Closing the gap
clearinghouse

Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people

Summary

What we know

- While more Indigenous students are completing Year 12 than in the past, there is still a significant gap between the educational achievements of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in literacy and numeracy, Year 12 attainment and school attendance.
- The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens as remoteness increases.
- Indigenous students are more at risk of disengaging from school than non-Indigenous students.
- Schools can have a positive effect on student engagement and attendance, and there is some evidence that schools can reduce the effects of poor social backgrounds.
- Some of the factors that can affect attendance and engagement include:
  - students' previous negative experiences with school
  - poor teacher–student relationships
  - racism
  - poor self-perception of academic ability
  - poor transition from primary to secondary school
  - earlier lack of educational success.
- For students to be fully engaged and reach their educational potential they need to be behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively engaged.

What works

- There is limited Australian evaluation evidence on the school-based factors that increase student engagement and contribute to an effective learning environment. There are however, some common themes that emerge on processes and strategies that contribute to a positive learning environment.

- The common characteristics of schools that are more effective for Indigenous students include:

  - strong and effective school leadership

  - a positive school culture that encourages care and safety among students and staff, as well as a positive sense of Indigenous student identity

  - teachers with the skills and knowledge to effectively engage and develop relationships with Indigenous students

  - high levels of community involvement in the planning and delivery of school processes, priorities and curricula.

What doesn't work

- A school culture that is unwelcoming, fails to support Indigenous students, and does not value Indigenous culture.

- Inadequate teacher training for teaching in a cross-cultural, bilingual situation.

- Low performance expectations of Indigenous students.

- Limited or no Indigenous parent and community involvement in schooling processes.

What we don't know

- In what ways a school's leadership can foster an effective learning environment for Indigenous students at school.

- The number of high-quality teachers working in Indigenous schools and which characteristics of quality teachers are most effective for improving student outcomes.

- Which aspects of school engagement matter most in learning outcomes.

Introduction

Education has long been considered a critical factor to closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. Research shows that students who complete Year 12 or an equivalent have greater employment opportunities, more self-confidence, and participate more in community life (CCYPCG 2007). Many Indigenous students are regularly attending school and succeeding at school (Purdie et al. 2011).

In contrast, the statistics indicate that, as a group, Indigenous students are performing well below the educational standards of other students on measures of literacy, school enrolment, school attendance and Year 12 completion (COAG Reform Council 2013b). Although more Indigenous young people are now completing Year 12 or an equivalent, there have been few improvements in the proportions of Indigenous students meeting the minimum national standards in reading across all age groups, and there have been no improvements in numeracy (COAG Reform Council 2013a).

Early childhood education has been well documented in the literature as a significant factor in a child's development: it influences the child's ability to learn and contributes to later educational, health and employment outcomes (MCEETYA AESOC 2006). It is also important to build on the benefits of early childhood education throughout the remainder of the schooling years and to provide opportunities to those whose early childhood experiences were less than optimal.

Recent literature indicates that school-based factors, such as the teaching approach and the school environment, are of primary importance to improving educational outcomes of Indigenous students.

Forty per cent of the Indigenous population is aged 15 or under, and the Indigenous population rate is growing at twice the annual rate projected for the rest of the population (MCEETYA AESOC 2006). This suggests that almost half of the Indigenous population is school-aged or will soon be participating in the education system. It is important, therefore, to examine the factors that can contribute to an Indigenous student's success in the learning environment. It is also important to identify the key principles of effective schools, and the programs and initiatives that have been implemented in schools to effectively engage and improve the learning standards through improved school experiences of all Indigenous students. The learning environment refers to the contexts and culture in which a student learns both inside and outside the classroom.

This resource sheet outlines how Indigenous students are performing at school in urban and remote locations and discusses attendance and engagement measures as outcomes of improved learning environments. This resource sheet examines school-based factors that contribute to an effective learning environment rather than examining external community and family initiatives such as parental engagement, housing, and health and nutrition programs because there is recognition among many authors that, while 'out-of-school' factors play an important role in terms of school attendance, 'school-based factors' play a more important role (Bourke et al. 2000). Harrison and Gordon 2014 reported that Indigenous educator Chris Sarra supported this view, commenting that the underlying causes of truancy usually related to the school rather than the child or their family. Furthermore, many Indigenous parents might be more reliant on schools to facilitate educational outcomes for their children than non-Indigenous parents because they may feel alienated from the education system, and because they believe that they lack the skills and knowledge to effectively support their children through school. Indigenous parents may feel alienated because of their own negative experiences with, or exclusions from, school. A research paper on intervention strategies for students at-risk of early leaving commented on this reliance, noting,

> addressing the problem of disengagement and early leaving will fall heavily on these schools, because families in disadvantaged settings are most dependent on the quality of schools to promote success for their children (Lamb & Rice 2008:2).

While this resource sheet focuses on the school's role in improving student outcomes, 'out-of-school' factors are still important and can affect an Indigenous student's capacity to attend and engage in school. An example of an initiative that aimed to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students by addressing a range of factors is the Cape York Welfare Reform trial. It saw 'statistically significant improvements in school attendance' as part of a broader initiative that aimed to rebuild social norms and behaviours, and restore Indigenous authority in Cape York communities (Limerick 2013:3). An evaluation of the trial reported that progress has been made in changing behaviour around education and that there are

> some positive early signs about improvement in educational attainment by students in communities where the CYAAA (Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy) has been implemented, but it is too early for a definitive finding (Limerick 2013:4).

How are Indigenous students performing at school?

Indigenous young people are the most disadvantaged group in Australia (KPMG 2009). Social disadvantage can act as a barrier to learning. The educational performance outcomes of Indigenous students in both remote and urban areas are well below the performance outcomes of non-Indigenous students. School attendance, Year 12 completion rates and national test scores for literacy and numeracy are all referred to in the literature as indicators of educational outcomes for Australian students. The national standard testing for literacy and numeracy in Australia sets benchmarks at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. By Year 3, there is already a significant gap for reading, writing and numeracy between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students (Ford 2013). In 2013, the percentage of Year 3 Indigenous students who met the minimum standard for reading was 81.5%, compared with 96.2% of non-Indigenous students. For numeracy, 81.6% of Indigenous students met the minimum standard, compared with 96.6% of non-Indigenous (ACARA 2008). Similar results were recorded for Year 9 students: 73.9% of Indigenous students met the minimum standard for reading compared with 94.5% of non-Indigenous students, and 65.7% of Indigenous students met the minimum standard for numeracy, compared with 92% of non-Indigenous students (ACARA 2008).

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Reform Council reported on the educational outcomes of Indigenous students attending government schools over the 5 years from 2008 to 2012. The results should be interpreted with some caution because Indigenous students were less likely to participate in testing, therefore the results might not represent all students. In addition, greater improvements are more likely to be evident in those areas that initially recorded lower scores, such as the Northern Territory.

The key changes from 2008 to 2012 outlined in the COAG Reform Council's report included the following:

Reading and numeracy

- Reading standards at Year 3 improved for Indigenous students nationally.
- There were no significant changes in reading standards for Year 5, 7 and 9 students.
- Numeracy skills at both Years 3 and 7 declined.
- There were no significant changes to numeracy at Years 5 and 9 (COAG Reform Council 2013a).

Attendance

- There were almost no improvements in school attendance, with rates remaining well below the attendance rates of non-Indigenous students.
- Gaps in attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are generally the largest in Year 10.
- Attendance rates decreased nationally from Year 1 to Year 10 for Indigenous students.
- Year 1 attendance rates have fluctuated or remained stable in all states and the Australian Capital Territory.
- Attendance rates for Year 10 fell in all states except South Australia, where it increased by 3%.
- Northern Territory has the largest gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance in Year 10—there was a gap of 30 percentage points in 2012.
- Year 10 attendance rates decreased in the Northern Territory by 14 percentage points from 2008 to 2012 (COAG Reform Council 2013b).

Year 12 or an equivalent attainment rates

- From 2006 to 2011, the rate of Indigenous Year 12 or an equivalent attainment increased from 47.4% to 53.9%, an increase of 6.5%.
- The Northern Territory achieved the greatest improvement, increasing by 10.4 percentage points from 2006 to 2011; however, the Northern Territory had the lowest scores in 2008, which means greater improvements are more likely (COAG Reform council 2013b).

Note: Changes over time refer to cohort differences, not to changes in individual students' achievement. That is, 'Reading standards at Year 3' means that, compared with the 2008 cohort of children at Year 3, the 2012 cohort had higher achievement (on average) on the measure of reading ability.

For more information on the gap between completion rates across city, regional, remote and very remote locations, and for comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students across these locations, see the following Closing the Gap Clearinghouse publications:

- *Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes* (Harrison et al. 2012)
- *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students* (Helme & Lamb 2011)
- *Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school* (Sims 2011).

Remoteness

The evidence indicates that the performance levels of Indigenous students are lower for those in remote locations. In 2011, 21.4% of Indigenous young people (aged 0–24) were estimated to be living in remote or very remote parts of Australia (ABS 2013). The COAG Reform Council reported that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens as remoteness increases. While the standard of educational achievement decreases for all Australian students with remoteness, it decreases more significantly for Indigenous students (COAG Reform Council 2013b).

In the Northern Territory, for example, where approximately 60% of all enrolled Northern Territory Indigenous children are classified as living in very remote locations, the Children's Commissioner for the Northern Territory in 2012 reported that very few students attend school at least 80% of the time, which is equivalent to four days of the week over the school year. In 2010, only 13% of Indigenous children in very remote locations attended school 80% of the time. Higher proportions, 65%, of Indigenous students attend school three days a week or 60% of the time (Children's Commissioner for the Northern Territory 2012); however, this suggests that there are still many Indigenous students in very remote locations that are attending school fewer than 3 days a week.

There is a range of complex reasons relating to 'out-of-school' and 'school-based factors' that explain why Indigenous students living in remote areas have lower educational outcomes. For example, Biddle noted that, in terms of attendance rates in remote areas, it is more difficult and more costly to access education in remote areas, and the educational institutions that are available are 'often lacking in basic services, adequately trained teachers or student amenities' (Biddle 2010:30). Furthermore, because of access difficulties, students often have to move away from home to attend secondary school. This can make transitioning from primary to secondary school particularly difficult. Transition periods have been recognised as a risk factor for student disengagement. Poor transitioning can therefore contribute to gradual disengagement and early school leaving.

Importance of attendance

The issue of non-attendance among Indigenous students has been a key focus of research and policy development in Indigenous education and has received considerable attention in the literature as both an indicator of how Indigenous students are performing at school and as a factor affecting the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between school attendance and academic achievement, just as there is a correlation between high rates of school absenteeism and lower academic achievement (MCEETYA 2001). Barnes (cited in McRae 2007) takes this analysis further, noting that the correlation between attendance and achievement is much stronger for early secondary students than it is for primary school students, where the correlation is relatively weak. This suggests that as the level of schoolwork becomes more demanding, regular and engaged classroom attendance is essential for educational success (McRae 2007). Commenting further on this relationship, McRae noted:

> More powerfully, it is obvious from looking at the data presented here that at the very point where we can confirm the relationship between academic success and attendance, attendance begins to decline rapidly. That matters. (McRae 2007:4).

Research has shown that parental engagement in their children's education and parents' own experiences with school and their academic achievements can have a range of positive outcomes in terms of their children's experiences with the education system and on attendance. For example, a study in Western Australia found that Indigenous students were 30% less likely to have lower-than-median attendance if their parents or carers had been educated beyond Years 10, 11 or 12 (Zubrick et al. 2006). This highlights the flow-on effect and intergenerational outcomes that can result from improving the attendance, engagement and ultimately rates of school completion among young Indigenous Australians. Attending school is an important factor that impacts on learning; however, engaging in school and the learning environment is just as important.

For more information on the impact of parental engagement and educational outcomes, see the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse resource sheet *Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education* (Higgins & Morley 2014).

Student engagement

Student engagement and connectedness to school is a fundamental underlying framework for effective student learning (DEECD 2009). Research has shown that school engagement is consistently associated with academic achievement (Woolley & Bowen 2007). Engaged learners are more likely to stay at school longer, have aspirations to higher levels of education (Fullarton 2002), and 'develop skills in learning, participation and communication that accompany them throughout adulthood' (MCEETYA AESOC 2006:17). Students with clear plans and goals for the future are likely to remain at school longer so they can complete the necessary qualifications to achieve those plans (KPMG 2009).

There are three interrelated levels of student engagement:

- Behavioural engagement refers to students' involvement in learning and classroom activities, social and extra-curricular activities.
- Emotional engagement refers to students' personal attachments to the school and relationships with other students and teachers.
- Cognitive engagement refers to students' application to and investment in learning (DEECD 2009).

For students to be fully engaged in learning and reach their educational potential, they need to be behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively engaged in school. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development states that a disengaged student will demonstrate none of the above characteristics or they will have a very poor attendance record, and that students are at-risk of becoming disengaged if they demonstrate only some of these characteristics (DEECD 2009).

Engagement in school and learning is particularly important for Indigenous students because they are less likely to attend and remain at school through compulsory and post-compulsory education than non-Indigenous students, and they are more likely to have lower educational aspirations (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2010; Craven 2003). Furthermore, Indigenous students as a population group are more at risk of disengaging from school (KPMG 2009).

Factors affecting school attendance and engagement

There is a combination of complex factors relating to individual, home or community life experiences that can affect Indigenous students' capacity to attend and engage in school. Some of these factors can be attributed to the background and life experiences of Indigenous students (such as from issues associated with their home and community environments). For example, many Indigenous children live in a combination of conditions that can have adverse effects on their capacity to effectively participate in school and classroom activities. Such conditions can include poverty, poor or unsafe community environment, limited access to mainstream services, high rates of unemployment, welfare dependency, or poor health and nutrition (CCYPCG 2007; Doyle & Hill 2008). Home factors such as parental engagement and support have also been shown to affect attendance and engagement of Indigenous students (CCYPCG 2007; Doyle & Hill 2008). These factors might not affect how a school constructs a learning environment, but they are affecting students' ability to effectively engage and perform in the learning environment while attending school. It is important for schools to be aware of the backgrounds of their students and how that affects their capacity to learn. In this way, schools will be able to create a learning environment that recognises and addresses the distinctive needs of Indigenous students. Furthermore, from a policy perspective, Biddle noted, 'policies that do not take into account the reasons why children don't go to school are likely to be ineffective or may have unintended consequences' (Biddle 2014:5). For example, 'forcing children to attend who don't want to may have large negative consequences on those who have been attending' (Biddle 2014:5).

In general, schools have little control over the background and life experiences of Indigenous students. Some of the factors that affect attendance and engagement are related to school-based factors that can be or could have been prevented, such as:

- students' previous negative experiences with school
- poor teacher–student relationships
- no sense of belonging in a classroom
- alienation from school
- language barriers
- racism
- poor self perception of academic ability
- poor transitions from primary to secondary school
- an earlier lack of educational success (Doyle & Hill 2008).

Many of the factors can be attributed to inadequacies in the school environment and the school process itself in terms of meeting the needs of Indigenous students. These are factors that schools can change. There is growing recognition in the literature that the school context plays a more important role in improving attendance and therefore engagement of Indigenous students than family background, and that schools can play a role in reducing the impacts of social background (Bourke et al. 2000; Lamb & Rice 2008). Schools, therefore, need to address such inadequacies to be more responsive to Indigenous students' needs and provide a learning environment where Indigenous students want to attend, learn and succeed. Biddle (2010) argued that there is much that schools can do to improve youth engagement levels in the school's area.

School-wide approaches to creating an effective learning environment

There is no evidence in the literature of an effective single formula or program for creating learning environments that produce strong positive student engagement and improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students. However, there are factors and school characteristics that are commonly referred to in the literature as being associated with improved results, making the school environment a more welcoming place for Indigenous students and positively contributing to an effective learning environment, such as:

- school leadership
- school culture
- quality teachers
- school curriculum
- family and community involvement.

In a major meta-analysis of the factors that contribute to the learning environment in mainly Western and more developed countries, Hattie (2011) ranked various influences on student achievement, and ranked those influences that are related to learning outcomes from very positive to very negative effects on student achievement. One of the most important factors Hattie emphasised was the importance of visible learning and teaching (2011). To Hattie, visible teaching and learning occurs 'when learning is an explicit and transparent goal, when it is appropriately challenging and when the teacher and students both (in various ways) seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained' (2011:18).

School leadership

Evidence shows that school leadership affects student learning outcomes, social and academic achievements, teacher performance and school–community partnerships (Zammit et al. 2007). Quality school leadership is responsible for providing organisation and direction with the school, establishing a clear vision for the school community, fostering a positive school culture and promoting schools as learning organisations (Zammit et al. 2007). Much of the literature focuses on the principal's role as a leader in driving improved outcomes, as research shows that school principals have a 'salient but indirect effect on student outcomes through the goals they establish and the quality of the learning environment they foster' (Zammit et al. 2007:vvi).

For Indigenous students, research shows that school leadership plays a critical role in improving engagement, achievement and school completion (Helme & Lamb 2011; Mulford 2011). A study into the success of 11 improving remote schools with high enrolments of Indigenous students showed that 'observations from each of the 11 schools made it very clear that school leadership performed a critical role in guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvement in practice and in student outcomes in their school' (What Works. The Works Program 2012:20). The study also emphasised the role of the principal in achieving improved student outcomes, commenting that this effect was noticeable throughout school operations and the school environment (What Works. The Works Program 2012).

There is currently no evidence that points to how Indigenous school leadership best operates, as different models work more effectively in different circumstances. However, the What Works study (What Works. The Works Program 2012) into the success of remote schools identified common characteristics that each of the principals demonstrated in driving improved outcomes for their students. These characteristics included:

- a core belief in the learning capacity of their Indigenous students
- high expectations of their students, aiming to mirror the results for their particular state or territory

- recognition of the value and importance of incorporating student cultural identity throughout school processes, particularly into teaching and learning
- provision of instructional leadership
- principals who see their role as a privilege.

Strong and effective school leadership plays an underlying role in establishing many of the common characteristics identified as contributing to positive learning environments for Indigenous students, including embedding a positive school culture and environment; encouraging a positive sense of Indigenous identity among its students; developing and maintaining successful partnerships between the school and families and communities; providing professional development for staff members, providing quality teaching and learning programs; and establishing a clear vision for the school based on high expectations (AECG & DET 2004; What Works. The Works Program 2012).

Box 1: Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program was developed by Indigenous educator Dr Chris Sarra, and it is based on Sarra's experiences as principal of the Cherbourg State School. Under his leadership, 81% of Year 7 students at his school scored in the average band for literacy in Queensland, compared to 0% before he joined the school. There was also a 94% reduction in unexplained absenteeism (cited in Doyle & Hill 2008:59).

The program recognises that school leaders, including principals, teachers, teachers' aids, parents and community Elders, all have a significant role to play in improving the educational outcomes of Indigenous students; it equips school leaders to actively engage with the community. The program aims to improve Indigenous student attendance, numeracy and literacy outcomes, and engagement of Indigenous children and their families in learning. It is based on strategies that are recognised as supporting Indigenous students to achieve success at school, including:

- acknowledging, embracing and developing a positive sense of Indigenous identity in schools
- acknowledging and embracing Indigenous leadership in schools and school communities
- having 'high expectations leadership' to ensure high expectations classrooms, with high expectations teacher and student relationships
- developing innovative and dynamic school staffing models—for example, asking for community input into hiring staff, recruiting Indigenous teachers, Indigenous staff members and staff with specialist expertise with Indigenous students
- adopting innovative and dynamic school models in complex social and cultural contexts—for example use of flexible timetabling, provision of dedicated space for Indigenous students, and use of policies to manage and accommodate student mobility between schools.

(Source: Luke et al. 2013; Stronger Smarter 2014).

The program runs for 12 months and there are a series of workshops and meetings held throughout the year. Activities for the participants include forums and activities, completing leadership challenges, recording their outcomes, sharing their experiences and participating in the evaluation process.

A formal evaluation of the program has not yet been conducted; however, in 2009, plans were developed to scale up the Stronger Smarter model into a national network of schools called the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project. The network would facilitate communication and the dissemination of the Stronger Smarter themes through leader connections of 'Hub' schools. Each Hub school leader would work with leaders at 3 of 4 Affiliate schools. The project was backed by the then Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. A 2013 summative evaluation of the project compared the test scores and attendance levels of Stronger Smarter Learning Communities (SSLC) membership schools with non-SSLC membership schools. Key findings of the 2013 evaluation include:

- the effect of SSLC membership on improved school attendance was not statistically significant
- the effect of SSLC membership on improved school level achievement in NAPLAN tests was not statistically significant
- in both SSLC schools and non-SSLC schools, there are individual instances of 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in specific age grade cohorts in specific curriculum areas; however, no effects were reported on coherent pattern of school level, school type, jurisdiction or curriculum area (Luke et al. 2013).

School culture

Research shows that the school culture is an important school-level factor that can influence attendance, engagement, achievement and school completion among Indigenous students (Helme & Lamb 2011). A school's beliefs, visions and values, as well as how a school operates—such as the curriculum, teaching approach and level of community involvement—all permeate the school's culture. How schools adopt an effective culture is largely dependent on the quality of school leadership.

An effective school culture for Indigenous students:

- promotes and values Indigenous culture
- allows Indigenous students to feel safe, welcome and valued at school
- supports Indigenous students and families
- focuses on learning
- is based on high expectations of both staff and students (AECG & DET 2004; Helme & Lamb 2011; Purdie et al. 2000; What Works. The Works Program 2012).

Bourke et al. (2000) stated that, in terms of school-based factors,

> one of the most important issues to be resolved, if Indigenous school attendance rates are to increase nationally, is the provision of positive welcoming school environments in which Indigenous children feel welcome, safe, valued and happy (Bourke et al. 2000:52).

A critical component of an effective school culture for Indigenous students, therefore, is providing a school environment that is free from racism and one in which Indigenous students feel safe and welcome.

A recent study into the ways racism are harmful to the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Australia found that bullying and unfair treatment have a considerable effect on the health and wellbeing of young people and on school attendance (Biddle & Priest 2014). Of the Indigenous people who participated in the survey, 14% of students aged 14 and under in 2008 were reported by their carers to have experienced bullying or unfair treatment because of their Indigenous status in the previous 12 months (Biddle & Priest 2014). For high-school students in non-remote areas, the percentage increased to 23% (Biddle & Priest 2014). In terms of attendance, according to the carers of the Indigenous students in the survey who didn't experience bullying or unfair treatment, 7% had missed school without permission in the previous 12 months, whereas of the students who had experienced bullying or unfair treatment, 16% had missed school without permission in the previous 12 months. Biddle and Priest reported, 'it is also likely to be difficult to achieve attendance targets without children feeling that school is a safe place, where their race or ethnicity is not going to adversely affect their treatment' (Biddle & Priest 2014:1).

The findings of the study highlighted that racism in school is an important issue that needs to be addressed to improve the health and wellbeing of young people and school attendance rates among Indigenous students, particularly as the concepts can be interrelated. Poor health contributes to poor attendance and a reduced capacity to engage in learning, and racial discrimination can contribute to poorer health and wellbeing (Priest et al. 2013).

The National Safe Schools Framework emphasises the importance of student safety and wellbeing, stating that these are essential for effective learning. The Framework recognises the strong link between student safety, student wellbeing and learning, and states, 'Harassment, aggression, violence and bullying are less likely to occur in a caring, respectful and supportive teaching and learning community' (SCSEEC 2003:2). One way that schools can foster such a culture is by facilitating positive student identities among Indigenous students and allowing Indigenous students to feel as though their identities are valued.

Sarra advocated that 'challenging, developing and embracing a positive sense of Indigenous student identity' is a key strategy for ensuring the success of Indigenous students (Sarra 2011:110). Sarra emphasised the need for schools to challenge negative perceptions of Indigenous identity such as stereotypes and racist attitudes. Attachment and connectedness to school, and positive school outcomes, are more likely to occur when Indigenous young people have positive conceptions of themselves as Indigenous people and as students (Purdie et al. 2000). The enhancement of positive self-identity in the school context has been linked to:

- teachers' characters and attitude
- a curriculum that Indigenous students see as relevant to their lives and their culture
- a school environment where students felt they belonged
- valuing and using Indigenous staff
- support from family and community
- promoting Indigenous role models (AECG & DET 2004; Bourke et al. 2000; Purdie et al. 2004).

Purdie et al. (2000) reported that, in terms of the school context, teachers have the most effect on the development of a positive student identity of Indigenous students.

As well as encouraging the development of positive self-identity through school culture, schools can facilitate positive identities via initiatives in the classroom and outside the classroom. For example, schools in the What Works study addressed challenges related to self-efficacy and academic self-concept among Indigenous students through 'focused teaching approaches' (What Works. The Works Program 2012:53). These approaches include engagement and motivation strategies, personalised learning plans and homework programs, providing pathways, supporting students through transition periods, catering for special needs, and by establishing appropriate case management arrangements (What Works. The Works Program 2012).

Box 2: Personalised Learning Plans

Personalised learning plans (PLP) are developed by teachers, generally in consultation with students and parents, to construct a personalised approach to learning that depends on each student's learning needs. Personalised learning is based on the concept that all students can learn to high standards, and they have been shown to enhance student engagement and motivation. What Works. The Work Program believes that PLP are the primary way to do things and should not be regarded as an 'add-on' (What Works. The Work Program 2011:1). An evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project reported that PLP are a 'viable approach to authentic and negotiated assessment and planning, but these require training and systematic implementation' (Luke et al. 2013:323).

The former Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (now the Department of Education) guide to developing PLP advises teachers to:

- start with assessment and diagnosis of a student's learning
- gather student's behaviour patterns, including attendance, attitude to school, social skills, family background and cultural understanding, and discuss this with the student and their parents, family and other support people
- identify specific learning goals and develop clear strategies to achieve those goals
- consider issues in the student's background that could affect their learning, and if appropriate, establish goals focusing on personal growth, social skills and cultural achievements (cited and reproduced in What Works. The Works Program 2011:3).

The core issues paper *Using personalised learning plans* lists a number of factors that have shown to be effective in implementing PLP, including:

- There is whole-school ownership of and commitment to PLP.
- Strong school leadership starts, drives and provides ongoing support for the school community developing and implementing personalised learning plans.
- Teachers are committed to 'Closing the Gap' for Indigenous students.
- A range of formal and informal diagnostic assessment tools is used to profile each student and to inform the development of their learning goals.
- Specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) learning goals are well understood.
- Targeted teaching strategies are developed to support students in meeting their learning goals.
- Collaboration takes place with Indigenous parents and carers, school support staff and other relevant community agencies to plan for and support learning for Indigenous students.
- Time allocation is provided for development of personalised learning plans.
- Implementation of personalised learning plans is included in ongoing work of teachers and not seen as an add-on or extra duty.
- There is provision of initial and ongoing professional learning support and resources for teachers in developing and applying personalised approaches and PLP (from What Works. The Works Program 2011:10).

For more information on PLP, see: *What Works. The Work Program: Core Issues 10*, <http://www.whatworks.edu.au/upload/1311202974899_file_CoreIssues10.pdf>.

Outside the classroom, schools can encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities to increase student engagement with the school, and encourage positive self-identity and positive experiences at school. Research shows that participating in extracurricular activities can have positive effects on student engagement (Fullarton 2002).

Many Indigenous people associate sport with positive feelings of Indigenous identity (Gray & Partington 2012). In addition, engagement in cultural activities and Indigenous language programs has been recognised as contributing to the positive self-identity of Indigenous young people (Purdie et al. 2000). Findings from consultations with a national sample of Indigenous community members and non-Indigenous teachers and principals suggested that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students should be involved in Indigenous

studies programs as part of the compulsory school curriculum; however, there was no consensus on what the programs should entail (Purdie et al. 2000). The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (AECG & DET 2004) noted that, particularly for students transitioning to adolescence (and who might be experiencing identity problems), cultural programs with extensive Indigenous involvement is critical to increasing self-esteem among these students.

Arts and cultural programs have the potential to play a significant role in engaging students in school and involving parents in their children's education. An example of a successful arts program is the Yonder project, which aims to engage young children and their schools in the community through art and cultural initiatives. An evaluation of the program saw improvements for students in social competency and self-esteem, and the development of literacy, particularly oracy (Gattenhof 2012). The program highlights the positive role that cultural activities can play for Indigenous students in terms of social and academic competence.

Box 3: Keeping Indigenous Kids at Secondary School

Keeping Indigenous Kids at Secondary School (KIKASS) is a secondary school support program for Indigenous students and their families; it operates at the Bairnsdale Secondary College in in the East Gippsland region of Victoria with support from The Smith Family. The program aims to encourage Indigenous students to stay at school longer, develop leadership skills, build a strong connection to their community, and learn skills that students believe are relevant and interesting. Students are encouraged to get involved in a range of activities, including Indigenous arts, leadership, music, sports, dance, drama and skills building activities. Parents are encouraged to participate in the program by engaging with the school. The program also aims to strengthen partnerships between the school and the community.

The program provides support based on three components:

- financial scholarship—allows student to participate in extra-curricular activities
- personalised support—focuses on education, goals and future aspirations
- personal development—activities aimed at increasing self-esteem, teamwork and leadership skills (The Smith Family 2011).

A survey of the KIKASS students reported that 77% agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the program positively affected their future career and study plans (Wilkinson 2011 cited in The Smith Family 2011). There have also been improvements recorded in some educational indicators for Indigenous students, including:

- increased enrolment of Indigenous students attending the Year 11 campus at Bairnsdale Secondary College
- increased number of Indigenous students in Year 10 and 11 enrolling in vocational education and training
- improved attendance of Year 9 and 10 Indigenous students at Bairnsdale Secondary College, increasing from 20% in 2001 to 80% in 2011 (The Smith Family 2011).

Quality teachers

Quality teaching plays a more significant role in improving performance for Indigenous students than for other students because the educational disadvantage of Indigenous students is generally higher, which means they might require more significant support from teachers (AECG & DET 2004). Research shows that teachers can influence Indigenous students' experiences at school, including enjoyment, engagement, success, attendance and their overall perceptions of school (Craven et al. 2005; Bourke et al. 2000).

There is no evidence that points to a single strategy for the effective teaching of Indigenous students in terms of driving educational achievements. The report *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage* (SCRGSP 2011) concluded that research into what makes a quality teacher is varied. Some studies have strongly linked student outcomes with teacher experience and test scores in obtaining qualifications, and other studies have demonstrated that, for

secondary students, years of teaching experience and level of teacher qualification are not significant influences (SCRGSP 2011). However, the report noted that there is some research that demonstrates that teachers with a sound knowledge of the subject matter can be a strong predictor of student outcomes (Hill et al. 2005; SCRGSP 2011).

The literature points to particular characteristics of teachers and teachers' relationships with their students as affecting educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Many of these characteristics will be underlined by teachers' understanding of Indigenous culture and preferred Indigenous learning styles. Doyle and Hill (2008) recognised 3 main characteristics of teachers that can affect Indigenous student attendance and engagement:

- teachers' interactions and relationships with their students
- the skills of the teacher, such as being trained in English as a second language teaching techniques and their experience with teaching in a cross-cultural bilingual situation
- the teacher's ability to tailor their teaching approach and structuring of the curriculum to meet the specific needs of Indigenous students.

The importance of positive teacher–student relationships between Indigenous students and their teachers for the educational achievement of Indigenous students has also been well documented (MCEETYA AESOC 2006). Research shows that student engagement from primary school through to secondary school is highly influenced by adult relationships and that particular characteristics of teachers can influence student engagement in school (Klem & Connel 2004; Woolley & Bowen 2007). Importantly, for Indigenous students at risk of disengaging, research indicates that positive adult relationships appear to have a more significant effect for at-risk students (Woolley & Bowen 2007).

Teacher–student relationships that can be effective for Indigenous students' learning are characterised by:

- personal warmth
- good humour
- friendly supportiveness
- an expectation of realistically high academic standards' (Bourke et al. 2000:25).

School curriculum

Including Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum has been identified as a key component to engaging Indigenous students in learning, and it has been associated with better results (SCRGSP 2011). It has also been shown to positively influence Indigenous and non-Indigenous understanding and appreciation of Indigenous culture, address racism and discrimination, and contribute to a more positive school culture, positive Indigenous self-identities, and Indigenous students' sense of belonging at school (AECG & DET 2004; Doyle & Hill 2008; Purdie et al. 2000). Because Indigenous students are likely to attend classrooms where they are part of the minority population, Biddle (2010) argued that it is therefore important for all students to be educated about areas that are sensitive to the history and culture of Indigenous students, but also about areas relating to the backgrounds of students from other minority groups. Schools that fail to provide education surrounding Indigenous culture risk marginalising and encouraging resistance from Indigenous students (Munns & McFadden 2000 cited in Biddle 2010). Doyle and Hill (2008) argued that an effective curriculum for Indigenous students needs to be both capability appropriate, and culturally and contextually relevant.

Capability-appropriate curriculum

Many authors have argued that an appropriate curriculum for Indigenous students needs to acknowledge the significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievements in literacy and numeracy (AECG & DET 2004; Bourke et al. 2000; Doyle & Hill 2008). Research has shown that language barriers in the primary years of education can disadvantage Indigenous students' achievements in literacy and numeracy in the long term (Warren & Miller 2013), and that low levels of numeracy and literacy affect the capacity of students to achieve at a secondary level (AECG & DET 2004). For some Indigenous students, the language spoken in classrooms is different from the language spoken at home and in their community. Grasping what is being taught in the classroom is more challenging for these students and can lead students to develop negative perceptions of their ability to perform academically (Doyle & Hill 2008). It can also lead to many Indigenous children being wrongly classified as having poor literacy skills (Biddle 2010). Doyle and Hill suggested that, to address the limited literacy and language skills of Indigenous students who don't speak Standard Australian English at home, the school curriculum needs to 'incorporate intensive language and comprehension components based on English as second language and bilingual teaching practices that recognise and accommodate students' linguistic backgrounds and capabilities' (Doyle & Hill 2008:44). Purdie et al. (2000) suggested that bilingual programs should be taught by trained bilingual teachers only.

Contextually relevant curriculum

Purdie et al. (2000) noted that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students respond and engage more effectively with content that is interesting and relevant. A criticism of the education system in the past in terms of the curriculum content is that Indigenous students have found it difficult to engage in learning because the content is not seen to be 'sufficiently practical or relevant to student experiences' (Doyle & Hill 2008:45). To create a more engaging learning environment, schools need to adopt a curriculum and teaching approach that is relevant to Indigenous students' prior knowledge, experiences, interests and aspirations. It must also be relevant to their local environment, culture and language (Bourke et al. 2000). The learning content, therefore, needs to be meaningful, important and culturally responsible (MCEETYA AESOC 2006). Doyle and Hill (2008) stressed that adopting such an approach does not require a 'dumbing down' of the curricula, rather a curriculum and teaching approach that is tailored to the needs of students, thereby creating a more responsive learning environment.

Biddle noted, however, that one of the difficulties with incorporating a culturally inclusive curriculum is the ability of non-Indigenous teachers to effectively 'understand and engage with the material', particularly when non-Indigenous teachers have little direct contact with the Indigenous population and where there are teachers who trained before such information was included in standard teacher training (Biddle 2010:29). Biddle suggested that the availability of online material could help non-Indigenous teachers in these circumstances.

Involving parents and community in the development of the curriculum has been recognised as an important element to developing an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy that are better suited to Indigenous students, particularly in areas where Indigenous enrolment is high (Bourke et al. 2000). Biddle noted that in such areas, there is more of an opportunity to incorporate 'Indigenous knowledge, history and culture more directly into subject matter and delivery' (Biddle 2010:29).

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Box 4: Deadly Ways to Learn Project

The Deadly Ways to Learn Project involved 14 teachers and 14 Australian Indigenous Education Officers working together in a series of collaborative forums to develop two-way bi-dialectal teaching practices that would enhance literacy levels among Indigenous students in the participating schools. Non-Indigenous teachers participating in the projects are partnered with an Australian Indigenous Education Officer, if available, or an Indigenous person.

The underlying concept of the project was to recognise and promote equality between Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English. The project publication *Deadly Ideas* (p.6 cited in What Works. The Works Program 2014) has the following views:

- Students who speak languages or dialects other than Standard Australian English, such as Aboriginal English, need language instruction and support to achieve outcomes set down in the curriculum frameworks.
- Students who speak non-standard dialects at home should not be given the impression that they are required to replace the home dialect with Standard Australian English.
- By broadening students' linguistic repertoires, students can learn to code-switch between languages and determine which dialect is most appropriate in particular contexts.
- Students need to be equipped to participate fully at school and in the wider community.

There has been no formal evaluation of the project; however, according to a project coordinator, improvements have been recognised in some areas, including:

- literacy progress
- awareness by students of 2 alternative dialects
- attempts by students at code-switching
- Australian Indigenous Education Officers are viewed as integral staff members who provide valuable cultural and linguistic insights in the development and delivery of the curriculum
- teaching practices are more inclusive.

For more information see: What Works. The Works Program 2014. The Deadly Ways to Learn Project: Aboriginal English and bidialectal classroom practices <http://www.whatworks.edu.au/4_2_1.htm>.

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Family and community involvement

The research literature emphasises that the recognition of culture in schools is fundamental to improving Indigenous student engagement. One way that this can be achieved is through the formation of effective partnerships with schools, families, communities and Indigenous Elders. Australian and international evidence recognises the benefits for Indigenous students when schools and the education system work closely with Indigenous communities (MCEETYA AESOC 2006). Biddle (2010) noted that there are clear potential benefits for involving Indigenous Australians where possible in decisions and process regarding education practices. For example, Indigenous parents might be more comfortable sending their children to schools and interacting with schools that they see to be culturally inclusive and supportive of their children's education and culture.

Possessing a profound understanding of community involvement was one of the themes identified in all of the successful 11 schools in the What Works study on the success of remote schools. The study found that where schools and Indigenous families and communities work in partnership, students achieved better results, with the authors concluding: 'It's that simple' (What Works. The Works Program 2012:27).

The Australian Government, as part of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014* (MCEECDYA 2011), aims to improve community involvement in schools through the establishment of formal school-community partnership agreements. School–community partnership plans establish ways for schools and the community to work together to improve educational outcomes of Indigenous students, and they

provide an opportunity for the community to be more involved in the directions and processes of the schools in their community. The success of formal school–community partnerships in terms of school achievement and attendance measures has not yet been formally evaluated. Other processes and strategies that schools have implemented to improve community involvement include:

- developing trusting relationships with community members by having school staff members spend time talking to and getting to know parents and community members
- establishing a clear vision for the school based on a combined input from the school and the community
- employing and valuing the input of Indigenous teachers and Indigenous Education Workers
- establishing an Indigenous community group, Indigenous education team and Indigenous education officer
- establishing a community room or an Elder's room at the school, where both parents and community members can meet and run a range of activities and programs
- encouraging Indigenous community members and parents to run programs at the school, such as homework centres, cultural activities and mentor programs
- inviting parents and community members to school and social events such as morning teas
- demonstrating to families and the community that the school values and welcomes Indigenous culture—for example, displaying the Indigenous flag or showcasing Indigenous art (Bourke et al. 2000; DEEWR 2011; What Works. The Works Program 2012).

Developing strong partnerships between schools, families and the community, and involving and valuing the input of Indigenous communities into the policy directions, priorities and school curricula can have a positive effect on the learning environment of Indigenous students.

Conclusion

Schools have an opportunity to contribute to closing the gap on the educational disadvantage by fostering a positive learning environment for Indigenous students. Despite a lack of long-term evaluation, the literature indicates that school-based factors play a significant role in developing an engaging learning environment for Indigenous students. In turn, this can have a significant effect on their attendance and educational outcomes.

Key characteristics identified in the literature and case studies point to a handful of crucial factors that schools can incorporate to create a school culture where Indigenous students feel welcome, safe and valued, fostering an environment where Indigenous students want to learn. These factors include strong and effective school leadership, creating a positive school culture that encourages a positive sense of Indigenous student identity, and providing teachers with the skills and knowledge to effectively engage and develop relationships with Indigenous students and their families.

Appendix

Table A1 contains a list of Closing the Gap Clearinghouse issues papers and resource sheets related to this resource sheet.

To view the publications, visit <http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/>.

Table A1: Related Clearinghouse resource sheets and issues papers

Title	Year	Author(s)
Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes	2012	Harrison L J, Goldfeld S, Metcalfe E & Moore T
Engaging Indigenous students through school-based health education	2012	McCuaig L & Nelson A
Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school	2011	Sims M
Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students	2011	Helme S & Lamb S
Teacher and school leader quality and sustainability	2011	Mulford B
School readiness: what does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities?	2010	Dockett S, Perry B & Kearney E
School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students	2010	Purdie N & Buckley S
Pathways for Indigenous school leavers to undertake training or gain employment	2010	Hunter B H

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Abbreviations

CYAAA   Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy

PLP   Personalised learning plans

SSLC   Stronger Smarter Learning Communities

Terminology

Indigenous: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to Australia's first people. This term includes 'Aboriginal Australians' and 'Torres Strait Islander people'.

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