AISNSW Pilot Project: Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

Final Evaluation Report – March 2019

External evaluation of the AISNSW pilot project: *Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students* was undertaken on behalf of the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales (AISNSW) by the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney.

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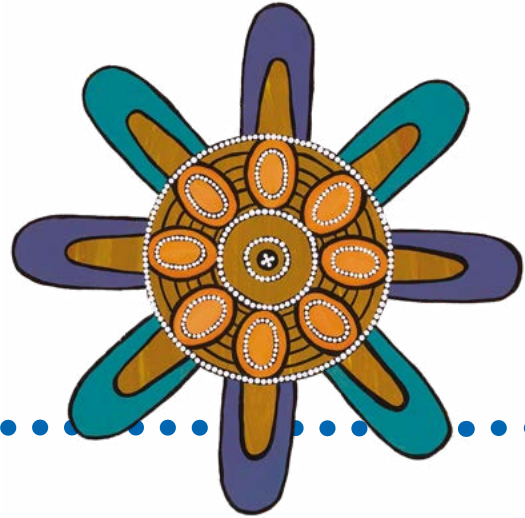Ms Maree Graham, Deputy Director Students and Community Engagement

Contents

In this report, the term Indigenous is respectfully used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Acknowledgements

Acronyms and abbreviations

AECG   Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

AIEF   Australian Indigenous Education Foundation

AISNSW   Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales

AIME   Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience

ICSEA   Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

NAIDOC   National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration

PBL   Project Based Learning

PLP   Personalised Learning Plan

PCYC   Police Citizens Youth Club

RAP   Reconciliation Action Plan

UAC   Universities Admission Centre

UTS   University of Technology Sydney

Glossary of key terms

Culturally responsive pedagogy – a pedagogical approach that values and draws upon the student's cultural knowledge and prior experiences to provide relevant learning experiences.

8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning – eight interconnected pedagogies that conceptualise learning as holistic, non-linear, visual, kinaesthetic, social and contextualised.

Explicit teaching – draw the learner's attention to the key elements of the learning task through clear articulation of learning objectives, explanations and demonstrations of required tasks and constructive individual feedback.

First Nations people – a term referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which draws attention to the different groups of Indigenous peoples inhabiting Australia pre-colonisation, with their own specific languages and cultural practices. The usual term used in NSW is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Personalised Learning Plan – a plan developed through a consultation process involving the student, parent/carer and teachers that articulates the student's individual short and long term goals and processes/actions for achieving goals. The plan (sometimes referred to as a pathway) should be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the student's ongoing development.

Project Based Learning – a pedagogical model that emphasises active learning and the integration of knowing and doing, through the teacher facilitating learning situations that engage students in investigating and responding to real-world issues and problems over extended periods of time.

School culture – refers to the constant evolving conscious and unconscious values, perceptions and attitudes within the school and the relationships, interactions, systems and practices that occur within this context. The school's students, parents/family, teachers, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school's culture, which is based within and influenced by its local community, education policies and structures and wider society.

Executive summary

Context and background

The AISNSW pilot project, *Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students*, was initiated by AISNSW in 2016 to support schools to improve outcomes for Indigenous students. The project's goals were embedded in the Australian Government's Students First agenda and underpinned by the priorities of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015, with a particular focus on providing quality teaching and quality learning.

Four schools with significant numbers of Indigenous students were invited to participate in the pilot project, and subsequently submitted project proposals: Kempsey Adventist School; Pymble Ladies' College; Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview, and St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill.

The schools were required to identify specific strategies to enhance the literacy, numeracy and other academic achievements of their Indigenous students within the two-year project period, through a focus on the key priorities of providing quality teaching and quality learning.

Project evaluation

To determine the impact of their project initiatives, participating schools were required to implement data collection and self-evaluation, and participate in an external evaluation.

AISNSW engaged the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, to conduct the external evaluation. This Final Report is the final of three reports covering the period from 1 March 2017 to 31 December 2018.

Key findings

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the schools succeeded in improving Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy outcomes within the project time frame, as well as other academic-related outcomes including increased student engagement with learning, increased student confidence in their own learning capabilities, improved student self-management of learning (goal setting, independence, time management and prioritisation skills) and increased student aspiration for both school and future education success.

How the schools achieved these outcomes varied according to their unique context and school community, yet there were common identifiable strategies across all projects. Key strategies included building strong relationships with the student, family and community, and providing culturally sensitive and individualised academic, personal, spiritual, social and physical support, from pre-commencement, through to transition out of the school.

In addition to improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes, this holistic approach resulted in the following outcomes:

- Significant improvements in schools' communication with students' families and communities and establishing trusting, respectful relationships

- Major advancements in developing a holistic understanding of the students' capabilities and needs which informed the provision of personal support and pastoral care, as well as tailored, individualised learning support

- Smoother and more positive student transition into the school, including into the boarding environment, and from school to further work and study

- Strengthened student-teacher relationships, embedded in culturally responsive pedagogical practices

- Increased Indigenous student sense of identity and pride in their Indigenous heritage

- School-wide changes to more widely and genuinely acknowledging and valuing Indigenous culture and integrating Indigenous perspectives into curriculum and school life.

The report describes how the schools implemented each of the strategies, and the impacts they had upon academic and other outcomes for Indigenous students, their families and communities and the wider school community.

Enablers and challenges

The project evaluation identified that key enablers for success were:

- Adopting a holistic approach to improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes

- Authentic involvement of Indigenous community and commitment to listening to Indigenous voices

Pymble Ladies' College

- Providing an Indigenous student support role in the school

- Providing strong, committed senior leadership for whole-school change

- Investing in staff professional development

- Establishing cross-school, multidisciplinary communication and collaboration structures

- Using data to understand students' needs and capabilities and guide decision making for support

- Establishing a specific project to increase Indigenous students' outcomes

- Providing additional resourcing to support project activities.

Challenges to achieving change through the projects included: project time frames for commencing and demonstrating impact; connecting and maintaining contact with family in rural/remote locations, and recruiting Indigenous staff.

The following recommendations are proposed based upon the key lessons from the pilot project.

Recommendations

1. The individual strategies identified through the pilot project are succeeding in all four schools to improve Indigenous students' academic and other outcomes and should be continued, with future work aiming to improve and strengthen the strategies.

2. In supporting Indigenous students, schools should adopt a holistic approach that recognises the interdependence of teaching and learning with cultural identity, physical, spiritual and mental health and wellbeing.

3. Consideration should be given by schools to appointing Indigenous teaching and/or non-teaching staff to provide Indigenous students with the culturally responsive, holistic support that is fundamental to their wellbeing and academic development.

4. Schools need to be supported in identifying and providing appropriate support for Indigenous staff given identified difficulties in recruiting these staff.

5. Schools need to continue to prioritise and resource building strong, trusting, culturally respectful relationships with Indigenous students' families and communities.

6. Schools should work towards establishing organisation-wide, formal arrangements for incorporating Indigenous input and guidance into the management and support of Indigenous students, and the wider school culture's incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, through developing Reconciliation Action Plans and establishing Indigenous advisory bodies.

7. Schools should continue to develop their processes and resources for supporting Indigenous students' transition, including transition into the school, during schooling and from school to further study/work.

8. This should include all schools developing understanding of and associated support for Indigenous students' experiences of transition between the home and school environments, including into the boarding house environment.

9. Developing strong, culturally informed staff-student relationships is a core element of a holistic approach to Indigenous students' academic development and overall wellbeing and should be a priority.

10. Appropriate professional development should be provided to staff to support developing high expectations of and culturally responsive relationships with their Indigenous students.

11. Indigenous students need to be provided with tailored, individualised support for improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, including the provision of specialist expertise based in culturally responsive pedagogy.

12. Improving outcomes for Indigenous students occurs most effectively in a context of whole-school change guided by overt, demonstrated commitment from senior school leadership to achieving improvement. This is a recommended position from where to begin project activities, and when considering the allocation of resources to schools to implement change.

13. It is important that all projects undertaken to improve Indigenous students' outcomes utilise student performance data and other sources of qualitative and quantitative information to determine project impact, including feedback from family, community and students.

14. Schools could establish more and stronger partnerships with relevant bodies including universities and other relevant Aboriginal organisations. This is particularly important in relation to supporting student transition pre-, during and post-school.

15. Increase the professional development opportunities provided by AISNSW. Project staff feedback regarding these activities was very positive and there appears to be a strong need for more professional support, including more online resources.

16. Ensure strong evaluation processes are established for any future project work that can extend the learnings from the pilot project. The limited time frame and small student numbers of the pilot project impacted upon the capacity for statistical analysis and generalisability of results. Longer term student tracking within the schools, as well as evaluating project impact across an increased student cohort, will provide greater capacity for extending understanding of what strategies are effective in supporting Indigenous students. Areas requiring further evaluation evidence include the longer term impact of specific literacy and numeracy strategies, supporting student transition and supporting students in boarding.

The evaluation findings support continuing and consolidating project activities within the current schools, and for their learnings to be shared with other schools aiming to improve Indigenous students' outcomes.

The recommendations provide a strong basis for future directions at both the individual school and wider sector levels, including for sustainability and scaling up of strategies and activities to improve Indigenous students' academic and other outcomes.

1. Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction

The AISNSW pilot project, *Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students*, addresses the critical disparities in academic outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These disparities are well known and widely documented, as are the systemic socio-historic, economic and cultural discrimination and disadvantage factors that have created this inequitable situation[1].

The two-year pilot project was initiated by AISNSW in 2016 to support schools to improve literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes for Indigenous students. The project's goals were embedded in the Australian Government *Students First*[2] agenda and underpinned by the priorities of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015*[3], with a particular focus on providing quality teaching and quality learning.

The following four schools with significant numbers of Indigenous students were invited to participate in the pilot project, and subsequently submitted project proposals:

> Kempsey Adventist School
>
> Pymble Ladies' College
>
> Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview
>
> St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill

1.2 Background

The project is important in its focus on the unique contexts of independent schools. This is especially so given that, while the majority of Indigenous students are enrolled in government schools (83.9% in 2017),

the non-government share has been steadily rising over the past 10 years. It increased from 8.9% in 2008 to 10.4% in 2017 for Catholic schools, and from 5.0% to 5.7% for independent schools over the same period[4]. While improving outcomes for all Indigenous students across the government and non-government sectors is critical, it is becoming increasingly important to identify how independent schools can support their Indigenous students to thrive.

The four project schools were asked to identify specific strategies to enhance the academic achievements of their Indigenous students within the two-year project period, through strategies such as: a focus on quality teaching and learning; academic support; pastoral care, and engaging and deepening understanding of the school staff in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and sensitivities. These focus areas reflect learnings and research into the factors which are effective in supporting Indigenous students, whilst being broad enough for schools to develop within them relevant strategies and activities tailored to their contexts and priorities in supporting their students.

A major element of the independent school sector is the boarding option many schools offer students, which may be the only opportunity for some Indigenous students in remote communities to continue their education past primary school. The study and living environment provided through boarding may also be a preferable option for Indigenous students in regional and urban areas. Transitioning into the boarding school environment however comes with challenges, and as more students take up this option it becomes increasingly important for us to understand how best to make this transition a positive experience for the students and also their families. The pilot project provided a valuable opportunity to identify the challenges experienced by Indigenous students in boarding and the strategies schools are using to address these.

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1   McInerney, D. (1991). Key Determinants of Motivation of Non-traditional Aboriginal Students in School Settings: Recommendations for Educational Change. *Australian Journal of Education*, 35(2), 154-174, https://doi.org/10.1177/000494419103500204; Craven, R., Ryan, R., Mooney, J., Vallerand, R., Dillon, A., Blacklock, F., & Magson, N. (2016). Towards a positive psychology of Indigenous thriving and reciprocal research partnership model. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 47, 32-43, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0361476X16300042

2   Liberal Party of Australia. *The Coalition's Policy for Schools: Students First August 2013*, https://members.nsw.liberal.org.au/news/federal-news/coalitions-policy-schools-putting-students-first

3   Australian Government Department of Education and Training. *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015*, https://www.education.gov.au/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education-strategy

4   Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4221.0 - Schools, Australia, 2017, http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4221.0main+features22017

The pilot project has provided the vehicle for taking action in improving experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students now in the specific project schools, and for creating a longer term impact on improving outcomes for Indigenous students across the independent school sector.

Project evaluation

To determine the impact of project initiatives, participating schools were required to implement data collection and self-evaluation, and participate in an external evaluation.

In addition, AISNSW engaged the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, to conduct the external evaluation of the pilot project. This Final Report is the third report covering the period from 1 March 2017 to 31 December 2018.

This Report identifies the strategies the project schools adopted to improve academic and other relevant outcomes for Indigenous students. It aims to identify specific actions schools have undertaken as part of its strategies with the intention of being a practical and useful document for other schools.

The report also proposes future directions and opportunities for building upon the work achieved to date through the pilot project.

2. The project schools

This section provides an overview of the four project schools, their main project aims and their approaches to improving Indigenous students' outcomes. All of the schools are independent, faith-based and non-selective. One is a coeducational day school located in a low socioeconomic inner regional area, and the other three are single sex (two boys and one girls) schools in high socioeconomic areas in Sydney.

Details of the project teams in each school are provided in Appendix 1.

2.1 Kempsey Adventist School

Total enrolments 2017: 510

Staff: 48 teaching staff, 34 non-teaching staff (total = 82)

School ICSEA[5] value: 941

Kempsey Adventist School (KAS) is a coeducational, independent K-12 school located in Kempsey Shire, an inner regional area of New South Wales.

The students attending KAS predominantly live in the township of Kempsey and the school notes that as a consequence of various socio-historical factors 'the educational experiences of many local students, and most particularly Aboriginal students, is typified by an absence of aspiration, self-belief and confidence in their ability as learners' (project reporting). At the same time the school also notes that its Indigenous students are typically from highly supportive homes where many families have high aims and expectations for their children[6].

The school is thus aware that it draws its students and broader school community population from a complex and diverse context and has intentionally embarked on a journey to create an 'aspirational, future-focused, learning community where both the individual and collective team exhibit a growth mindset to achieve educational excellence.'

The project

Kempsey Adventist School commenced project activities in October 2016. The target group comprised all Indigenous secondary students, a total of 38 students in 2017 and 25 in 2018 (note: the school advised that student numbers did fluctuate throughout each year, reflecting student movement in and out of the school and identified factors affecting this situation).

The project originally centred upon improving literacy, numeracy and other academic outcomes through embedding whole-of-school Project Based Learning. The main elements of this approach were: teacher professional learning; staff collaboration and resourcing and Project Based Learning and Indigenous student learning support.

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5   ICSEA - Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. Note that the average value is set at 1000. Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2001). *My School: Guide to understanding ICSEA*, https://myschool.edu.au/

6   Kempsey Adventist School Annual Report. (2018). https://kas.nsw.edu.au/about-us/publications/annual-report/

However the focus changed dramatically over the project time frame in response to staff learning, and new priorities were incorporated into the project model. There was a shift from Project Based Learning as the organising lens to authentic connections and partnerships with community and culturally responsive pedagogy. Staff identified successful strategies for understanding, engaging with and supporting the learning and overall wellbeing of Aboriginal students, drawing upon their professional learning, particularly the 8 Ways of Aboriginal Learning Model and the *Stronger Smarter Leadership Program*.

The school describes the project as becoming the 'vehicle for an integrated, holistic approach encapsulating learning and teaching practices, teacher professional development, curriculum development, resourcing and community and carer involvement' which produced genuine, deep cultural change throughout the school. Senior staff began to observe profound shifts in staff engagement with and thinking about Indigenous knowledges and culture, and gradual movement towards creating a culturally responsive school culture based on High Expectation Relationships.

The professional cultural learning experiences, employment of an Aboriginal Student Wellbeing worker and continued emphasis on relationship building began producing results across the board in terms of student engagement and wellbeing and academic outcomes.

2.2 Pymble Ladies' College

Total enrolments 2017: 2118

Staff: 220 teaching staff (one Indigenous), 132 non-teaching staff (total = 352)

School ICSEA value: 1175

Pymble Ladies' College is an independent K-12 girls' day and boarding school of the Uniting Church in Australia located in Pymble on Sydney's Upper North Shore.

The school identifies the Christian faith as a core element of its identity and five values that reflect its spirit, heritage and traditions: care, courage, integrity, respect and responsibility. These values underpin its commitment to providing meaningful, personal learning experiences for every student.

Pymble Ladies' College describes having a well-established and successful program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students commencing in 2007. It offers up to three scholarships per year for Indigenous students, two in partnership with the Aboriginal Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) and one with the Go Foundation, which cover tuition, boarding fees and all associated costs from Years 7 to 12. The school also provides students with all compulsory uniform items and other required equipment on commencement.

The school describes its vision is for 'Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to be educated side by side, and stand together as leaders of community and country. Our mission is to offer an outstanding education to Indigenous girls in a happy, caring and supportive community'[7].

The majority of Indigenous students are boarders (a requirement of AIEF scholarships) – in 2016 at project commencement the school had 20 Indigenous students of whom 90 per cent were boarders and 10 per cent day students. The school noted that its Indigenous program has been successful in terms of student retention rates and completion of Year 12 and saw its positive learning culture of high expectations of students combined with the boarding routine as effecting in motivating Indigenous students to engage, improve and excel.

The project

Pymble Ladies' College commenced project activities in December 2016. The target group comprised all Indigenous students: 20 students in 2017 and 18 students in 2018.

While the school felt its existing Indigenous student program was already providing opportunities for its students to succeed, it acknowledged areas for improvement. It identified its key aims as positively impacting academic outcomes through: student enthusiasm and aspiration; parental /family support and engagement; community involvement, and College learning environments.

These aims were further refined to concentrate strategies around two key areas: supporting student transition from their previous school into the first year of high school across all aspects of the student's life including academic, personal, social, spiritual and cultural dimensions, and improving academic and wellbeing success once enrolled.

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7   Pymble Ladies' College website, https://www.pymblelc.nsw.edu.au/learning/indigenous-education/

Strategies to improve transition involved a comprehensive bridging program involving pre-testing prior to entry to identify needs and strengths, targeted and individualised learning support, increased information sharing amongst staff, increased connection between family and school, and support for stronger relationships with Indigenous peers within the school and in other independent schools.

Underpinning these strategies were staff professional development activities to strengthen the quality of student support and improve cultural knowledge, and strategies aimed at creating positive school cultural change.

These strategies provided a deeper *'multidimensional picture of each student'* that enabled more effective targeted academic and wellbeing support, and authentic relationships that benefitted families, enabling them to feel connected with the school and have a better understanding of their child's experiences at the College.

Through the project, gains were made in students' experiences of transition, including feeling valued and comfortable in the school and boarding house environment, and in the creation of meaningful relationships between schools and family. There were improvements in students' interest in and engagement with learning and literacy and numeracy outcomes. The school also identified progress in staff cultural competency and desire for further professional learning in Indigenous perspectives, culture and language.

2.3 St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill

Total enrolments 2017: 1092

Staff: 115 teaching staff, 183 non-teaching staff (total = 298)

School ICSEA value: 1132

St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill is an independent boys' Catholic secondary day and boarding school (Years 7-12) located in Hunter's Hill on Sydney's Lower North Shore.

The school describes itself as providing a balanced education incorporating the spiritual, learning, physical and recreational. This occurs within and through a school community that *'draws faith, culture and life into harmony' within a caring, compassionate and highly supportive Christian environment'. 'Our Catholic faith values, and our Marist spirit, underpin everything we do*

and set us apart from other places'[8]. A central dimension of the school's identity is that it nurtures a strong sense of belonging and that the support and encouragement students receive is central to their development and reaching their potential. This is seen to occur within a school community that unites students' families, Old Boys and staff and extends beyond the school gates and school experience to an ongoing, lifelong relationship and engagement with the school. *'To be part of the Joeys family is truly a gift for life'.*

The school identified, in its 2017 School Plan, that one of its priority areas for improvement is providing Indigenous families with additional support, networking and opportunities for engagement with the College. This priority area was primarily identified because the Indigenous program was growing; in 2016 all 29 Indigenous students boarded at the College. With growing numbers there was recognition that processes and procedures required revisiting, and that there was a need for additional pastoral support, stronger family connectivity, refining of interview and transition models and greater attention to academic trajectory and support.

The project

St Joseph's College commenced project activities in October 2016. The target group comprised 34 Indigenous students in 2017 and 35 in 2018.

The school's project scope encompassed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students prior to, during and after their studies at the school, taking a long term and holistic perspective to supporting students. It identified in its early reporting a focus on increased cultural awareness, improved pastoral care, strengthened academic support and individual learning programs and engaging parents.

This widened to include more systematic strategies to improve literacy, numeracy and other academic outcomes through supporting transition into the school, pastoral and academic care during their studies and strategies to support further work and study success and development post-school. The school also implemented strategies to incorporate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into the curriculum and bring about positive cultural change.

In particular over the project timeframe there was a significant shift in priority to building relationships with students, families and their communities and enhancing

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8   St Joseph's College website, https://www.joeys.org/about-us/headmasters-welcome/

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

student pastoral care. It became increasingly obvious to the school that this *'vast improvement in communication and comprehensive care of the students'* (project reporting, November 2018) was the critical factor in improving the experiences and outcomes of the school's Indigenous students.

As a consequence, more trusting and respectful family and community relationships were established. These were resulting in students feeling safe and positive in their transition into boarding, and families feeling confident and comfortable about the care and development their sons were receiving at the school.

Developing and fostering positive personal relationships and community connections were providing the foundations for increased student aspiration and desire to succeed academically, and corresponding increases in literacy and numeracy outcomes.

The school's holistic approach extended to supporting students to transition from school to further education to TAFE or university, and encompassed securing suitable accommodation and employment, as well as recreational/leisure activities that enabled them to pursue interests and passions while meeting new people and engaging with Aboriginal leaders in other communities.

2.4 Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

Total enrolments 2017: 1576

Staff: 186 teaching staff, 124 non-teaching staff (total = 310)

School ICSEA value: 1176

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview, is an independent boys' Catholic school in the Jesuit tradition located in Lane Cove on Sydney's Lower North Shore. It offers day and boarding options for students in Years 5-12.

The school describes its mission as providing an all-round education for boys that inspires them to a life-long development of their faith. It stresses that fundamental to the school experience is cura personalis – care for the whole person – which includes '*respect for the individual's identity, and balance and flexibility in dealing with the individual's gifts, needs and educative readiness.*'

The school emphasises student wellbeing and the roles of both teaching and administrative staff in taking a personal interest in each student's *'intellectual, affective, moral and spiritual development, helping each one to develop a sense of self-worth and to become a responsible individual within the community.'* This is described as grounded in a school community whose fundamental values are justice, service, discernment, conscience and compassion[9].

9   Saint Ignatius' College website, https://www.riverview.nsw.edu.au/our-school/#mission_vision

Prior to the project, Indigenous students, whom were all boarders, were supported by two specialist teachers within the Faculty for Learning Enrichment. A First Nation Program Coordinator at the College also supported the students through oversight of administration and their general well-being.

The project

Saint Ignatius' College commenced project activities in October 2016 focussing on five Indigenous students transitioning from Year 6 into Year 7. These students were then supported across Stage 4 in the two years following. In 2017 the project continued with six Indigenous students transitioning from primary school to the College.

In order to enhance the classroom results and the rate of growth in academic outcomes for Indigenous students, the school chose to specifically focus its project resources upon supporting students to transition into Year 7, adopting strategies to improve students' academic, social and cultural transition experiences. This was approached by fostering strong relationships with students' families and communities prior to transition to gain a deeper understanding of each student's individual and cultural contexts, achieved through visits to student's home communities and primary schools, participating in community events and bringing families to the school for a transition week experience, and employing a First Nations Mentor to provide culturally informed pastoral care.

Over the project's lifetime these transition experiences were extended, including longer family visits to the school and employing a second mentor. These approaches were highly effective in building trusting relationships and families feeling valued by the school.

Other major areas of project activity involved employing specialist teachers and strengthening staff collaboration to identify and provide targeted support for students' learning needs. Refinements were made over the project time frame to increase the effectiveness of the support, for instance by moving to more small-group learning experiences and in-class support.

These strategies greatly increased awareness of students' cultural and academic needs before commencement on which staff could build each students' learning profile. The school sees this as a key contributing factor to the success of students' transition experiences. The improved staff communication and collaboration enabled them to provide timely, effective support tailored to students' learning and pastoral needs and circumstances.

Through the project there were positive gains in student wellbeing and engagement with learning, as well as growing independence. Students felt more confident, respected and valued, and that they were well supported. The combined effects of specialist support and cultural and pastoral support is leading to improvements in coping with school work and improved literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

3. Evaluation methodology and process

3.1 Purpose and scope

The primary purpose and scope of the external evaluation were to:

- Assess the extent to which each school's approach has influenced the educational outcomes of Indigenous students in each school's context

- Identify challenges in implementation of activities

- Identify which approaches could be refined, replicated or scaled-up for other schools

- Inform strategies to communicate the learnings from the project to other schools.

3.2 Evaluation questions

Through discussions with AISNSW and the project schools the following evaluation questions were devised to guide the external evaluation.

1. What strategies were identified by the schools to achieve the aim of improving outcomes for Indigenous students?

2. Were the strategies implemented as planned or amended?

3. What was the impact of the strategies and activities on Indigenous students' literacy, numeracy and other academic outcomes?

4. How did the project impact upon pastoral care and student support processes and effectiveness?

5. How did the project impact upon the engagement and deepening understanding of the school staff in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and sensitivities?

6. What challenges or particular school circumstances affected implementation and how did the school respond to the challenges?

7. How sustainable might the strategies and innovations be in the school after project completion?

8. Which successful approaches could be refined, replicated or scaled-up for other schools in similar situations?

9. What strategies could be employed to communicate the learnings from the project to other schools?

Other key evaluation questions were to be developed in response to each school's project goals and intended outcomes but may include investigating the impact of the project upon:

- Non-Indigenous students (awareness and appreciation of Indigenous cultures)

- Changes or developments in the wider school culture (for example in acknowledging, valuing and incorporating Indigenous cultures into curriculum and/or school life)

- Family and community involvement and engagement with the school.

3.3 Methodology

The project evaluation was informed by western and Indigenous methodologies in that it used a mixed methods design to enable formative and summative evaluation and address the evaluation questions, adopted a partnership approach to working with the project schools (evaluation was done *with* rather than on the project schools) and prioritised the voices of Indigenous students, family and community[10]. The Evaluation Team and AISNSW worked with the project schools to design the evaluation framework, methods, schedule of school visits and the school evaluation reporting template.

3.4 Design

The External Evaluation Team met with schools in May and June 2017 to develop the team's understanding of each school context, the schools' specific project aims and project logic. From these discussions it became clear that while each school was unique, their approaches to the overarching objective of improving Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes clustered into nine key strategy areas.

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10 Craven, R., Ryan, R., Mooney, J., Vallerand, R., Dillon, A., Blacklock, F. & Magson, N. (2016). Towards a positive psychology of Indigenous thriving and reciprocal research partnership model. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 47, 32-43, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0361476X16300042

Table 1. Key strategies to improve Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes

Strategy 1	Build strong relationships with family/carers and community from the outset
Strategy 2	Support successful student transition into the school, including into the boarding environment
Strategy 3	Build strong, culturally informed and responsive staff-student relationships and pastoral care
Strategy 4	Increase students' expectations and aspirations
Strategy 5	Support students to develop a strong sense of identity and pride in their Indigenous heritage
Strategy 6	Provide individualised, targeted learning to improve literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes
Strategy 7	Embed Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum
Strategy 8	Provide transition-out guidance and support to Indigenous students
Strategy 9	Take a whole-of-school perspective to improving Indigenous students' outcomes

Each school's progress in implementing the strategies and their impact upon improving Indigenous students' academic and other outcomes were evaluated, and findings were considered collectively to identify project successes, major factors in enabling success, challenges, and potential for refining, replicating and scaling up successful approaches.

3.5 Methods and data sources

The following methods and data sources were used in the evaluation.

3.5.1. School visits

A total of four visits to each school was undertaken over the two year project period:

- School visit 1: May 2017
- School visit 2: June 2017
- School visit 3: September 2017
- School visit 4: October/November 2018.

Purpose of school visits 1 and 2

- Establish relationships with key school staff stakeholders and familiarise evaluation team with school context (see 3.4 Design above).
- Discuss and define project goals, strategies and success indicators.
- Discuss and finalise the Evaluation Framework, school reporting template, external evaluation methods and school visit schedule.
- Discuss the range of data sources that schools could draw upon to evaluate the impact of their actions and strategies including qualitative and quantitative feedback from students, staff and family/community.

Purpose of school visits 3 and 4

Undertake external evaluation activities including:

- Semi-structured interviews with key project staff, usually involving senior staff and a staff member with specific responsibilities for Indigenous students (a role undertaken by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff members) to discuss in detail project aims, strategies, activities, outcomes, successes and challenges.
- Focus groups with staff across the school focussing on project activities, impact, success and challenges. This included teaching staff, specialist teachers, boarding house staff, student welfare and wellbeing staff.
- Interviews and focus group with parents, other family members and community members to elicit their experiences with the school and of project strategies and activities. This included discussing

impact of project activities upon their child's learning experiences and progress as well as upon the school more generally.

- Focus groups with students exploring their perspectives and experiences at the school in relation to their learning and the school environment more widely, and the impact of project strategies and associated activities upon these experiences. Student participants were from Years 7 to 12 in all schools except Saint Ignatius' College which focussed its project activities upon students in Years 7 and 8, hence only students from these years participated in the focus groups.

Focus groups and interviews

The focus groups were conducted by two evaluators and the interviews by one evaluator, with the evaluators aiming to create a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere conducive to genuine dialogue; an approach informed by Indigenous methodology. Open-ended questions were used to guide the group discussions and interviews, while providing the opportunity for participants to follow lines of interest and reflect without interruption.

To contribute to a more conversational approach in the student focus groups, the Evaluation Team included an ex-student from a project school who is now currently studying at UTS. The UTS student co-facilitated the focus group session, and then shared with the school students their own experiences of school and transitioning to university.

As well as contributing to a more comfortable environment for the school students, it was intended that sharing the UTS students' experiences with the school students would increase their understanding of university study, and contribute to aspiration building, including opportunities, challenges and support available. This reflected the partnership approach to the evaluation and intention of giving back to the school community.

Table 2. Number of participants involved in the external evaluation focus groups and interviews (school visits three and four)

Cohort	School visit	Kempsey Adventist School	Pymble Ladies' College	St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill	Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview	Total
Students	3	8	8	6	6	
	4	12	9	5	5	
Total students		20	17	11	11	59
Staff	3	8	9	6	12	
	4	10	9	9	13	
Total staff		18	18	15	25	76
Family/community	3	3	5	4	4	
	4	2	3	6	4	
Total family/ community		5	8	10	8	31

Note: there was overlap of participants in the two school visits.

Further details of participants in all four school visits and the evaluation activities are provided in Appendix 2.

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11 Goulding, D., Steels, B. & McGarty, C. (2016) A cross-cultural research experience: developing an appropriate methodology that respectfully incorporates both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(5), 783-801, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1081960; Kovach, M. (2010). Conversational Method in Indigenous Research. *First peoples Child and Family Review*, 5(1), 40-48, http://journals.sfu.ca/fpcfr/index.php/FPCFR/article/view/172

St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill

Analysis of interviews and focus groups

Focus groups and interviews of school visit three were taped and transcribed. Focus groups and interviews of school visit four involved two facilitators, and note taking only was used for recording the discussions to contribute to a more relaxed and informal atmosphere.

The evaluators undertook manual analysis of the transcriptions and written notes, which involved analysing participants' responses according to the themes generated by the key strategies, and identifying other themes that arose during the discussion. The approach enabled a systematic analysis of the data while capturing the fine-grained analysis of talk-in-interaction, a benefit of focus group methodology[12].

3.5.2 School evaluation reports

The schools provided an initial report following project commencement, then conducted their own data collection and self-evaluation and provided their findings in two, six monthly reports to AISNSW (October 2017, May 2018) and a final report (30 November 2018). Reporting templates were provided to schools for the six month and final reports to support them in capturing:

- Description of project aims, target groups, strategies and activities

- Identification of impact of project strategies activities using relevant supporting quantitative and qualitative data from key stakeholders – i.e. students, staff and family/community.

The schools' reports over the two year period reflected increasing sophistication in evaluation processes and analysis, and were valuable sources of rich, deep reflections upon the impact of their project strategies and actions. They included, as well as the standard literacy and numeracy data, extensive informal and formal verbal and written feedback from key stakeholders including email and phone correspondence with parents, student survey data, staff survey data and verbal feedback.

3.5.3 Evaluation workshops

The External Evaluation Team and AISNSW collaborated to provide further support through two workshops:

- A Project Schools' Workshop on 21 May 2018 to provide a forum for school project staff to share ideas and experiences to date including successes and challenges and future opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration (see Appendix 3).

- A Data Workshop on 18 September 2018 to discuss evidence from data sources and progress the schools' capacity to analyse data to inform their internal evaluation.

The discussions among the school staff during these workshops contributed to developing understanding of the strategies impacting positively upon Indigenous students' wellbeing and progress, and their associated enablers and challenges.

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12   Wilkinson, S. 1998. Focus group methodology: a review. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 1(3): 181-203, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13645579.1998.10846874

3.6 Partnership approach between evaluators and schools

In line with the partnership approach to evaluation and to contribute to schools identifying and responding to both achievements and challenges during implementation, findings from the first round of focus groups and interviews were written up by the evaluation team and returned to the schools. This process contributed to a sense of the evaluation team working with the schools, made the evaluation process transparent, provided the bases for useful conversations between the team and the schools, and provided the schools with formative feedback as they progressed through project implementation.

3.7 Methodology limitations

Table 3. Methodology limitations, potential impact and measures of control

Limitation	Potential impact	Measures of control
Access to and selection of family/ community for focus group discussions/interviews.	Family/community members were nominated by schools. Selection was largely determined by availability as most live outside of Sydney. Possibility of bias and limitations in generalisations of results.	Schools provided extensive formal and informal feedback from other family/community members not involved in the evaluation focus groups/interviews.
Access to and selection of students for focus group discussions.	Schools nominated which students were involved in the focus group discussions, with this largely determined by student availability. Possibility of bias and limitations in generalisations of results.	Schools provided comprehensive student qualitative and quantitative feedback addressing evaluation questions, including student literacy/ numeracy support, pastoral support, transition experiences, student-teacher relationships and school culture.
Comfort of interview and focus group participants in speaking with external evaluators.	Staff, family/community and student's willingness to speak openly with evaluators may have influenced findings.	Evaluators aimed to create comfortable, familiar environment informed by Indigenous research methodology.
Variability between project schools' strategies and activities.	While there was high crossover in objectives, strategies and activities, schools also varied in implementation and focus, according to their unique context and priorities. This affected the capacity to generalise across projects regarding strategy impact.	Despite this, strong themes did emerge across the four project schools. The report clarifies if a strategy or impact was specific to a particular school.
Relatively early stage implementation limits capacity to determine impact.	While impact of some strategies was clearly evident in the project period, the cumulative impact upon students' literacy and numeracy is early stage and there is a limited degree of quantifiability in terms of transference to classroom.	Multiple data sources were used to identify impact including student self-reporting, parent feedback, teacher qualitative feedback, and school quantitative data where available.

4. Findings – what strategies improved Indigenous students' overall wellbeing and academic outcomes?

As the schools implemented strategies and actions over the two year time frame, clear and consistent findings emerged regarding what was working to improve Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes, as well as their overall wellbeing in the school environment.

This section outlines these findings according to the key strategy areas, drawing upon both the external evaluation results and the schools' internal data collection and evaluation reporting.

Each strategy is discussed according to:

- A general description of the **strategy** that was identified as effective in bringing about improvements in academic and other student outcomes.

- **How?** A description of **actions** the schools undertook to operationalise the strategy. These are practical steps and guidance that other schools can draw upon.

- **Impact:** A description of the impact of the actions – the **actual differences** they made. This includes impacts upon students, family/community, staff and where relevant the whole school.

4.1 Strategy 1: Build strong relationships with family/carers and community from the outset

All schools identified from project commencement that improving relationships and communication with students' families and communities was key to improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes. The main relationship elements the schools identified were:

- Building trust and respect between family/community and school

- Improving the school's awareness of cultural elements within relationships

- Sharing of relevant information about the child's circumstances and development

- Collaborating in the child's best interest.

The schools emphasised this as a key priority for the projects: as expressed by Kempsey Adventist School *'Relationship is everything.'* This reflects good practice as evidenced by previous research regarding the powerful role that Indigenous parents play in determining their children's attitudes towards education and continuing with school, and that strong relationships between school and community is a critical factor in students achieving successful academic outcomes[13].

4.1.1 How?

Visit the student's family in their local community prior to the student commencing at the school

St Joseph's College, Pymble Ladies' College and Saint Ignatius' College stressed the importance of building sustainable connections with families before students commence, particularly through visits made by key College staff to the student's community, including the student's previous school. Objectives were to:

- Build positive and respectful relationships between school staff and family/community

- Enable the school to share relevant information with family/community and answer any questions they may have about the school environment and their child's living and study arrangements

- Enable school staff to better understand the individual student's needs and interests through gathering contextual information from home and the student's current school through meetings with teachers and other relevant staff.

The visits usually included a staff member with specific responsibility for Indigenous students. In some cases this was an Indigenous person, in others a non-Indigenous staff member with a high level of cultural competency, and strong connections and experience working with Indigenous students, families and communities.

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13 McInerney, 1991; Munns, G., O'Rourke, V., & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2013). Seeding Success: Schools That Work for Aboriginal Students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(1), 1-11, https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/core/journals/australian-journal-of-indigenous-education/article/seeding-success-schools-that-work-for-aboriginal-students/1C3AED12D1343840981A78E3AF9779FC

Kempsey Adventist School

Bring the student and family to the school prior to commencement, and at other times during the school year

St Joseph's College, Pymble Ladies' College and Saint Ignatius' College provided financial, organisation and living arrangements to families to visit their schools prior to student commencement. This included supporting family through subsidised travel and free on-site accommodation, in spaces that were culturally sensitive, warm and welcoming.

The visits were an important transition step for both students and their families. They generally involved campus tours, meetings with key staff, functions/events bringing together the new Indigenous families and students and opportunities to meet current students. The visits provided families with insights into what life would be like for their child at the school – living arrangements, available resources, curricular and co-curricular activities – and enabled critical relationship building between families and key school staff, including establishing direct points of contact.

Family visits were also arranged at other times during the school year for special events such as assemblies, and in response to particular student or family needs. For example, St Joseph's College had a Family Colo Weekend and Family Gatherings each term that included the sharing of Indigenous culture through activities such as storytelling and wood carving. These were intended to send a clear message to family that *'we want you to be here.'*

Undertake regular communication with family

This was done through phone, text and email, ensuring quick responses to queries or concerns, and communicating positive news as well as issues/difficulties.

This was a key element of building stronger, more trusting relationships between family and school. The schools all emphasised the importance of regular, *ongoing* contact with family, and noted that while it can sometimes be difficult to connect with family it was important to persist.

Provide families with a direct contact at the school, and be explicit in encouraging and facilitating communication with this person

This usually involved having a designated Indigenous Student Support staff role, who usually also visited the families prior to students commencing. St Joseph's College stressed that:

> *The families must feel there is a clear point of contact for them – someone who knows them and their community, someone they can trust.*
>
> *(St Joseph's College, project reporting)*

Ensure positive first impressions

It was suggested that the school staff walk through the school and try to see it through the eyes of an Aboriginal student and a family member – what is familiar, welcoming? Do families/community feel welcomed by all staff, ancillary as well as teaching? It was seen as important to incorporate physical representation of Indigenous culture in the school environment such as signs and visual images at the entrance to the school and in other locations. For example, Kempsey Adventist School is incorporating local Indigenous language into school signage, beginning with the Reception Area.

Establish a committee or reference group with Indigenous community representation

This group should contribute to the school's vision, provide advice on incorporation of Indigenous knowledges into the curriculum and provide structure and a channel for input from the wider parent/community body.

For example, Kempsey Adventist School established the Aboriginal Consultative Committee, which meets every three weeks and is a safe place for families to raise items and provide the school with feedback. Activities undertaken by the Committee included school signage in Dunghutti language and guidance on how to better engage with the community.

Engage with the local Indigenous community

This included forging links with the local Indigenous community in which the school is based, as well as with the students' home communities in other locations as described above. It should include getting to know local Elders and identifying opportunities to collaborate with the local Indigenous community. For example, Kempsey Adventist School has included local Indigenous community in cultural events such as storytelling and yarning circles. It was stressed that it is important that Elders and others are financially compensated for sharing their knowledge in the school so they feel valued.

Engage with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG)

The schools actively engaged with their local AECGs. For example, Kempsey Adventist School now has staff representation on the AECG and up to three to four staff attending meetings, which has led to other community involvement including a local Elder visiting the school. Pymble Ladies' College report that their involvement with their AECG has been instrumental in providing support and guidance for their project.

Develop a family/community communication strategy and associated recording tool that can support systematic, intentional communication

Aspects to include in a communication strategy could include:

* Who initiates the interaction – school or family?
* What is the focus/point of the interaction? Pymble Ladies' College noted an intentional shift to initiating communication about positive student behaviours,

rather than mostly contacting parents regarding problems/negative behaviours.

* Who in the school is involved in the communication?

Overall, prioritise and focus on building trust in relationships with family and community

The overarching message from the schools is prioritising building trusting relationships with family and community as the basis from which to proceed to improve students' school experiences and learning outcomes. They are approaching this through a combination of the actions outlined above and other strategies outlined in this report.

As Kempsey Adventist School advised:

> *Be patient as it takes a long time to build trust, battle through the mistrust.*
> *(Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)*

4.1.2 Impact of Strategy 1

Family and community feedback indicated that the approaches schools took to build strong relationships were highly effective. All schools made significant progress, with improvements achieved in: communication; genuine involvement of family/community in decision making; greater appreciation of Indigenous culture; deeper levels of trust between family and school; increased family confidence in the school knowing and caring for the child; strengthened relationships and networking between Indigenous families, increased family/carers engagement and their understanding and support of their children's learning, and greater accessibility to Indigenous families through increased financial and organisational provision. Evidence and examples of these are provided below.

Improved communication between family and school

* *'The communication here is awesome'.* This is verbal, by email and by phone, and there is a quick response. *'Now we feel comfortable there is someone to talk to, yarn to, about problems, even if there aren't problems.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

- Family focus group participants were extremely positive about the ongoing level of communication, support and understanding from the school, with one parent noting that it was *'such a good school to work with you.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

> **"If there is an issue, X will call…. she won't just ring about the bad stuff', but will call at the end of term with a general update."**
>
> **(Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)**

- One parent referred to the *'honest communication'* with the school including being able to talk frankly about their child's circumstances. (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

- One parent described feeling very nervous and anxious when she first came to the school, *'but the staff were great'* right from the first contact with reception, and these feelings quickly disappeared. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

- The school staff *'are always looking at ways to help'* and *'I always get responses from the teachers.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

> **"Communication is accessible, open"…"they always listen which is fantastic and get back to you."**
>
> **(Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)**

- *'If something is said, it will be done.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

- There is a lot of support at the school, *'so many people putting their hand up and their hand out'* to support them. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

- The family felt very welcomed into the College community, *'nothing was too much to ask…. all staff particularly X and X were very patient.'* (St Joseph's College, family focus group discussion)

- The Indigenous Coordinator *'is very responsive, 9 out of 10…he will get back to me the same day.'* (St Joseph's College, parent interview)

- St Joseph's survey of family reported that 21 of 22 respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that *'I find it easy to contact and communicate with staff from the Indigenous Program'* (one respondent disagreed).

Genuine involvement of family/community in decision making

- The Principal and Deputy Principal are accessible and encouraging of family/community to be involved in decision making. They genuinely and actively consult, listen and act on family/community feedback. They *'want the parents' advice.'* *'They don't do anything without consulting with the parents', talking things through, listening, taking on board parent perspectives.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

> **The parents have a sense of ownership because they are consulted at the beginning of the process, not as an afterthought. "The school is genuinely working and listening to the families." "We're part of it, we own it".**
>
> **(Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)**

- The school consults over resourcing and is totally transparent with funding and how to use it to best support Indigenous students. (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

- The Deputy Principal seeks advice from them. One parent gave the example of the Deputy Principal phoning to ask advice – *'I want to get your thoughts on how to handle this.'* This advice was taken and acted upon. (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

Pymble Ladies' College

- The group described the school as responsive to feedback regarding managing and supporting the Indigenous students. One family member provided an example where she advised the First Nations Academic Coordinator to *'ease up'* on the focus on the child's academic performance, telling her *'this is what's going on at home at the moment'* and pointing out the other factors in the student's school life such as the relationships he was developing and that he was enjoying school. The First Nations Academic Coordinator was very responsive, and her response contributed to strengthening the relationship with the parent, building trust and demonstrating that the school is understanding and respectful of family wishes. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

Improved appreciation and incorporation of Indigenous culture

- The *'things they are doing around Indigenous stuff is absolutely fantastic… The school is committed to all things Aboriginal.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

- Examples were given of community engagement through activities such as the Big House community dinner, bringing together all of the community, and Elders sharing their stories during NAIDOC – *'they are part of the school community.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

Stronger, deeper levels of trust between school and family/community

> **"Pymble has gone out of their way. They are friendly and they are good people."**
>
> **(Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)**

- Staff expressed that there had been major positive developments in engaging with family/community and building authentic relationships. *'Walls were collapsing'* between school and community, and the community could see staff taking a genuine interest in Indigenous culture. (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)

- Staff focus group participants discussed that before project commencement, *'the community wasn't sure if they could trust the school'*, but *'the Deputy Principal has worked hard to build relationships that have won trust, and Uncle X is playing a key role in connecting with community giving the message to all that they are welcome.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)

Increased family confidence in the school knowing and caring for the child

- A parent described the visit to her home by the Indigenous Student Coordinator, explaining that: *'it was wonderful to have X stay with the family to get to know her better and for X to learn about individual families.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

- St Joseph's survey of family reported that 21 of 22 respondents agreed/strongly agreed that *'I am confident that the staff of the Indigenous Program truly care about the happiness and well-being of my son'* (one respondent neither agreed/disagreed).

- All family/community focus group participants spoke positively about the school visiting their communities, with one parent explaining that she was *'very nervous'* about sending her child to boarding school. It *'really helped'* having the First Nations Education Coordinator visit and spend time in the community, and then visiting the College and feeling very welcomed. These things all helped to reassure her. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

Strengthened relationships and networking between Indigenous families

- There was positive discussion about St Joseph's Family Colo weekend, which was described as an opportunity for Indigenous families to get together, *'start to know each other, build camaraderie'* and *'begin forming parental networks.'* This was seen as playing a critical role in transitioning the boys as a collective. (St Joseph's College, parent interview)

- *'Small events at local restaurants or hotels bring extended families together under the St Joseph's College banner and instantly a greater sense of community and support is developed. Past and current families also encourage prospective parents from the local community to attend events to engage with the College culture and determine if they wish to send their sons to Joeys.'* (Parent comment, St Joseph's College reporting)

Increased family/carers engagement and their understanding and support of their children's learning

- Staff felt parents were more engaged as a consequence of the increased emphasis on relationship building, and had an increased sense of being part of the school community. Fewer behavioural issues were escalating because communication between the school and the parents is much improved. (Pymble Ladies' College, staff focus group discussion)

- St Joseph's College noted increased parental engagement with students' learning as a consequence of the project. (School reporting)

Greater accessibility to Indigenous families through increased financial and organisational provision

- Providing affordable accommodation to visiting families was described as a *'massive help'* that *'makes all the difference'* to the family being able to visit. (St Joseph's College, parent interview)

4.1.3 Future development

While all schools made progress in relationship building and communication with families, there were suggestions to continue to improve engagement with community more widely. This included engaging with the AECG.

Two parents (one from St Joseph's College and one from Pymble Ladies' College) spoke positively about relationships on an individual level but wished to see more formalisation of family/community engagement and influence. Both supported and stressed the importance of having a Reconciliation Action Plan, and one parent suggested that the school should have an Indigenous Advisory Committee.

4.2 Strategy 2: Support successful student transition into the school, including into the boarding environment

All project schools identified the importance of supporting students to successfully transition into high school as critical to their wellbeing and academic success. For St Joseph's College, Pymble Ladies' College and Saint Ignatius' College, the early transition period was of particular importance given the majority of students were leaving their familiar home environments (mostly from rural and remote regions) for school boarding.

The schools found that this can potentially be a traumatic time for their students as they adjust to the new school context. Discussions with students, staff and family/community reinforced the struggles many students experience: homesickness and not having familial support in Sydney; learning and adapting to different and more

structured routines; expectations around study practices; fitting in socially; emotional conflict from living in close proximity with other students and missing personal space and autonomy.

Their feedback aligns with research findings that 'many remote Indigenous students experience boarding school environments as a privileged educational and learning context within which they question their own belonging', and where they experience differences in school size, proportion of non-Indigenous students, uniforms, cultural cues and ways of being, knowing and doing, expectations, routines, food, weather, noise, population density and language[14].

The schools also noted that transition was an ongoing process that continued throughout the student's time at the school as the student moved between the home and school environments, and through different stages during time at the school. Each return to school from home involves a period of readjustment to different routines and expectations. Saint Ignatius' College for example reported the difficulties some students faced in re-integrating into the school environment after a long period at home.

Returning home may itself involve differing expectations and negotiating changing relationships with family and friends. One example was a student being teased at home for *'speaking posh[15].'* This reflects research describing transition as an ongoing process in which individuals navigate multiple narratives and subjectivities, sometimes involving disruptions, setbacks and anxiety and risk that can lead to profound change[16].

Having witnessed this situation over a number of years, the project staff in the three boarding schools prioritised implementing strategies and activities to support effective holistic transition encompassing students' academic, social, personal and cultural wellbeing. Pymble Ladies' College described this as *'aiming to create a bridge between each student's home and school, her old school, and Pymble'.*

4.2.1 How?

While each school was unique in supporting students' transition, common across all project schools was developing a more personal, supportive, pastoral approach to supporting students. Transition programs became more extensive and planned, beginning in the year before and continuing throughout the first year.

It should be noted that Kempsey Adventist School's context as a day school meant that, while they did have some measures in place to support student transition into the high school, these were largely integrated into their wider pastoral care and wellbeing strategies discussed in other sections of this report.

The following elements were adopted in the three boarding schools' strategic approaches to supporting student transition.

Undertake visits to the students' home communities and schools

This strategy has already been outlined in 4.1.1 above, largely in relation to family/community relationship building and providing staff with a multidimensional picture of the student. Just as importantly, from the student's perspective it conveyed connection between home and school, and was the first step for them developing relationships with the school staff who would be central to their lives once they left home.

Support the family with the application and enrolment process

This included providing assistance with enrolment and Abstudy[17] funding forms.

14   Heyeres, M, McCalman, J, Langham, E, Bainbridge, R, Redman-MacLaren, M, Britton, A, Rutherford, K & Tsey, K. (2018). Strengthening the capacity of education staff to support the wellbeing of Indigenous students in boarding schools: a participatory action research study. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 2018, https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/52608/1/Strengthening_the_capacity.pdf

15   Pymble Ladies' College staff comment, AISNSW Pilot Project Workshop, 21 May 2018).

16   Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2011). Good practice report: Student transition into higher education. *The Australian Learning and Teaching Council*, http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-student-transition-higher-ed-deakin-2011

      Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transitions in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(50), 734-753, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03075079.2012.721351

17   Abstudy - Australian Government group of payments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and apprentices

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

Bring students and their families to the school

As described above in 4.1.1, this enabled students and families to begin developing bonds with staff, become comfortable in the school environment and get to know their future Indigenous peers.

Provide a designated Indigenous student support person

All schools ensured that Indigenous students had at least one designated support person, to whom they had ready access and frequent communication. The three Sydney boarding schools increased the presence of the Indigenous support person in the boarding house to gain a better understanding of what was happening in students' lives, provide support for both students and staff and *'troubleshoot'* problems early on.

Facilitate students supporting each other

Indigenous students provided support for each other through networks and relationships including between siblings, other family and community members. The schools also explicitly facilitated peer-to-peer support, starting before commencement during visits to the school and continuing on through the students' time at the school. For example, Pymble Ladies' College ran a *'Big Sister Program'* through which an older student acted

as a *'sister'* to a new student, taking an interest in them, sitting with them during meals and taking them shopping. Saint Ignatius' College emphasised building relationships and support networks between the Indigenous students, for example using older students as peer mentors for new students.

4.2.2 Impact of Strategy 2

The combined effect of these elements is producing significantly positive changes for students and families across all schools. Overall the shift to a more personal and supported application and enrolment process and stronger connections between families and key staff members contributed to the student feeling safe and positive in their transition into boarding. The following impacts were identified.

Deepened staff awareness and understanding student's culture, capabilities and needs

- In our experience, students feel more secure and better known because staff, including the ISC[18], know where they come from and have some important insights into their life at home and can pass this information onto other key staff such as the boarding staff and academic teachers. (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

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18   ISC – Indigenous Student Coordinator.

Greater support to families in navigating the application and enrolment process

- One parent described the *'great support'* provided to his son and the family by the Indigenous Coordinator, who responded quickly to their questions, and helped them to *'deal with the bureaucracy.'* When their son was homesick the Coordinator gave the family daily updates, advice and strategies for managing the situation. (St Joseph's College, family focus group discussion)

Increased student confidence, familiarity with and security in the school

> *"The transition program was amazing, having Miss X come and visit me at my school was really good because she got to see my school environment, meet my teacher and my mum. That made me feel comfortable. I liked how I got to experience a few days at Pymble as it gave me some insight on what to expect at boarding school including the classroom environment, routines, learning opportunities and sporting opportunities. I met new friends day girls and boarding girls and talk to them about their experience. By the end of the week I knew the school was for me."*
>
> *(Student written feedback provided to the External Evaluation Team by Pymble Ladies' College)*

- Student focus group discussion about the transition activities, including the visit to the school prior to commencing, was very positive. The students explained that it really helped knowing other students prior to starting and that *'the buddy system is great.'* (St Joseph's College, student focus group discussion)

Strengthened student support in managing the transition, including dealing with homesickness

- One parent explained that her son was very homesick for the first two terms *'to the point where he was breaking my heart.'* He asked to come home for the weekend but they could not afford it. She described how the school responded:

> *"When X found out she said to let us know, if you're stressed or he's stressed let us know and we'll work something out. It lifted a lot of weight off my shoulders to know that if he's struggling, if finances are restricting things from happening just to let her know and she'll work on it."*
>
> *(Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)*

The school organised for family members to travel to the school and spend time with the child in Sydney, and they continued to receive weekly updates from the Head of Year 7 Boarding. This level of support made the difference in the family deciding to keep their child at the school, when otherwise they would have withdrawn him. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

- The staff described the positive impact of the additional support provided for student transition through the project, particularly in the Boarding House environment. The First Nations Cultural Mentor was *'invaluable to understanding the other perspective,'* and was the *'Bridge between two worlds'* for students. One staff member provided the example of one student being *'in a slump'*. The Cultural Mentor spent one-to-one time with the student, talking to them about home. He *'has helped this boy walk in 2 worlds.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, staff focus group discussion)

Greater family understanding of the school environment, and confidence in the school to care for their child

- *'The week at Pymble Ladies College was a great experience as it allowed us to get an insight of the school, and to get a feel of the school environment, students, boarding house and opportunities the school has on offer. This was great, it made X and I feel so included and comfortable being away from home and knowing what to expect. I don't think X would feel as comfortable going to Pymble without the transition program.'* (Parent written feedback provided to the External Evaluation Team by Pymble Ladies' College)

- Saint Ignatius' College's parent focus group participants provided positive descriptions of the support provided by the school for student transition. The family and community visits, frequent updates on their child's progress and overall wellbeing, and school's ongoing responsiveness to the family and student's situation and needs were described as all contributing to successful transition. One parent commented that the school *'did everything you could possibly do to make the child feel welcome.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

- One parent described how her Year 8 son continues to be homesick after each break. She was very happy with the amount and type of support he receives, especially from First Nations Cultural Mentor who keeps a regular flow of communication with her informing her how her son is doing. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

Strengthened peer-to-peer support in transition

- There was agreement about the positive impact of the peer-to-peer support that the school nurtures between the Indigenous students which supported students in transition, with references to *'the brothers', 'the mates', 'the nurturing, caring environment.'* (St Joseph's College, family focus group discussion)

- There is a strong sense of camaraderie between the boys, with the older boys looking after the younger ones. *'It's like a form of brotherhood'.* (St Joseph's College, family focus group discussion)

- One parent described that her son *'gets a little homesick from time to time'* and *'the boarding master is fantastic settling him down before bed'.* The other boys also play a huge role in helping each other when they get homesick. (St Joseph's College, family focus group discussion)

- The students described that as well as having the First Nations Cultural Mentor to turn to for support, they had other students, and described how they take care of each other. (Saint Ignatius' College, student focus group)

- Family focus group participants also spoke positively about the peer-to-peer support facilitated by the school, which they described as positive for both the new students and the mentors themselves – *'you can see they feel proud', 'they puff their chests.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

> *"You see the Year 11 and 12 students eating with the Year 7 students, giving them the extra support if they're struggling."*
>
> *(Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)*

- The parents spoke positively about the ways in which the Indigenous students encourage each other, and that her son is benefitting from being around other students who want to do well and be successful. (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

4.2.3 Future developments

Students and family/community noted that a challenging aspect of living in boarding was *'finding a space to be by yourself'* and just having *'time to hang out.'* This is an element that could be addressed more explicitly by the schools.

Understanding the experience of ongoing two-way transition for students between home and school is also an area for future strategic development.

4.3 Strategy 3: Build strong, culturally informed and responsive staff-student relationships and pastoral care

A critical strategy identified across all schools in supporting Indigenous student wellbeing and academic progress was the capacity for staff to develop strong, caring, culturally informed and responsive relationships with students:

> *Throughout the course of this project, it has become evident that positive relationship building is critical in improving outcomes for ATSI young people. As at least two thirds of staff identified, relationship is key.*
>
> *(Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)*

'*[W]e identified early in the project that…without the development and fostering of positive personal relationships, there was little to be gained from striving for academic success.*' (St Joseph's College project reporting)

While strong, caring culturally responsive relationships between staff and students were key to all project schools, for St Joseph's College, Saint Ignatius' College and Pymble Ladies' College, there is the added dimension of providing pastoral care for students in boarding. This was a key element of all schools' projects.

4.3.1 How?

Provide a designated Indigenous student support staff member

The importance of a designated Indigenous student support staff member has already been described in the previous two strategies in relation to building family/community relationships and supporting successful student transition. The role was also identified by all schools as critical to building strong relationships with Indigenous students. As St Joseph's College explains, the *additional support provided by the Indigenous Coordinator enables a greater focus on the Indigenous*

students and a better understanding of each boy and his particular, unique circumstances. This translates to more sensitive and responsive student management.' (St Joseph's College project reporting)

Ideally this staff member is an Indigenous person, who can draw directly upon personal experience and cultural knowledge in supporting students and other staff. In some project schools the staff member in the Indigenous student support role was non-Indigenous but had an ongoing history and close connections with Indigenous people and a high degree of cultural competency.

A full description of the Indigenous student support role is provided in 5.1.3 below. In relation to providing and facilitating culturally responsive student care and relationships it included:

- Supporting the student's overall social, emotional and physical wellbeing

- Building close, trusting personal relationships with students

- Encouraging and facilitating students to develop pride in their cultural heritage and connection with other Indigenous students and with local Indigenous culture

- Supporting students with challenges and resolving problems they may encounter

- Maintaining regular contact with family and other staff on all issues regarding student welfare and progress

- Supporting students in adjusting to school routines and living arrangements

- Supporting students' academic progress and co-curricular development

- Providing positive role modelling and encouraging student's aspirations for success

- In the case of Kempsey Adventist School, their Indigenous support staff member's role (referred to as the Student Wellbeing Officer) was specifically designed to support all students, and be a positive role model for all families. This is in keeping with the explicit whole-school approach to improving Indigenous students' outcomes.

Take the time to engage with students and explicitly convey care, a desire to understand their viewpoints and an interest in their wellbeing

The staff in all four project schools identified the importance of conveying care through daily interactions with Indigenous students in the classroom, the boarding house and around the school. Shared identified approaches were taking the time to listen to students, empathy, sensitivity to students' needs, overall helpfulness, and conveying interest in students' cultural heritage.

The additional resourcing through the project provided expanded opportunities for staff to engage with and develop these caring relationships with students. An example was provided by Saint Ignatius' College, where the academic support provided through the Learning Enrichment Team leads to broader conversations about student wellbeing, and also changes in the ways teachers engage with the students, such as asking about their mob, which would not have happened previously. From these conversations deeper issues emerge, including challenges and trauma that the student may be experiencing.

As a consequence of the project, the schools also sought to understand students in more structured ways by seeking feedback through student and community surveys and other means. For example, Kempsey Adventist School undertook investigation into staff and student's perceptions of relationships and communication, and St Joseph's College conducted a survey of all their Indigenous students and their families to understand their feelings and thoughts regarding aspects of life at the school, including communication, relationships, academic support and pastoral care.

Kempsey Adventist School explicitly and consciously adopted a whole-of-school coordinated approach to building stronger relationships with Indigenous students and families, as a key element of its culturally inclusive pedagogy. It did this through a combination of four factors:

- Relationship strategies developed by staff through the *Stronger Smarter Leadership Program* delivered by the Stronger Smarter Institute[19]

- Trauma management strategies developed through the Berry Street Education Model delivered by the Berry Street Childhood Institute[20] (outlined further below)

- Incorporation of Indigenous pedagogies into learning and teaching practices (8 Ways of Aboriginal Learning)

- Adoption of Project Based Learning pedagogy across the school.

The impact of these developments are discussed further in other sections of this report where relevant. In relation to student relationship building critical factors the school identified were:

- Investing time and focus in communicating with students and their families and developing relationships

- Having high expectations of students and challenging 'deficit thinking' amongst staff, students and community

- In particular listening to students, without responding and without being reactive or judgemental – giving others more voice.

Kempsey Adventist School staff also undertook a video project asking students about their culture, what they think about the school and what they would like to be different, and the Indigenous Student Wellbeing Worker surveyed students around their learning, including their health.

Understand how to support students experiencing trauma

The schools identified that many of their Indigenous students had experienced or were currently living with trauma to a varying degree, and providing the appropriate support was identified by all as crucial. The Indigenous student support staff member was central to this. For example, Saint Ignatius' College's two First Nations Cultural Mentors played a critical role in providing emotional support based on personal experience. The Mentors lived on site, *'which was beneficial for helping the students feel secure when surrounded by First Nations people in their immediate support network.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, school project reporting).

19 Stronger Smarter Institute Limited (2014). High-expectations relationships: a foundation for quality learning environments in all Australian schools. *Stronger Smarter Institute Limited Position Paper*, https://strongersmarter.com.au/resources/high-expectations-relationships/

20 Berry Street Childhood Institute, https://www.childhoodinstitute.org.au/focus-areas/berry-street-education-model

St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill

Kempsey Adventist School drew upon the Berry Street Education Model[21] in its approach to supporting students in trauma, an *'education initiative based on positive education, trauma-informed and well-being practices that enable student to grow personally and academically while have a strengths-based approach.'* The school found the professional development so helpful that in 2019 all its staff, including campus management, canteen and office staff, will be trained in the first two days of the four day course, completing the other two days in 2020.

Reflect and audit relationships in your school

Undertaking a school-wide audit of relationships was suggested as a process for moving forward in strengthening these relationships. Questions for schools to consider are:

- What sort of relationships do your staff have with your students?

- How do students view the relationships? Parents?

- Do your staff have strong interpersonal skills?

- What is the vision of your school for the way all members of your school community interact?

- Do your teachers hold the balance of power in the relationship or are students seen as contributors to the relationship? (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

4.3.2 Impact of Strategy 3

The increased prioritisation upon building strong, caring, culturally informed and responsive staff-student relationships and pastoral care had major impacts in all four schools. It positively impacted upon students'

emotional, social and cultural wellbeing, which flowed through to their capacity and desire to engage academically. This is evident in the following feedback provided by the students, families and staff describing the quality and availability of pastoral care and supportive relationships with teachers and other staff.

Students feel cared for and supported

- The students overwhelmingly praised their teachers. *'The teachers help us, support us'.* *'They're really great teachers, they do a lot for our learning.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

- The students were very positive about the support provided by staff and that *'they will do anything in their powers to help you'* and that *'there is always someone there to help you'.* They referred in particular to the support provided by the Head of Boarding, current and previous Indigenous Student Coordinators and the Deputy Principal. (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

- The students expressed gratitude for the support that the current Indigenous Student Coordinator provides, describing how she *'makes a lot of sacrifices for us'*, and giving the example of taking the Year 12 girls out to dinner. (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

- When talking about the support provided by the school, one student told a story about her sister wanting to leave at one point, and the school did everything it could to encourage her to stay, *'the school would do everything in its power to help you'.* (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

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21   Berry Street Childhood Institute.

- St Joseph's College survey of all 23 Indigenous students found that all respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement *'the staff of the Indigenous Program truly care about my happiness and well-being.'*

- St Joseph's College survey of all 23 Indigenous students found 21 respondents agreed/strongly agreed *'I am confident that I can always go to the staff of the Indigenous Program for help with any question, concern, problem or issue'* (two respondents neither agreed/disagreed/were unsure).

- '*The staff of the Indigenous program truly do care if we're happy or unhappy as they always give us an option to come and speak to them about it or to have some time by ourselves in their office to think about what's making us feel that way, such as giving us option to see a councillor or talking to them privately.'* (St Joseph's College, student survey feedback)

> *Having the Indigenous Coordinator there is "massive for us…it's the attitude he takes towards it, it's more than a job… honestly we'd all be lost without the support."*
>
> *(St Joseph's College, student focus group discussion)*

- *'He's like a second parent, he gives us his view and practical advice.'* (St Joseph's College, student focus group discussion discussing support of the Indigenous Coordinator)

- The students described the staff as very supportive and caring, *'they know if you're falling down.'* *'It's like they're parents but they're teachers.'* (St Joseph's College, student focus group discussion)

- The students spoke positively about their overall experiences at the school. They described it as *'friendly'*, *'like family'*, *'you can be yourself'* and *'it's a good school'*. (Kempsey Adventist School, student focus group discussion)

- The students identified a wide range of staff they could turn to for support including their classroom teachers, who *'talk to you about feelings'* and the

Student Wellbeing Officer who *'is there to listen to you.'* *'Pastor X is always there to talk to.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, student focus group discussion)

- Students were very positive about the support staff, referring particularly to the First Nations Cultural Mentor and the Duty Master. They explained that *'you can trust everyone'* – the teachers, the Indigenous staff and that *'there's lots of support.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, student focus group)

Students adapt more successfully to the boarding house environment

- Student X has *'arrived in Term 3 with a new attitude and a willingness to give it all a go…. From then on he has been going from strength to strength.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)

- Student X has *'emotionally progressed to the point where he is very confident in the boarding house.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)

- Student survey results found that all five of the Year 7 students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt supported in the Boarding House with their learning, and all four Year 8 students who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they felt respected and valued in their House. (Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)

Students are more confident, happier and relaxed

> *Through increased trust, a safe learning environment and personalised learning, the students are becoming more confident and empowered, and demonstrating overt affection in their relationships with teachers.*
>
> *(Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)*

- *'It feels like home here.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, student survey feedback)

Heightened staff awareness of, commitment and capacity to build strong relationships with Indigenous students

- Staff conveyed a heightened responsiveness to students' needs and perspectives, and the importance

of explicitly conveying to students that the teacher cares. One staff member noted that *'the greatest power comes from when they just see you trying.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)

- The St Joseph's College staff focus group members described the support of the Indigenous Coordinator as making a significant difference to their capacity to understand and support students. One described that from the beginning *'X's door is always open for teachers'* and that he provides advice and ongoing guidance about how to handle situations. The Indigenous Coordinator communicates through email and attends faculty and Heads of Department meetings and staff meetings to keep staff updated on student progress and relevant developments, and provides in-class support. (St Joseph's College, focus group discussion)

Family have increased confidence in the school staff's capacity to respond to student's individual emotional needs and form positive, healthy relationships

- *'X is a fantastic support for the girls and the family.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

- X's *'understanding, empathy, grasp of what the girls need is phenomenal.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

One parent provided the example of how some girls need hugs, others don't like to be touched. The Indigenous support staff are aware of this and do "what's best for the child, not what's best for the school."

(Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

- An example was given by one parent that her daughter found the transition to the boarding house very difficult and that *'there were lots of tears.'* The support provided by X made a huge difference, and also knowing that they could be in contact with the school, *'just being a phone call or text away.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

- One parent provided as an example of staff caring for the students, that a teacher made the effort to come to the boarding house when her daughter was unhappy and having *'a hard night'*, and stressed what a difference this made to her daughter. (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

- Family members all spoke positively about the boarding staff and particularly the support provided by the Director of Boarding and Boarding Adviser. (Pymble Ladies' College, family focus group discussion)

Kempsey Adventist School

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

- Family/community members were extremely positive about the impact of the *Stronger Smarter* program upon staff's understanding of and capacity to support Indigenous students. The program had *'changed the mindset'* of teachers, giving them *'greater self-awareness of their own baggage'*, a *'greater understanding of individual students and who you've got in the room.'* They *'full on want to be supportive.'* *'There is a greater sense of awareness that students are individuals.'* *'It's great that all teachers are attending.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family/community focus group discussion)

> *One parent described the school environment as an overall positive one for her son. She felt that the ways in which the staff interacted with the boys provided positive role modelling. She described them as being 'good', 'helpful', 'positive', 'respectful', 'caring' and 'attentive' in their interactions with the boys and that this was helping her son to feel cared for and showing him how to have 'healthy, positive relationships.*
>
> *(Saint Ignatius' College, parent interview)*

Fewer behavioural management issues

All schools referred to their being fewer incidents of behavioural management issues with Indigenous students, as a consequence of strengthened relationships and pastoral care.

Students develop increased self-management skills such as independence, time management and prioritisation

> *[I]ndependence is the area of greatest improvement; they've developed prioritisation skills, and a significant drive for learning that means they will engage with homework independently.*
>
> *(Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)*

- Students described the First Nations Cultural Mentor getting them together and helping them set goals, and talk about problems, which they found really helpful. (Saint Ignatius' College, student focus group discussion)

4.4 Strategy 4: Increase students' expectations and aspirations

The schools' approaches to increasing students' expectations for academic success and aspirations for future work and study success varied according to their unique contexts.

For example, Kempsey Adventist School identified a need to radically shift school-wide expectations and challenge preconceptions about students' capabilities, amongst staff, students and their family/community, and this was identified as a key feature of its project. At Saint Ignatius' College, the staff focus group and interview participants expressed the view that aspiration building has always occurred *'from the first meeting with the boys'*, and from then on there are high expectations of the students and a focus in the school on aspiring to be good learners and *'do your best.'* They build expectations by supporting students to push through difficult and challenging times and develop the confidence that comes from staying at the school and seeing things through.

All schools expressed the view that their project's strategies would combine to raise school-wide expectations for Indigenous students. For example, actions within Strategy 7 (*'Embed Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum'*) and Strategy 9 (*'Take a whole-of-school perspective to improving Indigenous students' outcomes'*) aimed to raise school-wide expectations of Indigenous students' capabilities through greater understanding, incorporation into the school's functioning and explicit valuing of Indigenous perspectives.

Within this context, specific actions schools took to increase Indigenous students' expectations and aspirations are outlined below.

4.4.1 How?

Develop high-expectation relationships

Kempsey Adventist School specifically approached building students' expectations and aspirations through the *Stronger Smarter* high expectation relationships model. Key components of this are strategies for building trust and stronger connections with students, understanding protocols, developing high expectations, having a wider perspective of students and diversity of Indigenous culture, avoiding stereotyping and appreciating individual differences.

The *Stronger Smarter* approach involves challenging one's own assumptions and biases:

> *Unless individuals in a school are prepared to reflect on their own cultural biases and then the school reflect as a whole, it is our assertion that no permanent change will occur.*
>
> *(Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)*

Staff noted that the *Stronger Smarter* training has *'taught us to not have preconceived ideas about Aboriginal people and to be self-reflective'* and that *'we need to have high expectations of ALL our students.'* This includes addressing deficit conversations when they occur – not being a bystander but speaking up against negative voices.

Provide positive Indigenous role models

Schools identified the importance of Indigenous role models to positively influencing students' expectations and aspirations, including role models in the school and in the wider community. Within the context of the projects, this largely centered upon the role of the Indigenous student support staff member.

For example, Saint Ignatius' College identified that as a consequence of the project, the First Nations Academic Coordinator and other staff are providing additional support and encouragement to Indigenous students to try their best academically, and in co-curricular activities.

Kempsey Adventist School's Student Wellbeing Worker stressed the importance of listening and providing students with positive messages as ways to increase aspiration, such as *'tell them we need kids like you in this community. They'll step up to the plate.'*

Pymble Ladies' College actively engaged with the NAIDOC Week *'Because of her, we can'*[22] theme, which promoted high achieving, influential Indigenous women figures, within the school's broader discourse centering on women's efforts and achievements.

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22   NAIDOC. (2017) *'NAIDOC 2018: Because of her, we can!'* https://www.naidoc.org.au/news/2018-national-naidoc-theme-announced

The schools provided numerous examples of interactions with other positive Indigenous role models including local Elders and successful Indigenous professional and sports people.

Facilitate students' goal setting and planning

The schools utilised various approaches to support students in goal setting, with a particular emphasis on the use of Personalised Learning Plans. The Indigenous support staff were central to the process of developing the Plan and liaising with a wide range of other school staff to facilitate building student aspirations. For example, Pymble Ladies' College used Personalised Learning Plans to initiate conversations about and student engagement in the once-a-term SMART[23] goal setting process.

Remind Indigenous students of their capabilities

Frequently reminding students of their capabilities, and explicitly encouraging them across all spheres and acknowledging effort and successes was occurring in all schools.

4.4.2 Impact of Strategy 4

Increased student confidence and aspiration

Given the embedded approach to building expectations and aspirations, it was difficult to specifically identify the impact of project activity, but there are positive early indications of increased expectations and aspirations. One of these was a strong impact across all four schools upon family/community's confidence that the school has high expectations for their child, and is supporting students in realising their expectations. This is reflected in the following comments:

> *One parent explained that his son is now thinking about university because of this contact with previous Indigenous students. "That person's the same as me, he's had the same experience as me."*
>
> *(St Joseph's College, parent interview)*

- Family focus group participants all conveyed the view that their children saw the opportunities the school was providing, and that the school had high expectations of the students, for example one saying that *'they want him to succeed.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, family focus group discussion)

- The family/community members were positive that the school's *Stronger Smarter* high expectations and Project Based Learning approaches were contributing to a positive school culture that was in turn building student aspiration. They were enabling students to develop a broader range of skills beyond academic capabilities, and building students' self-confidence. The group provided specific examples of how the Project Based Learning had positively impacted upon their child's engagement and interest in study. (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

- Family members discussed their children having more confidence to take on leadership positions. *'The shame thing is not as big a deal now'*, the students are stepping up more because there is a stronger Indigenous presence in the school. Indigenous students are standing up to be in leadership positions within the school. (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

Staff provided positive feedback around shifts in Indigenous students' expectations and aspirations. For example:

- Staff described students having a greater interest in and wanting to go to university, and aspire to other goals *'besides playing rugby.'* Specific examples were provided including of one student who had made enormous progress since being at the school, and had greatly increased confidence and aspiration. This student now wanted to go to university. Another example was given of a student whom the Indigenous Coordinator had supported and built aspiration, stepping in when family had not been able to. There was an understanding amongst the staff of the need to ensure that each of the boys aspire to success, and that this will mean different things to different students. The Indigenous Coordinator keeps in touch with students after leaving the school, and reports on where they are now. (St Joseph's College, staff focus group)

23 SMART goals – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Time-bound

The combined impact of the other strategies is being reflected in increased aspirations:

> *"My goals and options for life after school have particularly changed over the time being here at Joeys. The support given to me while attending the College has significantly improved my understanding of the options after school. By improving in all my subjects I've become more confident into thinking what I actually want to do once I finish Year 12."*
>
> *(St Joseph's College, student survey)*

4.4.3 Future developments

It will be important in continuing to improve Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes that we deepen our understanding of the impact of the various strategies upon their self-expectations and aspirations. It is equally critical that we continue to investigate strategies for raising school-wide expectations for all students as a prerequisite for improved academic achievements. These are areas for further evaluation and research.

St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill

Kempsey Adventist School
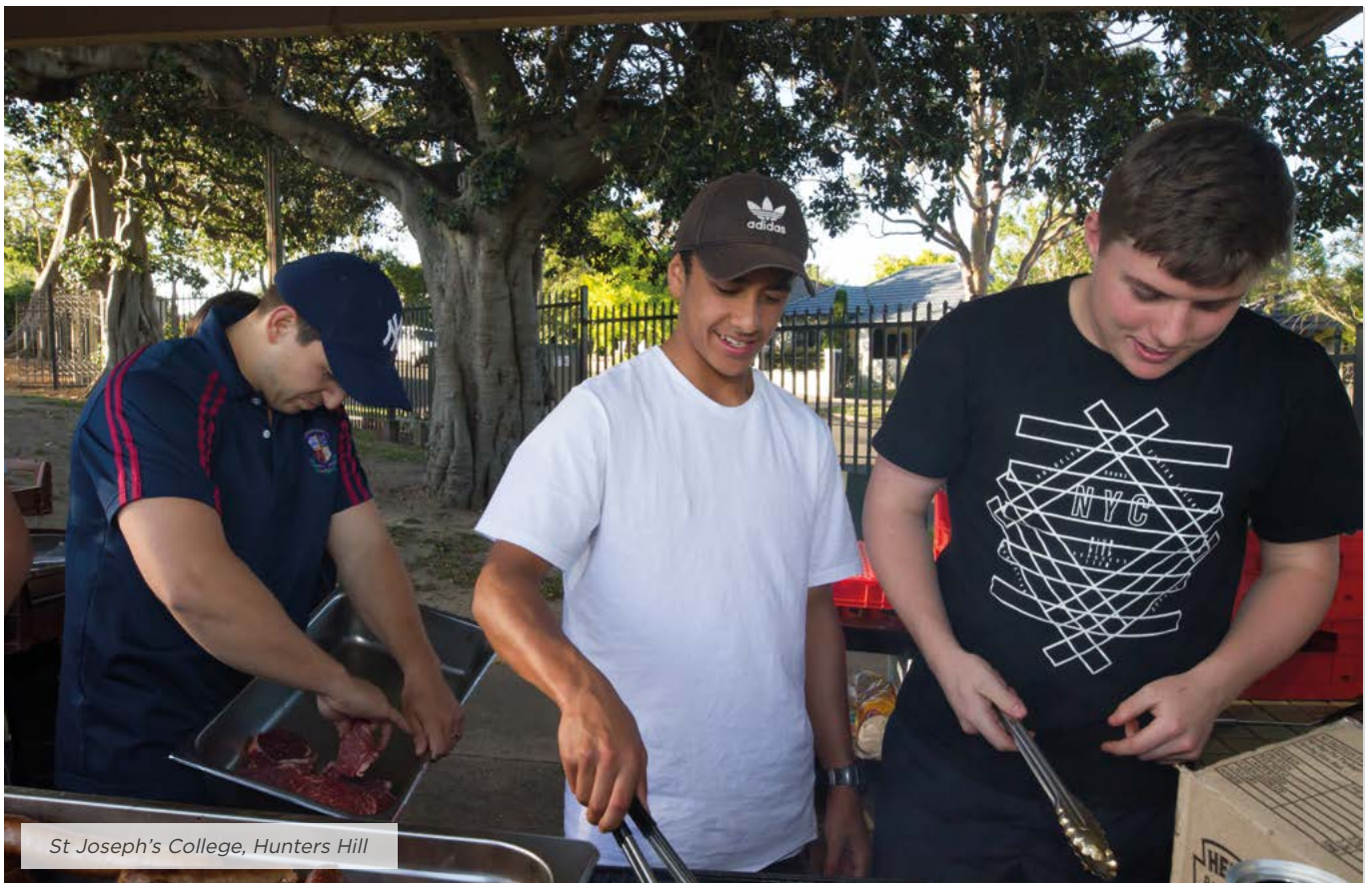
4.5 Strategy 5: Support students to develop a strong sense of cultural identity and pride in their Indigenous heritage

A key element of all schools' projects was valuing students' Indigenous heritage and supporting them in developing pride in this heritage. The schools recognised that this was a vital part of their wellbeing, and that *'They love the opportunity to express pride in their culture and identity'* (Kempsey Adventist School project reporting). This approach aligns with previous research regarding the importance to Indigenous students' wellbeing and progress of valuing and supporting Indigenous culture in the school.[24]

4.5.1 How?

Build positive, culturally affirming relationships between school and community

The importance and benefits of building connections and relationships with family/community were specifically addressed in Strategy 1 above. It is mentioned again here, because it was recognised by the schools that family and community are core to Indigenous students' sense of identity, and explicitly valuing links with family/community conveys to students the value the school places on their Indigenous heritage. This strategy aligns with previous research that Indigenous parents want schooling and teaching to affirm cultural identity.[25]

Provide positive Indigenous role models

The power of Indigenous role models in supporting students' wellbeing and development has been addressed in all previous project strategies, in particular in relation to the important role that the Indigenous student support staff have in this respect.

The schools also utilised other Indigenous cultural role models. For example, St Joseph's College employs a Cultural Tutor to work with the students in a 1-1 or 1-2 person session and reports that there is an *'unquenchable thirst'* for this cultural education. The sessions educate students about Indigenous traditions, specific lore from their own individual nations, and provide didgeridoo

tutoring. The students also have access to Indigenous Elders who share storytelling and wood carving expertise. The school aims to build on this in the future through discussion with parent and family communities. Saint Ignatius' College employs two First Nations Cultural Mentors who were central to building the students' sense of cultural context. Kempsey Adventist School's Student Wellbeing Officer provides culturally based guidance for student and is also a conduit into the local Indigenous community.

Provide a variety of opportunities for Indigenous students to display confidence and leadership

Through the projects, the schools were expanding the opportunities for Indigenous students to take on leadership roles, not only in Indigenous specific contexts – for example Welcome to/Acknowledgement of Country or Indigenous cultural events – but across the school more generally. As a staff member at Pymble Ladies' College expressed, *'Don't just pull the Indigenous girls out to the front for Indigenous things but for other stuff.'*

Staff explicitly convey interest in students' Indigenous heritage and their desire to learn more

The schools were highly conscious of explicitly demonstrating to students their interest in and valuing of Indigenous culture. This was done on an organisational basis – for example specific cultural events, and also in one case seeking student feedback regarding staff learning more about their culture (Kempsey Adventist School). It also occurred through staff's individual interactions with students. Examples include staff asking questions about students' cultural backgrounds, and also about their suggestions for improving school life for Indigenous students. Staff in all four schools were deeply conscious of conveying their desire to learn, extend and deepen their understanding of Indigenous culture.

Provide opportunities for Indigenous students to connect with each other, both within the school and with Indigenous students at other schools

Students in the focus group discussions commented that they also valued and looked forward to meeting

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24 Mooney, J., Seaton, M., Kaur, G., & Seeshing Yeung, A, (2016). Cultural perspectives on Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian students' school motivation and engagement, and reciprocal research partnership model. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 47, 11-23, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.04.006; Sarra, C. (2003). Young and Black and Deadly: Strategies for Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Students. Paper No.5 Quality Teaching Series, ACT: Australian College of Educators.

25 Lewthwaite, B. E., Boon, H., Webber, T., & Laffin, G. (2017). Quality Teaching Practices as Reported by Aboriginal Parents, Students and their Teachers: Comparisons and Contrasts. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(12). Retrieved from http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol42/iss12/5

Indigenous students at other schools. As well as being great opportunities to meet new students, for students in boarding in particular gatherings with Indigenous students at other schools enabled them to meet up with other family and community. The additional resourcing provided through the pilot project enabled Pymble Ladies' College to extend opportunities for their Indigenous students to participate in the following programs:

- Australian Indigenous Education Foundation – students regularly participate in AIEF events including university experience days, careers sessions, the mentoring program, social gatherings and cultural events

- GO/AIME[26] – students regularly participate in events including program days. The College also works in partnership with AIME to provide a yarning circle for Indigenous students held weekly for those wishing to attend

- Aboriginal Youth Program held at the local PCYC[27] – designed for local Aboriginal youth in the area to come together for a range of activities and explore Aboriginal culture.

Indigenous sports rounds were also very positively mentioned by students at Pymble Ladies' College and St Joseph's College.

Integrate regular, school-wide Indigenous cultural activities into school life

This included making Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country a regular part of school assemblies and other events. Pymble Ladies' College supported Indigenous students in writing their own Acknowledgements/Welcomes as a way of personalising the ceremony and providing another opportunity for Indigenous students to demonstrate pride in culture, using a model whereby students share parts of their own stories and family histories.

Provide Indigenous cultural activities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

Schools provided a range of cultural activities, some specifically for Indigenous students but others for all students, to increase awareness and understanding of

the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures. These included:

- Aboriginal dance workshops for all students

- An Aboriginal artist in residence to work with students on the concepts around identity and create a mural at the school

- Attendance at cultural/art performances (for example Bangarra Dance Theatre)

- Excursions to local Indigenous sites.

Provide culturally sensitive physical spaces for Indigenous students and family/community

The schools all identified the importance of providing designated spaces in the school for Indigenous students and for their families. This includes spaces where families and students feel welcome, where students feel comfortable and safe talking about their experiences and spending time together, and can engage in culturally based activities with mentors and others. Examples included yarning circle spaces and separate premises with accommodation provisions on campus or nearby.

Embed Indigenous perspectives and culture into the curriculum

This is addressed as a separate strategy below (Strategy 7).

4.5.2 Impact of Strategy 5

Students feel their culture is highly valued by teachers and other staff

Student feedback regarding staff learning more about their culture included:

- *'It's mad, I'm glad they're doing it, I feel it helps people who aren't in our culture understand more.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

- *'I think it's good, so that people can know more about our culture, so it won't be forgotten.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

- *'Well I'm glad that they have been [learning about Dunghutti culture], because I feel like most of other cultures think that we are dangerous and irresponsible and all that, when we are not!'* (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

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26 GO – GO Foundation; AIME – Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience

27 PCYC – Police Citizens Youth Club

- *'I think it's great because if the school is more involved then I can learn more about my culture.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

- Students talked positively about having a yarning circle, where some classes go for discussions, and *'other students just to hang out because it's a nice space.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, student focus group)

> ***The students were extremely positive about the support provided by the Deputy Principal. "Mrs X supports us in so many ways." She "questions us and asks us how we can make the school a better place for Aboriginal children."***
>
> ***(Kempsey Adventist School, student focus group)***

- The students were very aware of the attempts by teachers to connect with them and learn about Indigenous culture. *'They want to learn about our culture, they work with community.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

- The students described how recently there had been greater acknowledgement of Indigenous culture. *'They're teaching us more about Aboriginal culture. We get to celebrate being Aboriginal, it is a good school for Aboriginal people.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, student focus group discussion)

- The students described there being a lot of positive change over the past year to value Indigenous culture including the Indigenous sports round, Indigenous jersey, opening ceremonies and cultural celebrations, and Acknowledgment of Country at assemblies. (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group)

> ***"The teachers are doing a lot of learning, they're learning about our culture, asking questions." "They understand more."***
>
> ***(Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)***

- *'Teachers really care about Indigenous culture.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

Strengthened student pride in culture and leadership

This is demonstrated in the following comments from family and community:

- There had been an enormous improvement in student leadership skills, for example being more active in assemblies and Indigenous students undertaking school captain roles. (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

- The *'kids step up here, they excel in ways they wouldn't if they were somewhere else.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)

> ***"The Aboriginal pride is obvious."***
>
> ***(Kempsey Adventist School, family focus group discussion)***

- *'There is great pride from the boys in their culture,'* this has grown over the time of the project. (St Joseph's College, family focus group discussion)

- The boys are proud of their culture, and also proud that they are *'Joey's boys'* now and always will be part of the school community. Once that would have been a difficult thing but now they do both. (St Joseph's College, staff focus group discussion)

- The students described at length a speech that one of the Indigenous student's present had given at school assembly. The student then explained that in the past he had hidden that he was Aboriginal, but since being at Joey's he had developed the confidence to share the pride he has in his culture. The other students were clearly pleased and congratulatory about his presentation. (St Joseph's College, student focus group)

- The parents were very positive about the valuing of Indigenous culture in the school with comments including that *'being Indigenous in this school makes them feel special…they're treated with a lot of respect'*, *'small in numbers but a big presence'*, *'the girls feel confident about being Aboriginal'*. (Pymble Ladies' College, family/community focus group)

• The parents spoke very positively about Acknowledgement of Country and Indigenous round of sport. (Pymble Ladies' College, family/community focus group)

Students feel stronger connection to and growing understanding of their Indigenous heritage

Pymble Ladies' College reported that their Indigenous students are *'developing their own cultural awareness and sharing this with others. Students recognise that there are a lot more opportunities now available and that these successfully support both their wellbeing and learning. In their reflections, see below, there is evidence of interest, curiosity, confidence and a commitment to personal growth. The following comments come from a range of activities and reveal strong feelings of connection, self-worth and interest in learning about culture.'*

• *'I feel heavily connected when I am at the PCYC. The people, dance, poetry and fun have kept me hooked in. It interlocks culture with making new friends which boosts my attitude towards everything, including school.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

• *'I was really interested to go to Worawa College because my Grandma's heritage is from Victoria. My Aunty also attend Worawa schools it's a bit of a tradition. I enjoyed the activities there and liked getting to know new people. I spoke to my nan a lot and compared my experience to my aunties.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

• *'The AIME sessions on Mondays are great! It gives me realistic standards and goals for myself. I ask questions about my culture and ask questions about my future or at least, how I can shape it. My aspirations are always respected by others which is comforting.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

Students discussed how much they enjoyed attending Indigenous events at other schools, and that they valued and looked forward to these occasions to meet other indigenous students. They described enthusiastically meeting up with family at other schools, including siblings. They would like to have more of these opportunities. (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

The students spoke enthusiastically about the Indigenous Family Weekend at Colo, outlining having the elders there, doing 'cultural stuff' like learning about the dreamtime and telling stories, wood carving, weapons, and having the camp fire. They loved the history, and suggested getting other elders in next time so they can learn different stories. (St Joseph's College, student focus group)

4.5.3 Future developments

Feedback was received from students at Kempsey Adventist School and Pymble Ladies' College regarding the ways in which staff asked Indigenous students questions relating to their Indigenous heritage. While they appreciated their opinions being sought about Indigenous issues, they advised teachers not to do this in front of the class: 'No on the spot questions' about Indigenous issues/culture. They felt the pressure that 'you're expected to know everything' and then felt inadequate and shamed if they could not answer. They suggested that it was best to ask them for their perspective on a one-to-one basis out of class.

4.6 Strategy 6 Provide individualised, targeted learning to improve literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes

Providing individualised, specific, targeted learning support was a core element of the schools' projects, directly addressing the pilot project's objective of improving Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes.

Over the course of the project all four schools increasingly refined and deepened their understanding of students' learning capabilities and needs, and on this basis the resourcing, processes and actions they undertook to meet these needs and improve students' academic outcomes.

4.6.1 How?

Table 5 synthesises the processes and associated elements the schools undertook to provide systematic, comprehensive literacy and numeracy development support for Indigenous students.

Table 5. Process and elements of successful Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy development in the project schools

Assess	Undertake student information gathering and assessment prior to entry to identify student literacy and numeracy capabilities as early as possible. This was a key element to the schools identifying students' capabilities and needs upfront and providing individualised support.
	This included:
	• During the family/community visits, meeting with teachers from the student's previous schools to discuss interests and capabilities (Pymble Ladies' College, St Joseph's College, Saint Ignatius' College)
	• Undertaking diagnostic testing using: Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (St Joseph's College), York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (Pymble Ladies' College, St Joseph's College, Saint Ignatius' College), Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (Saint Ignatius' College), Progress Achievement Tests (Kempsey Adventist School) and Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals assessment (Saint Ignatius' College).
Plan	Develop a Personalised Learning Plan with each student.
Specialist support	Use trained specialists. This included specialist literacy and numeracy teachers and in some instances Speech and Language Therapists.
Literacy and numeracy programs	Utilise the various literacy and numeracy programs – see Table 6.
Individualised support	Provide one on one tutoring for each student tailored to specific and identified needs. This included:
	• Intensive, private literacy tutoring
	• General private tutoring
	• Evening tutoring in boarding (Pymble Ladies' College, St Joseph's College, Saint Ignatius' College)
	• Using ex-students as tutors who also provided positive role modelling/aspiration building
	• Providing Indigenous support staff who combined academic with pastoral and cultural support (for example Saint Ignatius' College Cultural Mentor also supported students' learning in boarding).
Small group learning	Undertake small group, collaborative learning – for example Kempsey Adventist School provided small groups to develop students' writing skills, and Saint Ignatius' College ran small group sessions delivered by a Speech and Language Therapist to improve written expression and vocabulary.
In class support	In class teachers and specialists provided support to Indigenous students.
Indigenous pedagogy and cultural responsiveness	Approaches informed by/aligned with Indigenous pedagogy. For example, the use of small group collaboration, embedded in pastoral care.

Table 5. Process and elements of successful Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy development in the project schools (cont'd)

Indigenous staff in academic positions	Indigenous academic staff worked directly with students in tutoring, small group and in-class contexts. For example, St Joseph's College's Indigenous Academic Coordinator worked directly with students one-to-one and in small groups, and Saint Ignatius' College's First Nations Tutor supported students in the Boarding House, one hour five nights per week.
Track	Continue to track students to identify progress. This was done by all schools through: • Collaboration between teaching staff to discuss student progress • Regular collection of student data including collecting writing samples, and through diagnostic testing • Termly multi-disciplinary review meetings with all key stakeholders.

Table 6. Inventory of the literacy and numeracy development programs used by the project schools

Literacy development	
Program	**Project schools**
Reading Tutor program (MultiLit)	Pymble Ladies' College (discontinued after first year due to low student engagement), Saint Ignatius' College
Spell It (MultiLit)	Pymble Ladies' College
Targeted Reading program	Pymble Ladies' College
MacqLit program	St Joseph's College, Saint Ignatius' College
Literacy and Learning elective	Pymble Ladies' College
Reinforced reading	St Joseph's College
Numeracy development	
Mathematics Pathway Program	Kempsey Adventist School
QuickSmart Numeracy program	Saint Ignatius' College

4.6.2 Impact of Strategy 6

Across all four schools the processes and programs outlined above were resulting in positive literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students. These are outlined below on an individual school basis given differences in each school's focus and approach.

Kempsey Adventist School

As described in other sections, Kempsey Adventist School aimed to improve Indigenous students' academic outcomes primarily through Project Based Learning and the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning pedagogies. These were proving effective in increasing student engagement and interest in learning.

During the course of the project, the school also introduced more targeted literacy and numeracy programs. In part, this was influenced by feedback from the first family/community focus group discussion in September 2017 that they would like to see more one-on-one support and more initiatives to build students' numeracy and literacy.

In response the school introduced literacy support for students through small groups with a literacy teacher. Sixteen students participated, mostly from Years 7 and 8. Progress was identified in students' sentence formation, punctuation (full stops, capitalisation), and use of simple past tense. Teachers also reported improvements in students feeling more confident and competent about writing in class.

Student feedback about the literacy group work was largely positive. Students participating in the focus groups commented that they enjoyed the small group work and they thought it was helping with their writing. School student survey feedback was also positive with comments including that *'It's helping me a lot to learn different techniques,' 'It's fun and you get to do it with your friends and its helping me in different ways.'*

Numeracy development was provided over two terms in 2018 through the Mathematics Pathway Program with Years 7, 8 and 9 students. The program was selected as it is individualised and provided *'learning with the right amount of challenge for each student with appropriate teacher support.'* Students commented that *'I can do the work sometimes I just need the reassurance'* and *'If the teacher gives me time, I can do it',* indicating the strength of this individualised approach.

At least half the students undertaking the program showed growth, although this had not yet been reflected in standardised tests and students still reported not feeling positive about Mathematics. Staff felt that both factors are likely due to students' previous negative history in the subject and short time span on the program. The school expects stronger results to emerge in the next two to three years.

Pymble Ladies' College

Pymble Ladies' College targeted improving Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy through a comprehensive suite of approaches including identifying students' needs and capabilities through pre-entry assessment, the active use of tailored Personalised Learning Plans, in class support, individual tutoring and reading programs.

The school also provides a specific literacy course by invitation to students with identified learning needs: *Literacy and Learning 1.* This course provides instruction and opportunities for each student to practise, and gain confidence and capability in reading and writing skills, as well as to develop an increased awareness of how to apply learning strategies effectively. It adopts a flexible approach to enable individual learners to reach personal targets, and also provides the student with opportunities for academic support across a range of learning areas.

Increased student engagement with learning, increased confidence and academic progress were demonstrated including:

- Students are more articulate about their learning due to goal setting and more confident about themselves as learners.

- The Year 8 Reading Program was seen as having an enormous impact with reading for pleasure, targeted reading, word recognition, word strings, modelling all proving very effective.

- Many students are now reading for pleasure and this has transferred into the classroom through improved literacy. (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

Staff feel there have been developments in numeracy capabilities, but these are not as yet reflected in testing.

Students participating in the focus group discussions spoke positively about the schools' individualised approach, including getting to know their learning style at the beginning of the year through a 'What type of learner are you?' survey. They were also positive about the extra

learning support provided, that they used the support and benefitted from it. They found the 1-1 tutoring really helpful, including with overall motivation – this was particularly mentioned by the senior students (Years 10-12). Comments included:

- *'Prep time is great as we get a lot more academic support.'*

- *'The extra support has motivated me.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

All parents participating in the focus group discussions were very positive about the type of support being provided and their child's progress. One parent described that there had been *'massive improvements'* in her child's literacy and another that through the learning enrichment program the girls' *'improvements are out of sight.'*

St Joseph's College

St Joseph's College also undertook intensive pre-entry assessment to determine students' learning needs and capabilities and on this basis developed individualised programs. Improvements were reported in students' literacy and numeracy achieved through intensive and general private tutoring, and in class support from the Indigenous Academic Support Teacher.

Students participating in the focus groups were enthusiastic when describing the learning support they received, and the school's survey of Indigenous students found that all 23 students agreed that *'I have access to a range of support for my academic work'* and that the *'support provided has helped me improve academically.'*

Comments included:

- *'I've improved significantly in all my subjects since coming to St Joseph's.'*

- *'I've improved with my classes drastically because of tutoring.'*

- *'My study sessions have definitely improved my learning.'*

Parents in the family/community focus group discussions spoke positively about the access to learning enrichment support and tutoring in the boarding house, describing it as tailored to each student's particular circumstances and that it was *'exceptional.'* They described the teachers as being *'child-focused'* and responsive to each student's individual learning needs.

The school reports that while there have been improvements in literacy and numeracy:

- *'.... the most drastic improvement in the academic profile of each student in the Indigenous program has been the attitude shift toward a greater desire to succeed academically...Students are regularly seeking further assistance with their studies and the shift has seen their aspirations and prospects after school improve dramatically.'* (St. Joseph's College, project reporting)

Saint Ignatius' College

Saint Ignatius' College reported that improvements in Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy outcomes were one of their project's major successes. These have been achieved through specialised reading, numeracy and language development programs designed in accordance with careful pre-assessment of students' learning capabilities. In class support has also been a key element. The school carefully monitored each student's progress and adapted support accordingly.

The support has generally translated into improved classroom results for eight out of ten students. The school has found that minimal transfer of support work into improved classroom results (in the case of two students) can be understood as related to the more complex cognitive and emotional needs of those students.

Outcomes include:

- Year 7 students demonstrated growth in all areas, including three years growth in all Mathematics areas to the high average level.

- Year 8 students experienced a four year gain in sentence composition from 10 to 14 year old. Math problem solving improved by two years from 10 to 12 year old.

- NAPLAN results for Year 7 students showed growth by 2 to 3 bands in Numeracy and Reading. Psychometric Assessment showed growth from 12 months to three years in Maths and reading comprehension. Year 8 students showed two to four years growth on reading and Maths measurements.

The following feedback from the school's Educational Psychologist affirms the gains made by the Indigenous students:

- *'In many cases prior to attending Riverview[28], many of these children have been progressing at a rate slower than their peers, meaning that every twelve months, they have only been improving a few months if at all. Therefore, for some children, 12 months growth is actually very positive, as it may be many times more than what they would have grown without such support. I find children with learning difficulties often regress in Year 7-8 when they do not receive support as they avoid things more and more (such as reading etc.). Therefore, for some children to make any growth at all during this period is very positive.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)

Students' feedback regarding their literacy and numeracy development was positive. In a school survey, all five Year 7 students and three of four Year 8 students agreed/strongly agreed they coped better with their school work. Four of five Year 7 and four of five Year 8 agreed/strongly agreed they feel more confident asking and answering questions in class.

Student focus group feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the tutorial assistance available to them, and the support staff they worked with, with one commenting that *'Miss X is a great support.'* When asked about their work, they all thought their work was improving.

Interestingly, the students were able to clearly articulate how they were assisted with learning, with them collectively outlining how the teachers go *'step by step'*, breaking things down and explaining. They agreed that the work was *'challenging but not too challenging.'* This may indicate that explicit teaching and scaffolding pedagogical approaches[29] are proving to be effective teaching tools, and it would be useful to investigate this in more detail in future evaluation work.

4.6.3 Future developments

Across all schools there were gains in students' literacy and numeracy as a consequence of project activity. However, the following issues were identified.

- The potential to overburden and tire the student with too many additional academic commitments and activities. Saint Ignatius' College identified the need to manage the interventions so that students were not overwhelmed, which could lead to tiredness and lowered inclination to engage with the work. This was done through ongoing monitoring and tailoring of the programs to the student's needs.

- Providing in class support can potentially cause the student to feel singled out and shamed. Schools were trialling different approaches for avoiding this situation. For example, Pymble Ladies' College managed the delivery of in class support with strategies such as assisting all students not just the Indigenous students, and starting off with assisting high achieving students before going to the Indigenous student. The aim was to *'normalise support'*, and de-emphasise the presence of the support teacher so that they *'become part of the furniture.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, staff focus group discussion)

- The issue of shame was also raised by a Year 9 student participating in small group writing at Kempsey Adventist School who was experiencing *'shame because I was with Year 7's.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)

This feedback raises an important issue regarding how support is provided. As expressed by one of the teachers participating in the staff focus group, there needs to be awareness of *'protecting the student's social persona while helping him learn.'* These are areas for further thought and development.

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28   Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

29   O'Neill, S., Geoghegan, D., & Petersen, S. (2013). Raising the pedagogical bar: teachers' co-construction of explicit teaching. *Improving Schools*, 16(2), 148-158; Morcom, V. (2014). Scaffolding social and emotional learning in an elementary classroom community: A sociocultural perspective. International journal of Educational Research, 67, 18-29, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2014.04.002

Pymble Ladies' College

4.7 Strategy 7: Embed Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum

Embedding Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum was a critical component of the schools' approach to improving outcomes for Indigenous students. In line with good practice for culturally inclusive pedagogy[30], the activities and processes outlined below were undertaken to more explicitly recognise and value Indigenous culture in the classroom and provide greater opportunities for incorporating students' and family/ community's cultural beliefs, knowledge and experiences.

4.7.1 How?

Undertake a whole-school curriculum audit as part of a whole-school approach

Pymble Ladies' College undertook a curriculum audit to map where and what Indigenous perspectives were being taught in each subject across each Stage, and is using the data to identify departments needing greater support in this area. The audit can also potentially contribute to raising staff awareness around and importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives and cross-discipline collaboration, This approach will support alignment with curriculum development processes regarding incorporation of Indigenous perspectives as specified by the NSW Government Education Standards Authority and Australian Professional Standards for Teachers[31].

Cultural professional learning experiences

The four schools increased staff professional development in cultural awareness – this is discussed further in section 5.1.5.

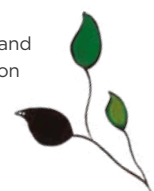#### Include Indigenous texts, and other resources and subject matter

All schools were conscious of and making progress in including Indigenous texts and resources. Saint Ignatius' College for example is working to expand connection of curriculum to culture and homelands, for example weaving culture into science, and exploring the chemistry of ochre. Schools provided numerous examples of other activities such as excursions to Indigenous cultural sites integrated into units of work.

Ask Indigenous students, family and community

To varying degrees the schools drew upon the knowledge of their own Indigenous students, current and ex, and their families and wider communities where relevant, as they sought to expand Indigenous context and perspectives. This included financially reimbursing local Elders for their time spent sharing cultural knowledge.

Guidance and knowledge from Indigenous staff

Indigenous staff played a key role in increasing Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in the curriculum through informal interactions and presentations to staff about Indigenous culture and presentations and discussions with students. Examples included having the

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30 Munns et al, *op. cit.*

31 NSW Government Education Standards Authority, *Syllabus Development Process*'. Viewed 15 February 2019 at http://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/k-10/understanding-the-curriculum/curriculum-development/syllabus-development-process/statement-values; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, Focus area 1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and Focus area 2.4: Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Viewed 15 February 2019 at https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards

Indigenous staff member come into the class to discuss the Aboriginal perspective on scientific phenomena and sharing an Aboriginal perspective on caring for land as part of Technology: Agricultural Studies learning (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion).

Adopting broader Indigenous pedagogical approaches

Kempsey Adventist School's approach to embedding Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum was to incorporate it into the school-wide adoption of Project Based Learning. This provided opportunities for responding to students' preferred learning styles, and for staff to give students *'choice and voice.'* This was combined with the *Stronger Smarter* approach to building relationships and utilising the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning Framework.

Specific examples staff provided of these approaches were:

- Building trust through talking to students before a class in which an Aboriginal text was going to be used

- Switching to individual learning programs for Mathematics so that students need not fear 'being outed' for their level, only they know, hence protecting student's social persona while helping him learn. *'They're safe as can be because no one knows where they are up to.'*

- Providing a variety of texts and levels rather than just one text so that students can select one that's interesting and at their level. (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)

- Greater use of visual displays and visual maps, *'so that students can "see" where we are going.'*

4.7.2 Impact of Strategy 7

Increased staff awareness and increased inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and materials

Across all schools there was increased staff awareness of and commitment to embedding Indigenous perspectives and culture into the curriculum. Feedback indicated the cultural awareness professional development was increasing understanding of key features of Indigenous culture and possibilities for inclusion of Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum.

Schools provided evidence that there had been an increased inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and materials in teaching and learning.

It appears that the project is providing an impetus for change, and processes have been initiated that should see more development at the school rather than individual teacher level.

School-wide approach is effective

Kempsey Adventist School was demonstrating the impacts that can be achieved by a whole-school approach to change. The school-wide adoption of Project Based Learning, the *Stronger Smarter* and 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning was conducive to incorporating students' and community's Indigenous perspectives and teaching and learning approaches that resonated with Indigenous students. This was leading to significant increases in student engagement and enjoyment in learning. An example of this is that in 2017, 46 per cent of staff observed a dramatic increase in engagement during the major Festival of Creativity, 31 per cent that some student's engagement increased and 18 per cent not many. In 2018, all involved staff expressed support for Project Based Learning because of increased student engagement and aspiration, describing it as:

- Liberating and exciting to see so many ATSI young people engaged and see the flow-on effects from PBL to other areas of the school e.g. staff/student relationships, student/student relationships, and even an improvement in academic work. (School project reporting)

Family/community focus group participants were overwhelmingly positive that the school's approaches were having positive outcomes for their children, with one commenting that *'They're excelling and it's all because they're enjoying it'* and another that *'my child has never shown this much enthusiasm for any learning at school.'* In particular the parents noted the combination of classwork and *'hands on stuff'* was benefitting students' learning.

The students were very positive about Project Based Learning in the focus group discussions, with one commenting that *'PBL is great, it helps our learning.'* When asked about what they liked they referred to the *'hands on'* approach and that they *'have a say'* in what they are learning about.

The students were generally positive that there had been increases in the amount of Indigenous content, and would like to see more of this.

Positive student impact

In all four schools, student feedback was positive about the inclusion of Indigenous content into their classwork. This was one important way in which enabled them to learn more about their own heritage, and know that that heritage is valued by the staff and the school. The benefits of this to students have already been outlined in Strategy 5 above.

4.7.3 Future developments

Embedding Indigenous perspectives and content in curriculum continues to develop, and the schools themselves recognised the critical need to progress this.

There was a consistent message from Indigenous students at all schools that that they wanted their schools to increase Indigenous content. For example, one student at Pymble Ladies' College expressed that there needed to be *'more recognition of the past'* and the rest of the group expressed agreement. The pressing need for more Indigenous content is reflected in this student's comment, with which the rest of the group agreed:

• *'There should be someone who comes in to teach us about culture because we should know more about it, I'm so uneducated, I don't even know where I'm from'.* (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion)

4.8 Strategy 8: Provide transition-out guidance and support to Indigenous students

Three of the four project schools included amongst their objectives providing increased support to students in transitioning out of the secondary school to further study or work, and in some instances securing accommodation and connecting with recreation and leisure opportunities.

The need to do so is reflected in research that while Indigenous students have aspirations for work they are less likely than non-Indigenous students to know much about the details of particular jobs that interest them or opportunities for further education and training post-school[32]. Indigenous students may experience difficulty in identifying relevant and useful sources of information about work and study, and navigating the bureaucratic/organisational processes of applying and enrolling in further study.

4.8.1 How?

Support students' understanding of work/study options and aspiration building

Activities to build aspiration and knowledge of study/work options included:

• Arranging visits to tertiary universities for open days/other events, sometimes with an accompanying staff member

• Arranging for previous students to visit and meet with current students to share their learning journeys post-school

• Connecting students with others who can assist, for example connecting with university Indigenous units

• Supporting students to access scholarship information

• Individual counselling about post-school options, from the Careers Adviser or an Indigenous staff member.

Provide assistance with course applications and enrolment

Schools provided practical assistance in applications for university and vocational courses and for scholarships.

Post-school learning support

Kempsey Adventist School provided access to learning support from staff to previous students.

Employment

Schools provided information and assisted students with networking to secure employment post-school.

Accommodation

To varying degrees, the schools supported students in identifying accommodation options post-school.

Mentoring support

At Saint Ignatius' College, Indigenous students are paired with mentors with whom they spend recreation time in enjoyable activities and who also assist with setting goals, dealing with problems and homework. The mentors maintain contact with the student post-school and provide general support as well as facilitating connections to work and sport.

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32 Craven, R., Tucker, A., Munns, G., Hinkley, J., Marsh, H. & Simpson, K. (2005). Indigenous students' aspirations: Dreams, perceptions and realities. *Self-concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation Research Centre*, University of Western Sydney, https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A4477

Holistic post-school program

St Joseph's College identified its post-school program for Indigenous students as one of its strategies for the project, with a support system designed to provide holistic, comprehensive care of students as they transition out of the school. This included four *'pillars of support'*: support for tertiary education through information provision, UAC[33] applications and course enrolment; support for accommodation either at university or nearby rental; support for employment if studying, and support for connecting with recreation/leisure options, such as enrolling in local sports clubs. The Indigenous Student Coordinator played a core role in developing and implementing a post school plan for each student based on the four pillars.

4.8.2 Impact of Strategy 8

While post-school transition was an identified strategy and schools were undertaking a variety of actions in relation to supporting students to transition to further work and study, it featured less prominently than other strategies. This can be understood in terms of the stages the schools are at in supporting Indigenous students to improve academic outcomes, and where they need to focus their energies and resources. There was less feedback about this strategy in the focus groups and interviews but some impacts noted were:

- The visits by former students to talk about their experiences were well received by students. (Pymble Ladies' College, student focus group discussion

- Family/community were positive about the provision of learning support at the school for former students, and thought that the support provided to them by teachers was instrumental to their succeeding. *'Keeping the connection is key to helping these students succeed at university.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, family/community focus group discussion)

- The St Joseph's College students spoke positively about the support provided by the Indigenous Coordinator in relation to work and study options, and connecting with sporting teams. (St Joseph's College, Student focus group discussion)

4.8.3 Future developments

St Joseph's College students described in the focus group discussions receiving *'a lot of advice'* and guidance in Years 10 and 11 about future study and work opportunities. However, this *'dies off in Year 12.'* They would like to continue to receive information in Year 12, including about different universities and courses.

One St Joseph's College parent also expressed in an interview that she would have liked her son to have received more assistance in Year 12 with his university application. She did note however that her son may have been reticent to seek or receive assistance. This is a limited sample, but it may be worthwhile for schools to explore further the timing of advice to students in the senior years.

St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill

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33 UAC – Universities Admissions Centre

4.9 Strategy 9: Take a whole-school approach to improving Indigenous students' outcomes and changing school culture

A critical strategy that emerged through the projects was the necessity for a whole-school approach to change. This involves two dimensions: the whole school has to be involved in bringing about change, and the whole school culture itself needs to change to greater integration, recognition and valuing of Indigenous culture and peoples.

In practice this means that, while change may be driven by a small number of key staff, there is a shared responsibility across the school (including the boarding house) for improving outcomes for Indigenous students.

4.9.1 How?

The cumulative effect of Strategies 1-8 were working to involve Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, family/community and students in the whole-school change process. Additional strategies that contributed to whole school change are outlined below.

Intentional whole school change

Kempsey Adventist School intentionally began the project from a whole-school change position, as reflected in the following statement:

• The power of our project has largely been created as we approached it from changing the whole school culture. This has meant …. a culture that is best described as *'this is the KAS way'*. (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

This positioned the school strongly to mobilise itself and capitalise on the additional resourcing provided through the project.

Embed Indigenous students' programs into the school's teaching and learning framework

Pymble Ladies' College ensures a strong link between its Indigenous Students Program and whole-of-college teaching and learning strategies, for example the school's Personalised Learning Framework and Student Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Initiate open and genuine dialogue about Indigenous culture and perspectives

Examples were provided of conversations initiated to challenge limited or biased thinking in the school about Indigenous people and culture.

One example, recounted in both staff and student focus groups at St Joseph's College, involved an *'interview'* between an Indigenous and non-Indigenous student at a whole-school Reconciliation Assembly. The non-Indigenous student asked questions about Aboriginal culture and people, including questions people are *'too afraid to ask'* such as *'how you can be a light skinned Aboriginal person.'* The impression conveyed was that the discussion was enlightening for staff and students, and united the school in seeking to more deeply understand and value Aboriginality.

Another example was given of a classroom exchange in which a non-Indigenous student queried why Indigenous students received extra privileges and financial assistance. The Indigenous Student Coordinator was present and used the query as an opportunity for a discussion about ongoing discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people.

The following two strategies for creating whole-school change are noted here and discussed further in the next section of the report:

• Strong cross-school staff collaboration and communication

• Undertake whole school professional development in culturally responsive pedagogies.

4.9.2 Impact of Strategy 9

Shift in whole school culture through the project to greater recognition, understanding and valuing of Indigenous culture

The project is facilitating shifts in each school's culture to more authentically recognise, understand and value Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. All schools articulated that the embracing of Indigenous culture is enriching the school in ways that are benefitting everyone – non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous students, staff and the wider community.

Kempsey Adventist School staff identified that the combined strategies of building trust and relationships, the employment of Indigenous staff and school-wide adoption of the *Stronger Smarter* model, Project Based Learning and Indigenous pedagogy are creating a more *'culturally responsive school culture.'* The school describes itself as being on a *'learning journey'* as it continues to more deeply embed these elements in the school's culture.

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

The following comments reflect the profound impact of the project upon school culture:

> We recognise the impact on the whole College community through positive engagement in activities and educational programs with Indigenous themes. Our evidence also suggests that our impact is extending beyond the College as more staff, students and families engage in activities, projects and events stemming from the Indigenous Scholarship Program.
>
> (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

- The teachers noted that in the past, there had been elements of tokenism and *'putting the girls on show,'* and Indigenous culture had been an *'add on'*. *'This has radically changed through the project.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, staff focus group discussion)

- The College has realised the relationship is two-way and the approach now is *'how can the girls help change the College culture?' 'We're allowing our girls to change us.'* (Pymble Ladies' College, staff focus group discussion)

> A 'quiet revolution' has been underway as a consequence of the program. Teachers are learning more about Indigenous culture and people, and students are learning more. The program has been enriched through having Aboriginal people around and having cultural connections.
>
> (Saint Ignatius' College, staff focus group discussion)

- Attitudes towards Indigenous students and people as a whole have moved from negativity and non-achievement and behaviour to appreciation of Indigenous cultures and perceiving Indigenous people as leaders. Because of this shift Indigenous students are proud and achieving more. (St Joseph's College, project reporting)

4.9.3 Future developments

The comments above suggest that the project strategies are resulting in positive, meaningful school cultural changes, including deeper and more genuine engagement with Indigenous culture, and that this has happened in a relatively short period of time. It will be important to continue the commitment to and focus on whole-school cultural change into the future in order to create an environment conducive to Indigenous students' excelling academically.

5. Enablers and challenges

The section above highlights the strategies and actions that were effective across the four schools in improving academic and other outcomes for Indigenous students, as well as the unique, different ways in which the schools enacted the strategies according to what worked in their particular context and for their students. It is evident that there were significant improvements across the strategies in a relatively short time frame.

Analysis and further discussion with the schools indicated common factors that enabled the changes which have been described above.

5.1 Important enablers for achieving change

5.1.1 Improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes requires a holistic approach to student support

> *The College has found that all of the aspects of the project are crucial, in terms of linguistic, cultural and academic development. Cutting any one aspect could risk jeopardising the students' holistic wellbeing. This aligns with the College's concept of cura personalis, or 'care for the entire individual'.*
>
> *(Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)*

This statement from Saint Ignatius' College expresses a key enabler of improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes – a holistic approach to student support. It is the combination of all the strategies outlined in the previous section that is resulting in change, that is; a school approach incorporating building relationships with the student, family and community, and providing culturally sensitive and individualised personal, spiritual, social, physical and academic support, from pre-commencement, through to transition out of the school.

The need for, and power of, a holistic approach became apparent to the schools as they began to see the cumulative effects of their various strategies. This is reflective of the position whereby in a 'holistic Indigenous Australian worldview, the interdependence of teaching and learning with cultural identity, physical, spiritual and mental health, and family and community belonging means that to have relevance, any intervention in one area must include all others'[34] .

Supporting students in developing a strong sense of identity and pride was at the heart of this holistic approach, substantiating previous research that 'cultivating a positive cultural identity is likely to promote a range of outcomes including academic achievement, motivation, and engagement'[35].

Key elements of a holistic approach were:

- Strategies and activities that addressed the student's physical, emotional, social, personal and academic wellbeing

- Consciously recognising the interconnectedness and interdependence of these elements

- Involving all key stakeholders in the student's life

- Establishing communication and collaboration between staff involved in supporting Indigenous students, including multidisciplinary teams and regular meetings and sharing of information regarding Indigenous students' progress.

For Kempsey Adventist School, the project-based learning model provided a school-wide framework for integrating project elements. Over the course of the project the other project schools began to conceptualise and articulate the integration of their Indigenous student programs within their school wide pedagogical frameworks.

5.1.2 Authentic involvement of Indigenous community and commitment to listening to Indigenous voices

Too often decisions about and for ATSI people are made without their voices being the strongest ones. Consider how this can be incorporated in any decisions that are made at any level of an organisation. True empowerment is created through authentic relationships that are established on trust. (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

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34 Craven et al (2016), p.37.

35 Mooney et al (2016), p.13.

> *Increase the number and strength of Indigenous voices in your school. Challenge yourself to consider who can contribute and who is being excluded. Parents, Elders, teachers, students and community members can all have a voice.*
>
> *(Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)*

These statements from the two schools convey the absolute necessity of being genuinely guided from the outset by Indigenous voices – Indigenous students, staff, family, Elders and other community members. This needs to underpin all the strategies enacted by the schools. Family/community and students' feedback that the schools all progressed in this area over the project time frame, in terms of valuing Indigenous input, being open and authentic, and establishing contexts where Indigenous family and community felt welcomed to speak. This was a continuing process however, as indicated by the student feedback reported above about no on the spot questions in class from teachers.

5.1.3 Indigenous student support role in the school

Having a specific Indigenous student support role was identified in all schools, and by all stakeholders, as a critical, necessary element for Indigenous student wellbeing and successful academic outcomes. This aligns with previous research recommending the importance of providing Indigenous student advisers[36].

There were variations between the schools in their arrangements for this role. In one instance it was filled by a community Elder. In others the role was split between two or more teaching staff members. The role may also be shared by a small team of staff with responsibility for Indigenous students' academic, cultural, personal and social wellbeing and development.

The role provides stability, pastoral support and guidance to students, cultural guidance and support for staff and communication and relationship building with family and community. As noted above, in some instances the Indigenous support role has been filled by non-Indigenous staff who have very close connections with Indigenous communities as well as highly developed cultural competency. Student and family feedback was overwhelmingly positive about these staff members. However, the presence of an Indigenous staff person was seen as a necessity for providing cultural responsive pastoral care.

Below is an overview of the key components of the role synthesised across the four schools, but drawing heavily upon St Joseph's College's role description.

Relationship building and communication with family and community – from first contact through to student application, enrolment, transition and ongoing. This may include visits to the student's home, attending community social and sporting activities, and undertaking regular communication with family providing updates on the student's progress and managing any concerns or difficulties.

Assessment, selection and enrolment – involved in student selection including meetings with the student, family, previous school, community, providing information about the school, and assisting the family with enrolment documentation.

General management – including general monitoring of students' progress, supervision, organisation of events, support with administration.

Pastoral care – primary role in supporting the student's overall wellbeing including: building close, trusting personal relationships; assisting students with challenges and resolution of problems; supporting students in transitioning into the school and adjusting to school expectations, routines and arrangements; taking an active interest in students' academic and co-curricular development, monitoring academic progress (see below) and encouraging students' aspirations for success across all areas.

Cultural identity and connectedness – supporting students in developing a positive sense of their cultural identity; facilitating connection between the Indigenous students based in cultural heritage; facilitating connection with local Indigenous culture and culture from the student's home community; facilitating and promoting cultural activities and practices within the school and organising appropriate cultural excursions and events.

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36   McInerney, 1991.

Staff liaison and support – facilitating staff information sharing and communication in relation to Indigenous students, providing guidance around student management and support, providing cultural guidance.

Indigenous academic support – monitoring the student's academic progress, including completion of class work, assessments, homework, subject selection, testing and other matters; working in collaboration with other staff who support student's academic progress, explicitly conveying interest in the student's academic work and progress and encouraging aspirations to succeed academically.

Post school opportunities and support – facilitating students' transition out of the school to further work or study, including providing information to students and families about post school study pathways, encouragement and positive role modelling around post-school progression to further work and study, supporting students with applications for post school study and maintaining relationships with and support for students in the year after school completion.

5.1.4 Strong, committed senior leadership

Strong senior leadership was a critical enabler in achieving change in all the project schools. This included the direct involvement of the Principal and/or Deputy Principal, as well as other senior staff such as heads of departments and of boarding. In practice this involved senior leaders:

- Overtly prioritising the project
- Communicating their passion for the project to other staff and the school community
- Being actively involved in overseeing the project
- Taking a role in relationship building with family and community
- Taking a role in student engagement and understanding the student's viewpoint
- Facilitating authentic conversations with staff and community about improving outcomes for students
- Joining with staff in opening themselves up to learning and deepening their understanding of Indigenous culture

- Investing time in discussing the project to understand the issues.

The impact of senior staff commitment to the project is demonstrated in the following comment:

- Commitment by the Executive to make this a priority in the school was a significant factor in driving change. Over the period of the project, this leading by senior staff has transitioned to middle leaders as well as classroom teachers and ancillary staff. A dedicated weekly meeting between the Principal and Deputy Principal to discuss the project [and] progress being made…meant that momentum was maintained. As a consequence of this meeting, as the project unfolded, it became a regular item of the Teaching and Learning Committee and the priority of implementing change continued. (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

5.1.5 Invest in staff professional development

The schools used the additional resourcing available through the project to provide staff with a variety of professional learning opportunities that enabled them to better support their Indigenous students. Given the evidence regarding the extensive impact teachers have on Indigenous students' motivation and developing self-identity[37], this was one of the best possible uses of the additional project resourcing.

This included cultural awareness and building culturally responsive relationships, using Indigenous pedagogies and supporting students in trauma. External sources were used for some professional development, as well as drawing upon expertise within the school (Indigenous staff) and the local community (Elders).

The following list includes professional development experiences described positively by project school staff:

- AISNSW resources and support including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education courses (particularly Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning), annual Aboriginal education conference and tailored support provided to schools from the Aboriginal Education Consultant[38]
- Berry Street Education Model delivered by the Berry Street Childhood Institute[39]

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37   McInerney, 1991, p.170; Sarra, 2003, p.7.

38   AISNSW website: https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/courses

39   Berry Street Childhood Institute, *op. cit.*

- *Stronger Smarter Leadership Program* – four day program delivered by the Stronger Smarter Institute[40]
- Project Based Learning professional development delivered by the Buck Institute for Education[41]
- Cultural learnings from Indigenous staff
- Cultural talks from local community
- Professional development through 'service learning.'

All schools reported that their professional development activities had major impacts upon staff, both in relation to effectively supporting Indigenous students and more generally contributing to school-wide change. Some examples are provided below:

- Staff are increasingly aware of and sensitive to the need to raise their cultural competency and engage more rigorously in promoting curriculum which builds understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, language and perspectives. Outcomes of these elements are obviously important for all students. We recognise that increased cultural competency assists not only Indigenous students to reach their potential, but all students and teachers as the entire community benefits from better understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, language and perspectives. (Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)

- *Stronger Smarter* was *'transformational', a 'profound experience', 'not just training but a life changing experience', 'we are stronger-smarterised.' It's changed my view…it's me that's changed, transformed the way I think'. 'Despite teaching indigenous students before I didn't have any knowledge prior to this, I was blind coming in'.* (Kempsey Adventist School, selection of staff focus group discussion)

- PBL has allowed the *Stronger Smarter* training to be reinforced on a practical basis. It opened the door for me to develop a mutually beneficial relationship between the school and community. (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

- Following PBL the cultural awareness sessions with Uncle X and other elders were really beneficial. (Kempsey Adventist School, project reporting)

- PD provided through AISNSW (Roz Thomas) was excellent in developing staff awareness of culturally responsive pedagogy. Through the 8 Ways of Aboriginal Learning teachers have improved relationships with students and pedagogy in the classroom – e.g. teachers now understand not to shame students. (Kempsey Adventist School project reporting)

5.1.6 Establish cross-school, multidisciplinary communication and collaboration structures

> *The success of this strategy for providing holistic student support was made particularly apparent in the Round Table meeting held between all involved staff once every semester…. each student was discussed in depth and on a case-by-case basis, with a particular emphasis placed on developing a picture of their academic needs in light of their learning profiles and broader cultural support.*
>
> *(Pymble Ladies' College, project reporting)*

A key enabler in providing holistic care in the schools was increased communication and collaboration between staff about their Indigenous students, which resulted in staff having a greater understanding of students' circumstances and what was going on in their daily lives, and the capacity to provide timely, tailored support.

Saint Ignatius' College identified the greater collaboration between key staff members as a major impact of the project, bringing a wide network of College staff into frequent connection including Indigenous academic and cultural staff, specialist staff, mainstream teaching staff, boarding staff. The sharing of information was seen as a crucial component of the program enabling a web of comprehensive, personalised student support. This *'system of continuous communication between teaching specialists, mainstream teachers, boarding staff and any external staff has been crucial to supporting the students' experience'.* (Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting)

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40   Stronger Smarter Institute, *op. cit.*

41   Buck Institute for Education: Project Based Learning courses and resources, https://www.pblworks.org/

Kempsey Adventist School

Pymble Ladies' College identified increased information sharing amongst teaching staff as contributing to improved academic outcomes and wellbeing of Indigenous students. This included:

- Weekly meetings between the Indigenous Student Coordinator and Deputy Principal to share information and plan program improvements.

- Fortnightly meeting between Indigenous Student Coordinator and Head of Boarding for information sharing session and problem solving as necessary.

- Twice termly meeting between Indigenous Student Coordinator and key staff working with Year 11 and 12 students including Deputy Heads of School (Learning and Year) to share information and help provide greater support our Senior School students.

- Regular conversations between Indigenous Student Coordinator and Health Care Centre staff to discuss overall medical needs and sourcing of health care providers to support students.

5.1.7 Use data to understand students' needs and capabilities and guide decision making for support

The use of data to understand students' learning capabilities and needs and plan accordingly was another key project enabler. All schools grew in their capacity to identify relevant data and use it to evaluate activity/ strategy impact. This included identifying multiple

qualitative and quantitative data sources, with increased importance attached to understanding family/community and students viewpoints:

- *'Gathering data at the beginning of the project, throughout and at the end of it allowed us to reflect and adapt accordingly.'* (Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)

> *One of the most powerful collections of data was recording students talking about a variety of questions and then sharing these with staff so they have an insight into how the students feel, their perceptions and pearls of wisdom.*
>
> *(Kempsey Adventist School, staff focus group discussion)*

- Saint Ignatius' College staff stressed the importance of seeking feedback from the students *'so that their voice is heard in terms of whether the support is working for them.'* (Saint Ignatius' College, project reporting).

The schools are actively using the data to identify and track each student's progress in a detailed, systematic way.

5.1.8 Establish a specific project to increase Indigenous students' outcomes

The schools found that establishing specific project goals to improve Indigenous students' academic and other outcomes actually contributed to the success of its strategies.

Developing a project logic linking aims, strategies, targets, intended outcomes and evaluation processes deepened and clarified thinking about how to best support Indigenous students. Further, having a specific Indigenous students' project gave the project team more leverage across the school, enabling them to harness energy and find champions of change in the school.

5.1.9 Provide additional resourcing

The additional resourcing through the project enabled the strategies to have high level impact in the short period of the project. It was used to appoint additional staff including the Indigenous student support staff, specialist literacy and numeracy staff and other specialised support; fund the staff professional development that was critical to bringing about change and many of the activities to build family/community connections including home visits and family visits and activities at the schools. All schools noted the significant cost of strategies for supporting their Indigenous students in the project time period, and implications for future sustainability of those strategies (see next section).

5.2 Challenges to achieving change through the projects

5.2.1 Project commencement

Schools' feedback indicates that the amount of time from the invitation to participate in the pilot project to date of application submission was insufficient for them to conceptualise and plan thoroughly. This was especially so for Kempsey Adventist School as they approached the project from a whole-school change perspective. The tight time frame had a flow on effect throughout the project as the schools sought to clarify their project objectives and aligned strategies, actions and indicators of impact after implementation was underway. For example, there was limited time to employ the specialist staff who were instrumental to assessing students on commencement and ensuring appropriate learning support was developed for what were sometimes complex learning needs.

5.2.2 Project time frame

The two year project time frame proved a challenge to schools, in terms of developing the project's objectives, implementing strategies, and demonstrating evidence of impact on Indigenous students' academic and other outcomes. It was suggested that three years would be a more realistic time frame to develop and implement initiatives and track student impact.

5.2.3 Connecting and maintaining contact with family in rural/remote locations

All three Sydney schools used their projects to strengthen processes for connecting with their Indigenous students' families and communities, through visiting the communities, meeting family and community members, attending sporting and other events, visiting the primary schools and meeting teachers, and funding families to visit their schools prior to and during early transition. Maintaining and building on these foundations for strong relationships was identified as an ongoing challenge for the schools, requiring heavy resourcing and staff focus.

5.2.4 Recruiting Indigenous staff

Recruiting Indigenous staff was a challenge for the project schools. This included recruiting Indigenous academic staff and also Indigenous staff to provide pastoral support to students in boarding and to support students transitioning beyond school. This relates to the importance of providing schools with sufficient lead up time to undertake project work and also putting other processes in place to source appropriate Indigenous staff.

5.2.5 Transitory nature of Indigenous community

This was a situation noted by Kempsey Adventist School. The mobility of some members of the Indigenous community influenced student attendance and the capacity to determine the effectiveness of project strategies supporting students' academic development.

6 Summary – key lessons, recommendations and future directions

Over the two year project period the four schools made significant progress in successfully implementing project strategies, resulting in improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students. Feedback from students, staff and family identified that the strategies were also producing other academic-related outcomes including:

- Increased student confidence, familiarity with and sense of security in the school environment

- Increased student self-management of learning including goal setting, independence, time management and prioritisation skills

- Increased student confidence in their learning capabilities

- Increased student enthusiasm, interest in and engagement with learning

- Increased student aspiration for both school and future education success

- Increased student leadership skills and capabilities

- Fewer student behavioural management issues.

An analysis at the school level and across the four schools is yielding key lessons regarding what strategies work, and what contributes to enabling or restricting the implementation of those strategies. It also provides insights into directions for future developments to continue to build upon the strong foundations laid through the pilot project.

Lessons learned, associated recommendations and broader policy implications are outlined below.

6.1 Key lessons and recommendations

6.1.1 Improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes requires a holistic approach to student support and development

A consistent message from all schools was the necessity for initiatives to enhance literacy, numeracy and other academic outcomes to be underpinned by a holistic approach to supporting Indigenous students, as outlined in 5.1.1 above. This means recognising the interdependency of the strategies outlined above and implementing a framework that encompasses students' academic, social, cultural and physical development within strong teacher-student relationships and a whole-of-school culture that genuinely embraces and celebrates Indigenous students' heritage.

Key to providing holistic care is creating a web of student support involving close collaboration and communication between staff within the school and with the boarding house, and between staff and family/community. Underlying the provision of holistic care is the principle of shared, school-wide responsibility for and ownership of the progress and wellbeing of Indigenous students.

Future developments would involve the schools continuing to work across all the strategies identified above. It would include continuing to improve their systems of communication and staff liaison around their Indigenous students to provide the basis for aligned and tightened student support.

Recommendations

- The individual strategies identified through the pilot project are succeeding in all four schools to improve Indigenous students' academic and other outcomes and should be continued, with future work aiming to improve and strengthen the strategies.

- In supporting Indigenous students, schools should adopt a holistic approach that recognises the interdependence of teaching and learning with cultural identity, physical, spiritual and mental health and wellbeing.

6.1.2 Indigenous staff are central to holistic Indigenous student support

Throughout all the strategies identified as successful in supporting Indigenous students and which collectively enable the provision of holistic care, a critical element is having Indigenous staff. Students and family/community stressed repeatedly the difference it made for students having an Indigenous staff person to turn to in both the boarding house and school setting. This could be the difference between a student undergoing homesickness or other challenges staying at the school or leaving. The positive role modelling provided by the Indigenous staff person was major factor in building students' cultural identity and pride, and also contributed to motivating students to succeed academically at school and in the

Pymble Ladies' College

future. Their impact extended to the broader staff and school community.

Recommendations

- Consideration should be given by schools to appointing Indigenous teaching and/or non-teaching staff to provide Indigenous students with the culturally responsive, holistic support that is fundamental to their wellbeing and academic development.

- Schools need to be supported in identifying and providing appropriate support for Indigenous staff given identified difficulties in recruiting these staff.

6.1.3 Building strong relationships with family and community is critical to student success

A key factor in holistic support was building relationships with family and community and this was a major area of project success across all schools. Feedback indicated improvements in communication, involvement of family/community in decision making and increased family confidence in the school caring for their child.

The other benefits included greater engagement with family in their child's learning and greater accessibility to the family through provision of accommodation and travel. These developments are contributing to strengthening trust between the school and family which the schools identified as the core factor of strong relationships.

Critical to relationship building was having a clear point of contact between family and the school. Also critical was genuinely seeking, listening to and being guided from the outset by Indigenous voices, both informally, at the individual family relationship and more broadly around the school in the development of policies and activities.

The projects gave clear directions regarding the need to not only maintain but build upon the progress to date, by continuing to focus effort on relationships at the individual and personal level, while developing more formal arrangements with family and community. This includes through schools' developing Reconciliation Action Plans and Indigenous advisory bodies.

Recommendations

- Schools need to continue to prioritise and resource building strong, trusting, culturally respectful relationships with Indigenous students' families and communities.

- Schools should work towards establishing organisation wide, formal arrangements for incorporating Indigenous input and guidance into the management and support of Indigenous students, and the wider school culture's incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, through developing Reconciliation Action Plans and establishing Indigenous advisory bodies.

6.1.4 Schools need to support Indigenous students' transition into the school, during their schooling and from school to further study/work

The efforts and activities that schools invested through their projects in supporting students to transition into the school were demonstrated to have an important positive impact upon the students' experiences and those of their families. The schools improved their processes for understanding their students on commencement and thus provided better tailored academic, personal and social support. Greater support for families through practical assistance, provision of information and communication was a major contributor to building trust strengthened relationships, and increased family confidence in the school to care for their child.

The schools identified through their projects that transition is an ongoing two-way process, with students continually readjusting to the home and the school environments after each school break. Developing deeper understanding of how Indigenous students experience two-way transition and processes to support students' capacity to successfully navigate transition through these periods of adjustment is an area for future work. Strategies and processes for supporting students to transition out of the school to study and work is also an area for development.

Recommendations

- Schools should continue to develop their processes and resources for supporting Indigenous students' transition, including transition into the school, during schooling and from school to further study/work.

- This should include schools and the wider sector developing understanding of and associated support for Indigenous students' experiences of transition between the home and school environments, including into the boarding house environment.

6.1.5 Strong, culturally informed and responsive staff-student relationships are the basis for student academic progress and wellbeing

The projects demonstrated the importance of the staff-student relationship in progressing Indigenous students' academic outcomes and overall wellbeing, what positive relationships look like and how to go about building them. Critical factors included the holistic approach to student development referred to above, developing trust, being overtly respectful of and supportive of students' Indigenous heritage, and having high expectations for students' academic capabilities. Understanding of and being responsive to the needs for students experiencing trauma was also identified as a key dimension for effectively supporting Indigenous students.

Through strengthened relationships, students transitioned more smoothly into the school and the boarding house, were more positive and engaged in the classroom, experienced fewer behavioural issues and increased development of self-management skills. Staff's capacity to form positive, culturally responsive relationships benefitted from professional development in this area including that offered around Indigenous pedagogies, from Indigenous colleagues and the *Stronger Smarter* model, and there was strong interest and an identified need to continue development in these areas.

Recommendations

- Developing strong, culturally informed staff-student relationships is a core element of a holistic approach to Indigenous students' academic development and overall wellbeing and should be a priority.

- Appropriate professional development should be accessible to all staff to support developing high expectations and culturally responsive relationships with their Indigenous students.

6.1.6 Indigenous students need to be provided with targeted and individualised support to enhance their outcomes in literacy and numeracy

Targeted and individualised literacy and numeracy support was identified by staff and family as critical to students' academic progress. This was demonstrated by improvements observed in students' engagement and academic outcomes as a consequence of the various programs and approaches undertaken through the project.

Future development is needed to deepen our understanding of the effectiveness of the teacher pedagogy in developing Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy in the high school setting, including getting the balance right in terms of how much support is provided and when and where it is delivered[42].

The feedback demonstrated that schools are continually reflecting upon this and coming up with innovative strategies, and this needs to be supported through further research and evaluation. It will also be important to extend the evaluation data to improve more quantitative data, which will be possible through longer term tracking of student progress.

Recommendation

•   Indigenous students need to be provided with tailored, individualised support for improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, including the provision of specialist expertise based in culturally responsive pedagogy.

6.1.7 A holistic approach to Indigenous student support includes whole-school cultural change anchored in strong school leadership

The schools' projects demonstrated that changing outcomes for Indigenous students requires whole-school cultural changes that involve and impact upon all students, staff, family and community. The schools demonstrated varying ways in which they approached whole-school change and achievements in this area, with change achieved most effectively when entered into intentionally from the outset, as was the case with Kempsey Adventist School. This included school-wide incorporation of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into curriculum and the school's cultural life more widely including whole-school cultural activities and celebrations.

Also important for whole-school change was the direction, guidance and commitment of senior school leadership, and the power of this to effect change was demonstrated by all four project schools. A common quality amongst the staff which created the context for deepening cultural learning was an attitude of openness and honesty. This was encapsulated by one Deputy

Principal's observation, half way through the project, that 'We realise how much we don't know', a statement demonstrating an increased awareness of the need for greater understanding and ongoing learning.

Recommendation

•   Improving outcomes for Indigenous students occurs most effectively in a context of whole-school change guided by overt, demonstrated commitment from senior school leadership to achieving improvement. This is a recommended position from where to begin project activities, and when considering the allocation of resources to schools to implement change.

6.1.8 Implementing evaluation of project strategies and activities is instrumental to identifying what works, and for informing future decision making and resource allocation

The importance of systematically evaluating and documenting the impact of strategies and activities to improve Indigenous student outcomes became increasingly clear over the course of the project. All schools improved significantly in their capacity to identify, collect and analyse a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data sources that collectively provided a comprehensive picture of students' progress.

Instrumental to the schools' growing capabilities were learning through the project from each other and from the partnership approach with the evaluators and AISNSW. It was recognised that professional development in project evaluation prior to project commencement would be have been helpful in establishing strong evaluation processes.

Recommendation

•   It is important that all projects undertaken to improve Indigenous students' outcomes utilise student performance data and other sources of qualitative and quantitative information to determine project impact, including feedback from family, community and students.

In addition to the recommendations above, the following are provided on the basis of evaluation findings and direct feedback from the schools regarding additional strategies

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42   Boon, H.J. & Lewthwaite, B.E. (2016). Signatures of quality teaching for Indigenous students. *The Australian Association for Research in Education*, 43, 453-471, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/docview/1889681230?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo

and activities that would contribute to sustaining project activities, sharing project learnings more widely across the sector and deepening understanding of and capacity to provide support for Indigenous students.

Further recommendations

- Schools could establish more and stronger partnerships with relevant bodies including universities and other relevant Indigenous organisations. This is particularly important in relation to supporting student transition pre-, during and post-school.

- Increase the professional development opportunities provided by AISNSW. Project staff feedback regarding these activities was very positive and there appears to be a strong need for more professional support, including more online resources.

- Ensure strong evaluation processes are established for any future project work that can extend the learnings from the pilot project.

The limited time frame and small student numbers of the pilot project impacted upon the capacity for statistical analysis and generalisability of results. If the pilot project were extended to include other schools, it would provide valuable opportunities to address a serious gap in the research of quantitative evidence regarding effective teaching practices for Indigenous students[43]. Areas requiring further evaluation evidence include the longer term impact of specific literacy and numeracy strategies, supporting student transition and supporting students in boarding.

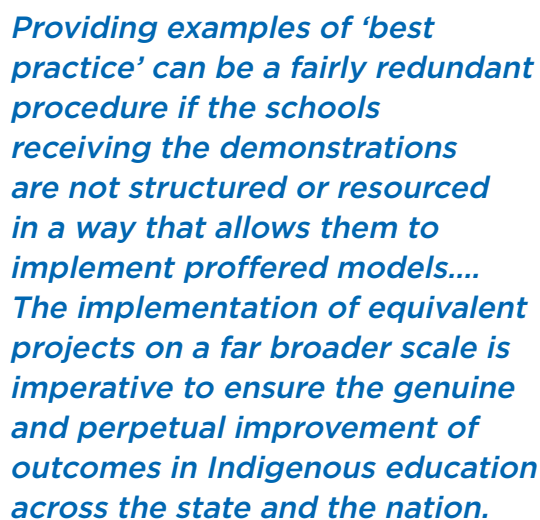## 6.2 Future directions for sustainability and scaling up project activities

The schools have demonstrated that Indigenous students' academic outcomes can be improved through an integrated, holistic strategic approach underpinned by genuinely engaging with, and listening to, the voices of students, families and community.

The pilot project learnings provide us with future directions at both the individual school and wider sector levels, including for sustainability and scaling up of strategies and activities to improve Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes.

There are many possibilities for building upon the impact of each of the key strategies identified through the schools' projects. While all are important, critical to this project's objective of improving Indigenous students' academic outcomes will be to learn from the school's initiatives for targeted, individualised literacy and numeracy programs and approaches. The projects provide insights into what programs and approaches are most effective in improving students' academic outcomes and it will be important that future project work continue to extend this evidence base.

Beyond the initial pilot project, schools will need to explore alternative support to enable the longer term continuation of resource-intensive strategies that have proven to be effective, such as the employment of Indigenous staff and specialist staff and the provision of travel and accommodation to families.

As expressed by one school:

> *Providing examples of 'best practice' can be a fairly redundant procedure if the schools receiving the demonstrations are not structured or resourced in a way that allows them to implement proffered models…. The implementation of equivalent projects on a far broader scale is imperative to ensure the genuine and perpetual improvement of outcomes in Indigenous education across the state and the nation.*
>
> *(St Joseph's College, project reporting)*

The pilot project has demonstrated the high cost to schools of implementing a range of strategies that have been shown to be effective in enhancing outcomes for Indigenous students. This finding needs to be taken into account at government level in any discussions around school funding, and at school level when setting priorities and budgets.

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43   Lloyd, N. J., Lewthwaite, B. E., Osborne, B., & Boon, H. J. (2015). Effective Teaching Practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students: A Review of the Literature. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(11), 1-25, http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol40/iss11/1

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview

7. Appendices

Appendix 1
School project teams

Kempsey Adventist School	Rohan Deanshaw, Principal[44] Leanne Lesic, Deputy Principal (Secondary) Melanie Phelps, Dean of Learning (Years 7-9) David Afele, Dean of Learning (Years 7-10) Leo Wright, Student Wellbeing Worker, Chair – Aboriginal Consultative Committee
Pymble Ladies' College	Julie Shaw, Deputy Principal, oversight of school project Kate Howie, Indigenous Student Coordinator Lora Lim, Coordinator Learning Support Sara Eisner, Indigenous Learning Support Teacher
St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill	Edward Morgan, Indigenous Coordinator Lesley Maher, Director of Mission Moya Rodgers, Indigenous Academic Support Teacher
Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview	Kate Hilyard, First Nations Education Coordinator Dominic Wilkinson, Head of Learning Enrichment Kaleb Taylor, Cultural Mentor

Appendix 2
School visits undertaken by the External Evaluation Team

School visit 1: Meetings with key project staff		
Date	**School**	**Staff member**
1 May 2017	Kempsey Adventist School (video conference)	Principal Deputy Principal – Secondary
1 May 2017	Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview	Learning Enrichment Coordinator First Nations Education Coordinator
1 May 2017	Pymble Ladies' College	Deputy Principal
3 May 2017	St Joseph's College, Hunter's Hill	Head of School Director of Missions Indigenous Coordinator

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44 Rohan Deanshaw left the school at the end of 2018 and Leanne Lesic is now Principal.

School visit 2: Meetings with key project staff		
Date	School	Staff member
5 June 2017	Kempsey Adventist School	Principal Deputy Principal – Secondary
7 June 2017	St Joseph's College	Director of Mission & College Chaplin Aboriginal Support Worker Indigenous Academic Support Teacher
8 June 2017	Pymble Ladies' College	Deputy Principal Indigenous Student Coordinator
19 June 2017	Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview	Assistant Head of Learning Enrichment Head of Learning Enrichment

School visit 3: Round one of external evaluation focus groups and interviews

St Joseph's College, 7 September 2017

Student focus group: 6 participants

Staff focus group: 4 participants

Staff interview: 1 participant

Staff interview 2: 1 participant

Family/community focus group: 4 participants
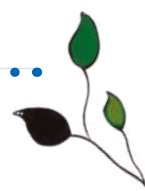
Pymble Ladies' College, 11 September 2017

Student focus group: 8 participants

Staff focus group: 8 participants

Staff interview 1: 1 participant

Family/community focus group: 5 participants

Kempsey Adventist School, 12 September 2017

Student focus group: 8 participants

Staff focus group: 5 participants

Staff interview 1: 2 participants

Staff interview 2: 1 participant

Family/community focus group: 3 participants

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview 20 September 2017

Family/community focus group: 4 (note: this was conducted on Friday 11 August)

Student focus group: 6 participants

Staff focus group: 8 participants

Staff interview 1: 2 participants

Staff interview 2: 2 participants

School visit 4: round two of external evaluation focus groups and interviews

St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, 25 October 2018

Student focus group: 5 participants

Staff focus group: 7 participants

Staff interviews: 2 participants

Family/community focus group: 6 participants

Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview, 2 November 2018

Student focus group: 5 participants

Staff discussion group: 10 participants

Staff interviews: 3 participants

Family/community interviews (by phone): 4 participants

Pymble Ladies' College, 9 November 2018

Student focus group: 9 participants

Staff focus group: 7 participants

Staff interviews: 2 participants

Family/community focus group: 5 participants

Kempsey Adventist School, 27 November 2018

Student discussion groups X 2: 12 participants

Staff discussion groups X 2: 10 participants

Family/community discussion: 2 participants

Appendix 3

Project schools workshop agenda

Project Schools Workshop	
Date/time	9.00 am – 2.00 pm, Monday 21 May 2018
Location	Ken Canning Meeting Room, Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research, Level 17, Building 1, Broadway campus (CB01.17.18)
Attendees	
Kempsey Adventist School	Rohan Deanshaw, Principal Leanne Lesic, Deputy Principal
Pymble Ladies' College	Julie Shaw, Deputy Principal Sarah Eisner, Indigenous Learning Support Teacher
Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview	Dominic Wilkinson, Learning Enrichment Coordinator Kate Hilyard, Assistant Head of Learning Enrichment
St Joseph's College	Lesley Maher, Director of Mission Edward Morgan, Indigenous Coordinator
Association of Independent Schools of NSW	Rosalyn Thomas, Aboriginal Education Consultant
Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research, UTS	Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt, Director Research and Academic Programs
	Dr Tracy Barber, Education Specialist Adviser
	Maree Graham, Deputy Director Students and Community Engagement
Apologies	
Kate Howie, Indigenous Student Coordinator, Pymble Ladies' College	
Douglas Melrose-Rae, Division Head: Education Regulations and Program Implementation, AISNSW	

Agenda		
Time	**Item**	
9.00 am	Introductions and workshop overview (Tracy Barber)	
	Project overview and discussion: each school to provide a 10-15 minute overview of their project including priorities, successes and challenges, followed by discussion amongst the group	
9.15 am	Saint Ignatius' College	Dominic Wilkinson, Kate Hilyard
9.50 am	St Joseph's College	Lesley Maher, Edward Morgan

10.30 am	Morning tea	
	School project overviews and discussion continued:	
10.45 am	Kempsey Adventist School	Rohan Deanshaw, Leanne Lesic
11.20 am	Pymble Ladies' College	Julie Shaw
12.00 noon	Group discussion: 1. Synthesis of morning discussions about learnings to date 2. Priorities and ideas moving forward, including possibilities for collaboration and processes for disseminating project outcomes with others.	
1.00 pm	Lunch	

Appendix 4

Staff professional development resources referred to in this report

AISNSW suite of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education courses
https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/courses

Stronger Smarter Institute
https://strongersmarter.com.au/

Berry Street Childhood Institute
https://www.childhoodinstitute.org.au/focus-areas/berry-street-education-model

Buck Institute for Education: Project Based Learning courses and resources
https://www.pblworks.org/

Kempsey Adventist School

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Coming Together

The original artwork, Coming Together, was created by De Greer-Yindimincarlie, a curator, academic and multi award-winning artist from the Wiradjuri Nation in Central Western New South Wales. The artwork was commissioned by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW to symbolise its ongoing commitment to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in NSW independent schools.

The meaning of the artwork in the artist's words:

We sit around the campfire and share a yarn together. We bring to that yarn our resources, strengths, knowledges and learnings to share with each other. Our discussions make us aware of all that we have combined, and we soon work out that we have many resources, strengths, knowledges and learnings to achieve the goals we are aiming for. As a collaborative, we stand strong and resourceful, with the ability to achieve anything because of our connection to each other.

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