

Stuck in the Middle: The effect of boarding schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

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On Wednesday 16th of September the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, asked the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs to inquire into and report on ‘the educational opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.’ One of the aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling that forms a part of the terms of reference is on ‘the provision of boarding school education and its outcomes.’ This submission is focused on a summary of the available evidence on this topic.

The first thing to note up front is that we do not have the data to definitively answer the question of whether attending a boarding school has positive or negative effects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Simply put, those who attend boarding schools are vastly different to those who do not, and it is therefore near impossible with the data we have to tell whether any observed differences in outcomes are driven by the boarding school experience itself, or differences that would have occurred anyhow. In slightly more technical terms, we lack a counterfactual.

There is some evidence in other contexts. Vilsa Curto and Roland Fryer Jr. analyse¹ a program in the US called SEED schools, which are located in Washington, DC, and Baltimore and are, according to the authors ‘America’s only urban public boarding schools for the poor.’ Their analysis utilises the fact that selection into the schools is based on part on a lottery. That way, those who attend and those who miss out through the lottery can be assumed to be otherwise identical. They find in their analysis that ‘attending a SEED school increases achievement’ but that ‘the effects may be driven by female students’.

Of course, the history, culture, geography and education profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is very different to disadvantaged communities in urban US. We can, however, gain some insight from the qualitative data and existing research. The general conclusion from that research is that boarding schools have the potential to have both positive and negative effects. The specifics matter.

¹ Curto, V. E., & Fryer Jr, R. G. (2014). The potential of urban boarding schools for the poor: Evidence from SEED. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 32(1), 65-93.

Some students find physical distance between home and school harder than others. While being separated by long distances can make homesickness harder, qualitative data shows this can have a positive effect on the desire and ability to “drop out” when times are difficult. The distance also impacts the ability of family to come in to school. This can be a positive, or negative for many students and their families. Homesickness is reported as getting easier over time, but being away from home presents much greater challenges than a longing to be back with family and friends you love, and culture and community you are an intrinsic part of.

There are many aspects of the boarding school experience that can cause a mismatch between student and school. Some schools have large Indigenous programs, others have a few Indigenous students. This can impact the way Indigenous students experience boarding school. For some students, a large cohort can provide protective factors against issues regarding attendance, retention and even attainment. For others, having a large program can result in infighting, community pressures being brought into the school, and stereotyping by other students and staff. A mismatch can occur between family and school expectations for a student.

Family members may expect students to withdraw from school for times of family business, while schools expect them to return to school within a short period of time. The communication of such expectations is not often made clear at enrolment and can lead to clashing expectations that often leave students feeling stuck in the middle, unable to meet both school and family responsibilities.

Sorry business, for example, may negatively impact on attendance and retention, whilst still being an important part of the lives of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Students who are boarding away from community have obligations they need to fulfill. Compounded by clashing expectations between school and home, the Sorry Business that occurs frequently for some students can become a distraction too great to bear, and with travel back and forth to school, can lead to missed work at school, increased stress about assessment being incomplete and teacher frustration picked up on by Indigenous students.

Anxiety, grief, and anger can be experienced by students who would like to return for Sorry Business but can't, for any number of reasons, resulting in behavioural issues and distraction at school. These compounding factors can lead to students withdrawing and not returning after business is complete, days, weeks or even months later.

In qualitative research that is being undertaken for the Doctoral studies of one of us (and supervised by the other) Indigenous students who attend boarding schools are open about the fact that it changes them. Their language, worldview, ability to accept certain lifestyle norms and their connection to family and culture are all noted as changing when away in urban areas for schooling. This can impact on their identity, as well as family dynamics and personal relationships when a student returns home for holidays, leave or after school is complete.

The concept of “walking in two worlds” is often used to describe the two sets of social and cultural norms a student feels comfortable living and acting within, however little research has been done on the impact of being ostracized by community, friends and family after boarding school for Indigenous students, as well as never truly fitting in at non-Indigenous urban and regional schools with small Indigenous student numbers.

Being away for long periods of time is a fact of life for boarding school students, who note they miss many important community and family events, and sometimes feel this can lead to loss of cultural connection. Rapid and difficult changes that are responded to differently by each parent, child, friend, community and family member are difficult to manage for Indigenous students, aged anywhere from 11-18 years of age, especially when their families may also be dealing with other issues at home they cannot assist with or contribute to.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there is an important interaction between indigeneity and social class/capital. Students in schools where Indigenous scholarships are explained as achievement-based, through an application based process, an in the same vein as academic and sporting scholarships, reported feeling proud and not receiving as many negative comments from staff and students about their status as scholarship recipients.

Many Indigenous students attending top Australian boarding schools on scholarships come from families that do not have the same social capital and financial resources as their peers. One boarding parent noted “it is hard for our girls to feel equal, when they make non-Indigenous friends and see their harbour-side homes, their BMWs...They also can’t usually repay the favour to have a friend stay at home. This leads to Indigenous students sticking together.” With many students at boarding schools in urban areas attending today not for reasons of distance or lack of education available, but rather for the extra opportunities available, students who are from remote communities become even further removed from the other boarding students they share classes and rooms with in boarding school.

Qualitative and quantitative research demonstrates a strong association between experiences of racism and school attendance/outcomes.² Racism can be considerable harder to deal with in residential schooling environments, particularly when Indigenous students make up a small percentage of overall school enrolments. Racism is often compounded in traditional private boarding schools that have a lack of Indigenous content and perspectives in curriculum and whole school activities. A lack of awareness of the historical and intergenerational causes of Indigenous disadvantage, caused by colonisation and its ongoing impacts, can lead to an ignorance of the purpose of scholarships, reconciliation activities and social justice work toward Indigenous rights. Furthermore, activities that focus on Indigenous disadvantage in affluent schools can position Indigenous students as needy, lacking, and further extend the gap in student and staff perception of what it means to be a regular student and an Indigenous student attending boarding.

Stability of leadership (Principal and Indigenous support staff) is vital to Indigenous student success. Indigenous student success, like the success of other students, is based on relationships. In light of the relationship issues mentioned above, students often need supportive staff structures to provide protective factors that enable them to continue in the face of difficulties. When Indigenous support staff are often subject to similar issues as students, in relation to low percentages of Indigenous staff employed, and the socio-economic and cultural differences, they often do not stay in support roles such as Indigenous Support Officer for long periods of time. When these staff move on, for reasons of cultural safety, family commitments and often low paying roles, students can be left feeling abandoned, with roles sometimes unable to be filled straight away, and little information given to students and their families by schools as to why Indigenous staff leave, sometimes suddenly.

Changes in school leadership can play a different role in affecting Indigenous students in boarding. Changes to leadership can affect Indigenous support programs and staffing in schools, as well as day-to-day activities (such as Acknowledgement of Country on assembly, how many cultural activities are allowed as excursions, whether Indigenous staff, how many scholarship students are accepted and so on). Such issues all affect each other, and the web of variables can come undone quickly when leadership priorities regarding Indigenous education change.

² <https://theconversation.com/racism-hits-indigenous-students-attendance-and-grades-48233>

Teachers are well-researched as having a large impact on student outcomes.³ For Indigenous students, many Australian teachers are likely to be ill-prepared to teach Indigenous students. In boarding schools, teachers may also have less exposure to Indigenous families, students and community members if they have not taught in environments where Indigenous students make up more of the student population (for example in schools in remote communities). Teachers in private boarding schools often report not seeing the relevance of teaching Indigenous content throughout all curriculum areas in all year levels. This results in pigeonholing or worse still, lack of Indigenous content in Indigenous boarding students' education on a daily basis. They become invisible in what they learn, and learning becomes disconnected from their personal experiences and realities. It also creates a bigger gap between the "normal" ways of life and "Aboriginal" ways of life when Indigenous content is covered, as a special unit or unique example.

Some of the compounding factors outlined above interact with each other and become too great for students and their families to cope with, resulting in withdrawal from school. Some boarding schools are simply not culturally safe places for Aboriginal students to live and learn. Others are a bad fit for an individual student. The reasons for each student who has not completed at boarding school are different, however the commonalities, and there are many more than are within the scope of this paper to discuss, are able to be discussed and analysed toward schools and students understanding the boarding school experience before making a decision. Well-informed families and students as well as schools would, in our opinion, lead to less non-completes for our Indigenous kids. Better application and enrolment processes would ensure a good fit between school and student. Many schools look to attract any Indigenous student and enrol all applicants, for reasons known to such schools. For students and their families, a lack of information and research into Indigenous boarding schools leaves them making decisions without having the full picture. Misinformation and miscommunication can lead to difficult issues to resolve down the track.

On top of the issues that boarding schooling can have on individual students, we need to be aware of the effect of boarding schools on those that are left behind at home. This includes family, friends and community. With many scholarship programs taking the brightest and best Indigenous students from their small communities and enrolling them in private schools in urban locations, the structure of communities are undoubtedly changed. With the bright and dedicated young Indigenous students showing potential taken at

³ Rockoff, J. E. (2004). The impact of individual teachers on student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Economic Review*, 247-252.

young ages, there is little chance they will return before adulthood. Boarding school and city life changes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids, and when they finish school at boarding, many go on to pursue university studies and successful careers in regional and urban locations. Some return to their home communities, but with the world expanded and skills and solid education behind them, often, home is viewed as a place with no opportunity for the future. While connection to family and country is rarely broken, the experiences of boarding are affecting communities that see their young ones leaving and not returning.

Boarding schools undoubtedly give Indigenous students new social, cultural and educational experiences. Many interacting variables are present in boarding school education for Indigenous students that make their effect difficult to measure through quantitative data alone. Qualitative data is essential in understanding the relationship between the interconnected causes of disengagement and failures of students who have attempted a boarding school education. However, a lack of good quality quantitative data (particularly data that explicitly takes into account selection into boarding schools) hampers our ability as a policy community to say anything too definitive about the effect of boarding schools on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

This paper merely scratches the surface when discussing issues that can play a part in the success of Indigenous students at boarding school. We encourage the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs to take a balanced and rigorous approach to the evidence on boarding schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, advocate for more and better data, and make policy recommendations that take into account the diversity of experience of boarding school students.