

Submission to the Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

This submission has been prepared by: 1) Roxanne Bainbridge, Janya McCalman and Michelle Redman-MacLaren, Centre for Indigenous Health Equity Research, Central Queensland University; and 2) Richard Stewart, Manager, Transition Support Services, Department of Education and Training, Queensland.

This submission is focussed on the Terms of Reference Key Area Number 3: *The range of service delivery programs and whether there is duplication or a lack of coordination across programs*. Specifically this submission is focussed on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students from Cape York and Palm Island who leave their remote communities to attend boarding school.

In summary:

1. More than 500 Indigenous students have to leave remote communities throughout mainland Queensland and the Torres Strait to attend boarding school due to limited or no secondary school options in their remote community.
2. The Transition Support Service, Department of Education and Training provides specialised transition and educational support in remote Indigenous communities and in boarding schools and residential facilities to enhance the success of remote secondary students from Cape York and Palm Island.
3. The NHMRC-funded Resilience Study is being conducted by the Centre for Indigenous Health Equity Research, Central Queensland University to document the resilience, psychosocial distress and upstream risk factors for self-harm of remote Indigenous students who attend boarding school for secondary education.
4. Research findings show students are proud of their culture; their families and education are important to them. Opportunities for improving educational outcomes include more targeted preparation of primary students for the transition to boarding school, creating school environments that students feel they belong to and are treated fairly, and centralising families as part of an educational partnership. Trauma-informed education practices are key to enabling students from remote Cape York and Palm Island communities achieve education and contribute fully in society.

5. Alternate models of education in remote Indigenous communities should be explored, in particular for those students for whom boarding school is not an option due to exclusion, health, social or cultural reasons.

Contact Details:

Michelle Redman-MacLaren, Email: m.redman@cqu.edu.au Telephone: 07 40374732

Richard Stewart, Email: richard.stewart@det.qld.gov.au Telephone: 07 4036 5021

Chloe's Story*

Chloe is a 14 year old girl from a small remote community on Cape York, Far North Queensland who lives with her mother, aunt and three brothers. When Chloe was 12 years old, she moved down to Toowoomba, South East Queensland to attend boarding school as there was no secondary school in her community. Chloe speaks to her mother at least three times a week, and still missed her community despite now having attended boarding school for over two years. Chloe especially misses home when it gets very cold.

In the boarding house, Chloe shares a bedroom with two Aboriginal girls from another community in Cape York and a girl from the Torres Strait Islands. Chloe finds it hard to get time alone and she misses her cousins, many of whom are attending different boarding schools across Queensland. In class, Chloe found it hard to keep up with her school work when she first arrived, and required support from an Aboriginal teacher aide. Having to get help just to keep up in class didn't feel good – it felt shameful.

Despite her thinking education is important, sometimes Chloe feels like it might be easier just to stay home. It is hard to get on that little plane and fly back to boarding school at the beginning of each Term. It is especially hard to go back to school after being back in community for sorry business – Chloe worries about her family when she is not there.

Chloe recently participated in a NAIDOC week event as a dancer, and felt very proud of her Aboriginal identity. Chloe has told her boarding house parent that when she finishes Year 12, she would like to go back to her community and be a teacher aide in the primary school.

* Chloe is not a real person, but the facts of this story are.

The Cape York and Palm Island Educational context

Education provides a key pathway to economic opportunities, health and well-being and reduced crime. Yet, limited or no locally available secondary schooling in remote Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requires more than 500 Indigenous students to transition to boarding schools. This transition means students have to leave their families, and reduces opportunities for students to learn about, and participate in, social and cultural practices important in their community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (respectfully hereafter, Indigenous) students who transition from remote community primary schools to predominantly urban secondary boarding schools undergo major transitions in where they live, how they live, and the culture they live in (including language/s used). In addition, students face transitions associated with new educational standards, expected roles and responsibilities along with changes to parental influence, personal freedoms and new relationships. In short, the transition to boarding school has the capacity to create a wide range of school and post-school opportunities for students from remote communities but it also presents complex and considerable challenges and requires substantial support if students are to be given the best possible chance of success.

The Transition Support Services, Department of Education and Training

The Transition Support Services (TSS), Department of Education and Training, is a service of the Queensland Government. In response to concerns raised by parents in Cape York communities in 2004, a pilot transition service for Cape York Indigenous students was funded through a combination of State and Commonwealth resources. This service was expanded and now supports students and families from the Cape York communities of Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Kowanyama, Lockhart River, Coen, Laura, Hope Vale and Wujal Wujal and Palm Island to transition to boarding schools. TSS also provides in school support to these students and a number from communities in the Northern Peninsula Area at boarding schools and residential facilities throughout Queensland.

The service has approximately 15 staff who provide support across the three service streams: primary into secondary school transition; secondary school support for students in Years 7 to 12; and re-engagement for students who are excluded from school. TSS has been shifting to an ecological, resilience-focused approach to practice in their work with students, schools and families. TSS supports student adjustment, orientation, and ongoing stay at boarding school schools.

Building the evidence base: The Resilience Study

The 5-year Resilience Study was developed by the Centre for Indigenous Health Equity Research, Central Queensland University in partnership with TSS in response to identified self-harm and suicide risk for transitioning students. Funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council from December 2014, the Resilience Study is investigating the impact of an enhanced multicomponent mentoring intervention to enhance psychosocial

resilience of remote Indigenous students from Cape York and Palm Island who are compelled to relocate to boarding schools across Queensland (McCalman et al 2016). Resilience is understood to mean “the capacity of individuals to navigate their ways to resources that sustain well-being; the capacity of physical and social ecologies to provide those resources; and the capacity of individuals, their families and their communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways to share resources” (Ungar 2008; 2011).

In this mixed methods study, an interrupted time series design is applied. A pilot phase was conducted in 2016. In this current phase, boarding schools are randomly assigned to one of two groups starting 2017 and 2018 and resilience measures are compared pre- and post- the boarding schools' resilience-promoting projects; and compared across groups. The survey items include a tailored version of an international validated resilience scale (the Child and Youth Resilience Measure), a validated measure of psychosocial distress (Kessler 5), and questions about usage and satisfaction with health services and TSS support. Surveys are self-administered by students using iPads, with TSS and/or Central Queensland University (CQUni) staff available to assist at all times. Follow-up with the relevant school is provided for students who report very high levels of psychosocial distress, and if requested by the student.

In addition to the survey data, TSS and CQUni staff will also facilitate semi-structured interviews and yarning circles with students, staff and stakeholders during 2017 /18.

What the Study has found so far

In 2017, over 300 students completed the student surveys and the CQUni team are currently analysing this data. In 2016, pilot study data from 94 students were analysed and reported in full in a peer-reviewed journal article (Redman-MacLaren et al 2017).

A summary of the 2016 pilot study findings are below:

Primary students: 40 primary school students responded. Positive findings included (most or all of the time): I try to finish tasks I start (62.5%); I think my family cares about me when times are hard (82.5%); I feel safe when with my family (87.5%); I like the way my community celebrates events (92.5%); it is important to help out in the community (80.0%); and I know what my language, totem, clan group or traditional country is (80.0%). These responses seem to reflect strong positive feelings about family and community. Challenges

included (most or all of the time): I have people I want to be like (30.0%); and when things don't go my way, I can fix it without hurting myself or others (45.0%).

As well, the responses of primary students to questions that indicate levels of psychological distress resulted in 60% in the high to very high categories. In addition, 100% of the primary students knew someone who had died in the last year and 77.5% of the students knew someone who had suicided in the last year.

Secondary students: 46 secondary school students responded. Positive findings included (most or all of the time): education is important (91.3%); proud of my Indigenous heritage (88.9%), my family cares about me when times are hard (74%); feel safe when with my family (97.9%); like the way my family celebrates events (93.5%); it is important to help in the community (67.4%); and know my language and totem (91.3%). These responses seem to reflect strong positive feelings about family and community. Challenges included (most or all of the time): I am treated fairly (52.2%); my family know a lot about me (52.2%); I try to finish tasks I start (47.7%); and when things don't go my way, I can fix it without hurting myself or others (52.2%), school work is hard (40%) and I feel safe at school (78.3%).

75% of secondary students also responded to questions that indicate levels of psychological distress in the high to very high categories. In addition, 84.8% of secondary students knew someone who had died in the last year and 69.8% knew someone who had suicided in the last year.

Re-engaging students: 8 re-engaging students responded. Positive findings included (most or all of the time): think my family cares about me when times are hard (87.5%); feel safe when with my family (100%); like the way my family celebrates events (100%); it is important to help in the community (87.5%); and know what my language, totem, clan group or traditional country is (87.5%). These measures seem to reflect strong positive feelings about family and community. Challenges included (most or all of the time): my parents/caregivers know a lot about me (like what I like to do) (0%); I try to finish tasks I start (37.5%); and when things don't go my way, I can fix it without hurting myself or others (25%).

87.5% of re-engaging students also responded in the high to very high categories of psychological distress. 37.5% of the students knew someone who had died in the last year and 37.5% knew someone who had suicided in the last year. 25% of the students had problems with the Police or court or had legal issues in the last year.

What is happening now?

In addition to the pilot data collection in 2016, there has been a second round of data collection in 2017 with over 300 students completing surveys. This data is now being analysed and findings will soon be available to inform policy development. In addition, eight Queensland boarding schools who educate remote Indigenous students participated in a Schools and Community Knowledge Sharing Meeting (September, 2016), along with representatives from four communities. This knowledge exchange was pivotal to developing the 2017 Resilience Study activities with partner schools. In 2017, 8 partner boarding schools have developed “Step up plans” for their individual schools to create resilience promoting environments, have participated in online professional sharing forums, and have participated in professional development forums specifically around trauma-informed practice. A further Schools and Community Knowledge Sharing Meeting will be held in August 2017.

Recommendations based on Findings from the Resilience Study

The research being conducted by TSS and CQUniversity Resilience Study team provides evidence of remote Indigenous student experiences. The Study also identifies targeted areas for promoting opportunities for remote Indigenous students to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and enhance their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.

The current educational processes that require remote Indigenous students to attend boarding school works well for some students, but are challenging for others and have proved very difficult for a small group of re-engaging students. Recommendations for action include:

1. **Targeted preparation for primary students who are likely to be transitioning to boarding school.** It is recommended that the Education Queensland state school curriculum include mandatory preparation for transition out of community and into boarding school from the end of Year 4 / beginning of Year 5 so that remote Indigenous students have a greater chance of a successful transition and retention. It is

recommended that resources are quarantined to support the development of a transition curriculum which builds strategies based on the strengths of the year 6 students and strengthens their resilience to deal with challenges. Staff should be identified in each primary school in remote settings to assist in the preparation of students and families for transition from primary to secondary school.

2. **Linking schools and communities:** it is patently evident in the research findings, exchanges at the Schools and Community Meeting and what our research partners are telling us, that there needs to be greater connections between boarding schools and communities to ensure the successful transition and retention of remote Indigenous students. Schools would greatly benefit from opportunities to visit communities, and community members would more fully understand the student experience if they had opportunity to visit the schools and participate as advisers, and potentially decision-makers. The synthesis of these two important worlds for the student, would enhance their opportunity to succeed at the challenging task of walking in two worlds. In addition, the boarding school initiatives to develop and grow Step Up plans to better support remote Indigenous students demonstrates school commitment and good will in this space. Such initiatives should be better resourced and coordinated.
3. **Exploring alternative models of education:** a very high proportion of students who have been disengaged from boarding school had very high levels of psychosocial distress and are particularly vulnerable. The State has articulated obligation to provide educational services for all students. In some communities, there are limited educational services for secondary students and in two communities, there is no on-site secondary provision. For students for whom boarding is not an option, this leaves no alternative educational opportunities. Urgently required is a review of alternative models of education for re-engaging remote Indigenous secondary students, and delivery of models of education that work for all students.

References

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