarly, at times we have been taken aback by staff members undertaking roles they are not qualified to dispense. For example, a four year trained school psychologist trying to counsel a student with serious mental health issues rather than referring on to a more appropriately trained mental health practitioner (e.g., clinical psychologist). We feel, similar to the steady shift being made in the health sector to help manage the mounting pressure placed on primary healthcare infrastructure in hospitals, education sectors will also need to better develop the ability to be inclusive of and value the skills that allied professionals bring to education support programmes.

Effectively supporting the development of young people is a dynamic and continuous process with education support programmes being most beneficial when they are customised through the inclusive practice of involving all stakeholders in programme operations. By taking this step we found it allowed us to better identify and prioritise student support needs, as well as allowing us to more cohesively support the key elements contributing to creating a positive educational experience which are the student, peers, parents (or family), the school and the wider community.

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Corresponding with the protocol outlines by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2003) the present article where possible will not use the term Indigenous. As a peak body on research protocols NHMRC emphasises that for the most part people prefer being referred to by names such as Bardi or Yindjibarndi as it more closely reflects the diversity of identity, as well as respecting the distinct cultural differences between clans and language groups. The use of the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in this article is proposed (and hoped) to be inclusive of this diversity.

**Short Biography of Authors**

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**David Mander:** David is currently completing his PhD at ECU investigating the experience of boarding school on male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from rural, regional and remote locations across WA. David has worked in both the Government and Independent education sectors in WA and prior to this he worked as a community mental health worker with young men. Some of David's interests include issues related the development and wellbeing of young people, cross cultural awareness, building sustainable relationships in community practice, equity and social justice issues, resilience, self-esteem, and identity. David has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a Bachelor of Psychology from ECU and his fourth year manuscript (unpublished) investigated the relationship between anxiety, gender and chronological age and the development of depressive symptomatology in children.

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