Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION REPORT
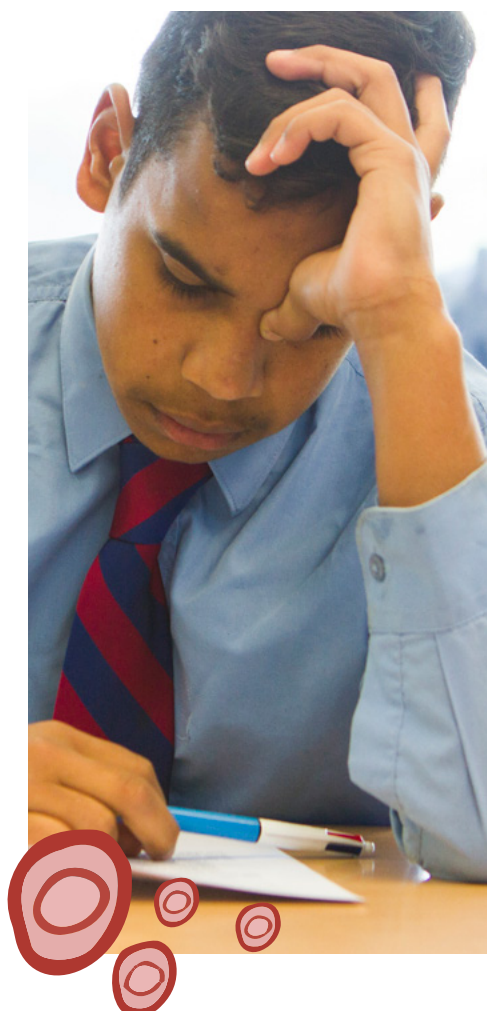
Background and development of the project

The AISNSW pilot project, Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (Phase 1, 2016-18), included an evaluation by the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney. This indicated improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' literacy and numeracy outcomes, and in other academic outcomes including increased student engagement and confidence in learning, improved self-management and increased student aspiration for school and further education success.

Based on the success and learnings from Phase 1 which had involved only four schools, AISNSW commenced Phase 2 in May 2019. The 12-month project extended the project to 16 schools, involving 12 boarding schools and four days schools, one of which was a state school. A key feature was the organisation of the 16 schools into four networks of four schools, in each of which a Phase 1 school acted as a hub to support and share learnings with three spoke schools.

Design of the external evaluation

The Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research again undertook the external evaluation, with the following key evaluation questions:

1. What strategies and activities were implemented in each school through the project to improve students' literacy, numeracy and other targeted outcomes?

2. What has been the impact of these strategies and activities in relation to intended and unintended outcomes?

3. How effective is the hub-spoke network model in supporting the achievement of enhanced student outcomes in the 16 project schools?

4. How effective is the participatory evaluation approach in building project staff's capacity for implementing their own evaluation processes?

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted plans to gather qualitative and quantitative data through school visits which were to complement project reports from each school, so interviews were conducted by either telephone or Zoom technology. However, network workshops were able to be conducted face-to-face and via Zoom to develop project school staff's capacities in research and evaluation.

As a result of the pandemic, it was decided that the evaluation period would finish early on 24 March 2020, with evaluation of schools' responses to supporting their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during COVID-19 to be provided in a separate report.

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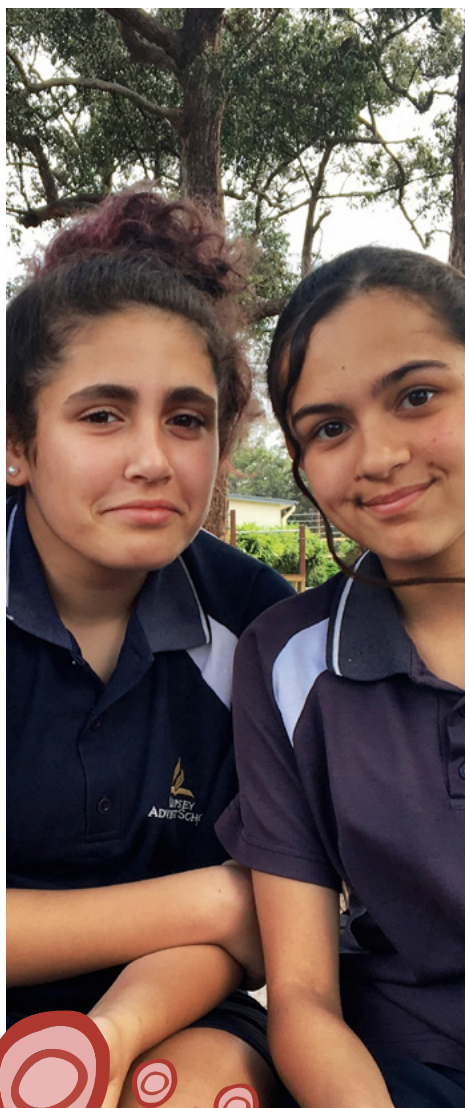
Evaluation findings

The evaluation evidence indicated that the strategies, programs and activities implemented through the project yielded significant results within the project time frame. A critical finding echoed from Phase 1 was that improving academic outcomes requires targeted and individualised learning support within a holistic understanding of and responsiveness to students' capabilities and needs. Schools therefore directly targeted students' academic development while also building strong relationships with each student's family and community, and providing culturally sensitive personal, spiritual, social and physical support.

The ten high level outcomes of the project can be grouped together and represented by the Waratah Outcomes Framework, which participating schools, AISNSW and the evaluator developed collaboratively.

This summary outlines (A) project activities and their impact on outcomes for students, stakeholders and school communities (Evaluation Questions 1 and 2), and (B) the effectiveness of the hub and spoke model and the participatory evaluation approach (Evaluation Questions 3 and 4).

A. Impact of strategies on outcomes for students, stakeholders and school communities

Literacy and numeracy and other academic outcomes

Activities included: Personalised Learning Plans (PLP); involvement of specialist staff, including Indigenous support staff and external tutors; specialised literacy and numeracy programs and assessment tools; targeted in-class literacy and numeracy support; targeted literacy and numeracy support provided outside of class time.

In addition to feedback and observations on improved student literacy, project schools also reported evidence of improvements in academic results and class rankings featured in semesterly reports. Paired analysis confirmed significant positive growth in individual student achievement as measured by PAT Reading scale scores.

Feedback and reflections from teachers, support staff, and students indicated less progress in numeracy. Paired analysis of two PAT Maths assessments showed no significant difference in PAT Maths scale scores overall, but there was a significant difference in PAT Maths scale scores for female Indigenous students. However, results need to be interpreted with caution due to the smaller sample sizes of male and female students with available data.

Schools provided evidence of increased engagement in learning, including enhanced interest, motivation, and commitment to studies. There was also progress in areas of academic self-management skills and preparedness, such as goal setting, study skills, time management, and stress management,

with several schools reporting levels of student and parent satisfaction with academic support provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by the school.

A positive and successful transition into the school and boarding environment

Activities included: school staff visits to Indigenous students' home school, family, and community prior to commencement; student and family visits to the school prior to commencement, including orientation events; regular communication and support with application and enrolment processes; completion of student profiles and learning plans prior to commencement; targeted support or mentoring from staff and peers including buddy systems.

These activities resulted in increased staff awareness and understanding of individual student needs, capabilities, and culture, deepening understanding of each student's home environment, contributing to staff capacity to support informed and culturally aware relationships between home and school. There was evidence of improved understanding of students' learning capabilities and needs due to better access to prior academic data and to results from psychometric and standardised testing prior to commencement at the school. Transition programs also directly benefited prospective and future Indigenous students and their families.

Students have increased aspiration and expectations towards further education and future employment opportunities

Activities included: the provision of information and advice about further education and employment options and opportunities; engagement and partnership with further education and employment providers; implementation of a holistic post-school planning program.

These resulted in increased aspiration and expectations for the students about their futures, increased motivation and confidence towards further education, with students feeling that university is a realistic option for them. The outcomes of holistic post-school programs were described as key project achievements.

Students have strengthened connection to and pride in their Indigenous culture and heritage

The critical importance of this strategy was identified in Phase 1 with schools taking more intentional steps to build a connection to culture for students. Activities included: provision of culturally safe spaces and groups within school; cultural learning, coaching and mentoring opportunities within school; cultural learning experiences and excursions outside of school; Indigenous student involvement and leadership in school-wide events; language learning; planting, and tending of native gardens; artistic expression through Visual Arts projects.

These activities resulted in increased awareness of and knowledge about Indigenous culture and heritage. Schools

reported increased student contribution, leadership, and voice in school-wide events. Students regularly helped to plan and celebrate, and often lead, speak, and perform at school assemblies. They gained and demonstrated increased awareness of their personal and family heritage, delivering Acknowledgement of Country in their own traditional languages and preparing for this by either speaking with family members or Elders and carrying out independent research to locate information from other sources.

Students have improved social, emotional and physical wellbeing

Activities included: programs and initiatives to strengthen connection to and pride in Indigenous culture and heritage; professional learning opportunities for staff to develop cultural competency, particularly in relation to trauma-informed practice; cross-school collaborative responsibility for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; targeted health and wellbeing support for individual students.

Direct evidence of improved wellbeing in Indigenous students is limited at this stage of the project. Schools would likely benefit from support to implement direct measures of wellbeing in future, such as a culturally appropriate wellbeing index or scale. Project schools reported evidence that Indigenous students and their parents or carers were satisfied with the support for student wellbeing provided by the school.

Strengthened and culturally informed relationships between key stakeholders

Activities included: professional learning opportunities for staff to develop awareness of cultural elements within relationships; fostering strong relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; communicating with and involving family in student learning; engaging family and community within the school environment; engaging family and community outside of the school environment. Programs included the Stronger Smarter approach and 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning, emphasis on trauma informed practice, general cultural awareness training, and AECG Connecting to Country.

Staff reported strengthened relationships with students, with the activities increasing students' cultural identity, confidence, and pride in culture: Schools also observed changes in parent engagement through improved communication led to strengthened relationships, with family and broader community members becoming more involved in school decision-making processes.

Engaged, supportive and culturally competent school staff and whole-of-school integration of Indigenous culture

As in Phase 1 of the Pilot Project, strong and committed senior leadership was identified as a critical enabler in achieving change. Activities included: professional learning and development for school staff and leaders; delivery of PD by both school staff and external organisations; attendance at

external conferences and meetings; whole-school responsibility for the wellbeing of students; whole-school pedagogical change and the embedding of Indigenous pedagogy, culture, and perspectives into the curriculum; celebration of school-wide events, visual signposts and symbols acknowledging and honouring Indigenous culture.

Whole-of-school change is a challenging aspect of this project that requires long-term commitment. However, schools reported significant impact upon staff awareness and cultural competence, with staff questioning their previously held assumptions and expectations. School leaders reported increased understanding of requirements for support and commitment for improving student outcomes. There was evidence of the introduction of Indigenous language, whole-of-school celebrations of Indigenous culture, integration of Indigenous culture and perspectives into the curriculum and embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices and knowledges into programs and teaching activities associated with specific subjects.

B. Effectiveness of hub and spoke model and the participatory evaluation approach

Schools demonstrated the significant benefits of this model, particularly the opportunities it provided for them to support and learn from each other regarding what enables progress, what constrains it, and how to deal with the challenges. The model generated new ideas, perspectives, and resources, enabled outcomes to be realised faster, provided valuable opportunities for professional learning, and facilitated collaboration across the independent and government school sectors.

The evaluation identified that the hub and spoke model was particularly effective for:

• enabling hub schools to share with spoke schools their learnings and experiences and the impact this may have had on the schools' projects

• facilitating support and collaboration between the project schools to successfully develop and implement their project activities

• developing new ideas, approaches or resources that would improve outcomes for students.

The participatory evaluation approach increased staff awareness of and capacity to identify a wider range of qualitative and quantitative data sources to understand students' progress across the different project outcomes. It also contributed to developing schools' capacity to analyse and use student data. Evaluators suggest that staff would benefit from continuing to build skills in data collection and analysis, which could occur through the network model approach as well as supporting schools to access other forms of professional learning in this area.

Summary of key learnings

1. Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' literacy and numeracy outcomes requires targeted and individualised learning support informed by accurate student data, within a holistic and whole-school understanding of and responsiveness to students' capabilities and needs.

2. Indigenous staff are a critical component for success, as are authentic and strengthened relationships between students, families, communities and schools.

3. The school network model, together with a well-defined project with specific and measurable outcomes, are effective in supporting progress.

4. The participatory evaluation model used in this project was effective in building schools' capacity for self-evaluation of their strategies and activities.

5. Schools experienced common challenges in relation to time pressures, resourcing, funding, staff coordination and effective use of student data. Additional project funding is integral to the ongoing development and implementation of strategies and activities to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' outcomes.
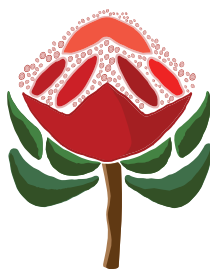
The evaluation findings from the Improving Outcomes project form the basis of the design and implementation of The Waratah Project which commenced in July 2020 with 25 participating schools.

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