

Parent-school engagement: Exploring the concept of 'invisible' Indigenous parents in three north Australian school communities



Richard Chenhall • Catherine Holmes • Tess Lea • Kate Senior • Aggie Wegner



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PARTNERS

This project is was conducted by a research team from Charles Darwin University, the Menzies School of Health Research, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory and The University of Melbourne.



It was funded by the Australian Research Council (project number LP0882670).



The Smith Family was our leading industry partner.



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Responsibility for this report including the findings and interpretation lies with the research team. All information presented here is sourced from participants who willingly provided their time and input as well as from policy documents that are available in the public domain.

PROJECT TEAM

The project team brought their multi-disciplinary background and expertise to the project:



Dr Richard Chenhall is an anthropologist currently working as a Research Fellow with the Centre for Health and Society, Melbourne School of Population Health, University of Melbourne. Richard has been conducting research with Indigenous Australians since 1995 and is one of the Chief Investigators on this project.



Dr Catherine Holmes is an Adjunct Research Fellow with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and is also a Chief Investigator on this project. Cath has extensive research experience in the area of health and life quality of disadvantaged and marginalised populations and has developed, evaluated and provided strategic direction on related programs and policies.



Associate Professor Tess Lea is an experienced organisational ethnographer and anthropologist of policy cultures. As one of the Chief Investigators on the project, she assisted with research design, data analysis and writing up. Her broader research concerns social policy across health, education, housing and knowledge management realms.



Dr Kate Senior is a Program Leader with Menzies School of Health Research and one of the Chief Investigators on this project. She is an anthropologist with extensive research experience focusing on health and quality of life, in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings. Kate also has a strong interest in education and has conducted research into the barriers preventing effective community and parental involvement in education in a remote Aboriginal community.



Dr Aggie Wegner is a Research Fellow at The Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University. Aggie is a social scientist with a background in environmental science and management, policy and tourism. She worked in the industry prior to her move into academia which helps her to link and relate across different groups of interest. She has a strong research focus on all aspects of policy and decision-making processes, as well as human dimensions of interactions with a focus on partnerships.

During the course of the project the research team acknowledges the contribution of Georges Otenga, who worked on the project in the early stages, and also:



Dr Eva McRae-Williams is the Sustainable Research Excellence Project Manager at the Research Division, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Batchelor, NT. As an anthropologist she is experienced in ethnographic research methods and has worked with a range of Indigenous and other marginalised groups.



Johanna Karam was the Research Associate with the School for Social and Policy Research at Charles Darwin University. Jo's expertise ranged from working with community groups to all aspects of administration.



Helen Thompson has commenced a PhD research project titled "Parent and Teacher Attitudes to School Based Student and Parent Engagement Programs". As Helen's research will extend well beyond the timeframe of this project, her work allows for a longer term investigation into the issues affecting parental engagement with schools.

The research team further acknowledges the expert facilitation, patience and invaluable guidance of The Smith Family, and in particular the contributions of Tricia Rushton, Rob Simons, Irene Williams, Catherine Phillips, Jacinta Charters and Bronwyn Clee. We thank the participating schools and their staff as well as representatives from the education authorities who gave up their time to provide us with their valuable input. Our project could not have proceeded without the input of the many Indigenous families who agreed to speak to inquisitive researchers. To them we owe our deepest gratitude.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores school-parent engagement in three town-based schools in the Northern Territory of Australia. Undertaken over a three year period between 2008 and 2010, the research team worked in partnership with The Smith Family and participating schools—Karama Primary School in Darwin; Moulden Park Primary School in Palmerston; and MacFarlane Primary School in Katherine—to explore what parents have to say about the schools that their Indigenous children attend and about education more broadly.

The research applied an exploratory case study approach using a mix of ethnographic and interview techniques. We observed children, parents and school environments; interviewed parents, teachers, policy personnel and school based staff; and conducted focus group sessions with key stakeholders. In-depth interviews were conducted with 48 parents and/or carers, 9 policy officers and 26 educators. The questions we asked all participants in this study probed three key questions: What does engagement mean? Why is it important? How is it achieved?

Our research revealed a dissonance between what parents expect their level of engagement with school should be and what the policy community assumes about the importance of engagement. Suffice to say, parents' visible engagement with schools and the importance they place on education are different matters. The parents who were most visible were not necessarily engaging for reasons of academic advancement or schooling success but over concerns about bullying or truancy or social trauma. And the parents who were least visible were not necessarily marginalised from the school but believed that the school was addressing the education of their children, and that the leadership of educators could be depended upon to get the job done, rendering forthright 'engagement' unnecessary. In short, non-visibility is an exaggerated problem. Non-visibility does not equate with lack of interest or lack of participation in schooling.

The key message from this research is that to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, schools and policy makers need to consider a re-focus of their engagement efforts on one aspect more intensely: namely, how to help parents invest in the cognitive and emotional development of their children toward academic attainment. It is clear that the schools in our study are doing an extraordinary job with stretched resources to meet the challenges of educating socially disadvantaged young people. It is clear that engagement has a place in improved outcomes, but more focused methods for encouraging parental responsibility and involvement in all aspects of their children's education are required.

The efforts of the school to dismantle barriers between home and school are certainly reflected in the praise parents have for their respective school and school-based personnel. Within the complexity of everyday life, parents think that schools are doing a good job. They separate the school from their everyday worlds, and do not expect the school to be part of their worlds more than it is. Parents are committed to the idea of education and register their support in various ways, including getting their children to attend as often as feasible.

The flipside of this is that parents, whilst clearly valuing education, cannot prioritise education over the demands of family and the ongoing need to respond to crisis situations in everyday life; and rely on, or expect, a division of educational labour whereby teacher expertise and schools generally are trusted to do the job. This reduced expectation of the role of the school and limited interference in decisions around teaching approaches, restricting their own interventions to responding when their children are in trouble, is part of what some might call 'low parental expectations', but as this report reveals, both educator and parent pragmatism is more complex again.

Among other things, the policy promise that attendance is the single most important key to school success has proved misleading. At the national policy level, engagement has been recommended as one of the top priorities for increasing participation and retention in schools, on the underlying premise that there is a positive relationship between attendance, employment and socio-economic gain. However, just as under-performance in education does not reduce to participation, nor does 'engagement' alone target the ways in which parents can prepare their children for academic success.

Further, advances in educational outcomes of children in this study depend on shifting the responsibility from educators alone to include not only parents, but also the different tiers of government and their departments—such as housing, health, families, employment, arts, sport—that respond to the social and economic circumstances of families and the worlds that they occupy. Schools cannot be held solely responsible for undoing compounding regimes of inequality in the wider society.

INTRODUCTION

This report explores school-parent engagement in three town-based schools in the Northern Territory. Over a period of three years, a research team from Charles Darwin University (CDU), Menzies School of Health Research (MSHR), the University of Melbourne and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) worked in partnership with The Smith Family and participating schools—Karama Primary School in Darwin; Moulden Park Primary School in Palmerston; and MacFarlane Primary School in Katherine—to explore what parents have to say about the schools that their Indigenous children attend and about education more broadly. The research was co-funded by The Smith Family, the Australian Research Council and the contributing universities, under the Australian Research Council's Linkages Project funding scheme (project number LP0882670).

As it was originally conceived, the project aimed to assist parents who might feel marginalised from the school community to be in a better position to help their children succeed; with the aim of using the research findings to assist schools to foster their engagement with these parents. We did not assume that visible involvement in school events directly correlated with commitment to education. However, if barriers to their involvement existed, we hoped to facilitate the input of parent and school perspectives in discussions on what can be done about it and work with parents and staff on ways of overcoming these barriers.

We originally called our project 'The Invisible Parents Project - Exploring the barriers to effective parental and community involvement in three Northern Territory Schools'. But as we progressed, we realised that notions of visibility and of engagement both had to be called into question. Our research revealed a dissonance between what parents expect their level of engagement with school should be and what the policy community assumes about the importance of engagement. Suffice to say, parents' visible engagement with schools and the importance they place on education are different matters. The parents who were most visible were not necessarily engaging for reasons of academic advancement or schooling success but over concerns about bullying or truancy or social trauma. And the parents who were least visible were not necessarily marginalised from the school but had a faith that the school was on top of the education of their children, and that the leadership of educators could be depended upon to get the job done, rendering forthright 'engagement' unnecessary.

In short, non-visibility is an exaggerated problem. Non-visibility does not equate with lack of interest or lack of participation in schooling. Educators frequently commented on the greater 'invisibility' of families who have students that are achieving average (as opposed to below- or above-average) outcomes. The average is rendered unexceptional, and removed from everyone's radar.

Our focus here is on parents, but we also report on school engagement from the perspective of educators. Education is defined as the formal teaching of knowledge-gathering attributes within schools, and the role of parents as that of partners to this enterprise. Wider definitions of education which embrace life-long socialisation processes, including the imparting of life values, stories, traditions and skills within families, are touched on through our discussion of the different perspectives held by parents and educators. In the main, however, a system-centric definition was maintained by both groups and we reflect this participant emphasis in what follows. It should also be noted that the schools who participated in this research project are not necessarily representative of schools across the board. By definition of their strong association with The Smith Family and long prior history of engagement with their feeder communities, they have a keen interest in improving ways in which they relate to the families in their surrounding neighbourhoods. This should not be assumed to be a universal commitment; and the exceptional nature of the schools we partnered with needs to be taken into account when our findings are considered by schools that may not be at the same stage of development or reflection.

Context

Coincidentally, our research took place in the midst of the 'Intervention' of June 2007 when the Federal Government sent in the Australian army to 73 Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Ostensibly in response to the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred': Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*¹, an extraordinary array of measures targeting Indigenous people in prescribed communities² was announced.

Under the Intervention, the Australian Government's Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), a program that supported a range of community services and organisations and partly-funded many Aboriginal assistant teachers, was abolished (and later partly reinstated). Non-discretionary quarantining of welfare payments, along with the removal of the permit system for entry onto Aboriginal Land, was also instituted. The army was deployed to ensure implementation of intervention programs and school principals were required to report unexplained student absenteeism, for the possible suspension of family support payments. To enable this targeted discrimination of income beneficiaries and whole communities to occur, the operation of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* was explicitly suspended and the protection of anti-discrimination law in the Northern Territory was removed. Coinciding with this upheaval, 53 Aboriginal Community Government

¹ Wild, R. and Anderson, P., 2007, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children are Sacred": Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*, Northern Territory Government, Darwin, <http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquiry/aac/pdf/bipacsa_final_report.pdf>.

² 'Prescribed areas' include all land held under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976*, all Aboriginal community living areas and all Aboriginal town camps: over 600,000 sq kilometres in total, encompassing over 70 per cent of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

Councils and Association Councils were simultaneously forced to amalgamate into eight regional 'super shires' by the Northern Territory Government.

This backdrop of rapid social policy change affected the research insofar as a more circumspect approach to participant recruitment needed to be adopted than originally planned. It also meant we needed to have the right team members on board, and approaching families only took place after establishing the trust of our partner schools, who, alongside Aboriginal families, were fielding more disruptions than ever.

The research also took place in the midst of heightened concern about Indigenous students' educational achievement levels in Australian primary and secondary schools. Since the introduction of national assessment and reporting of student and school achievement levels at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students, the significant 'gap' in the academic achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is periodically bemoaned in the national media and within political responses. The sparsely populated Northern Territory (NT) occupies a unique position in this national debate. While the largest populations of Indigenous people are to be found in New South Wales and coastal Queensland, the Northern Territory has the highest proportion of Indigenous students at 45% of the school population; and some of the starkest indicators of educational disparity. For example, in 2008, only 40% of Indigenous students achieved minimum English literacy benchmarks by Grade 3, compared to 89% of non-Indigenous students.³

Reasons for poor formal academic outcomes among Indigenous students are complex, and are part of an intricate colonial, historical, social and cultural dynamic. There are many different approaches to understanding why Indigenous education inequality persists.⁴ At the very least, we can say that relationships are at the centre of educational interactions - relationships which are embedded within contexts. We can also say that relationships are placed under strain in the NT context, where schools endure high rates of teacher turnover and turbulent social policy adjustments. In 2009, for example, over 550 of the 2133 (26%) teachers in the NT left their positions.⁵ We know less about how schools are related to by the parents of the children who are problematised in policy terms as being most at risk of underachievement in schooling.

³ Northern Territory Government Department of Education & Training, 2010, *Annual Report, 2008-2009* Darwin, NT: Northern Territory Government.

⁴ Beresford, Q. and Partington, G. (eds.) *Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education: The Australian Experience* Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press; Collins, B. and Lea, T., 1999, *Learning Lessons: An Independent Inquiry into Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory* Northern Territory Department of Education, Darwin, NT; Gray, J. and Beresford, Q., 2008, 'A 'formidable challenge': Australia's quest for equity in Indigenous education' *Australian Journal of Education*, 52, 197-223; Loudon, W., Rohl, M., Barrat-Pugh, C. Brown, C., Cairney, T., Elderfield, J., House, H., Meiers, M., Rivalland, J. and Rowe, K. J., 2005, *In teachers' hands: Effective literacy teaching practices in the early years of schooling*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

⁵ Northern Territory Government Department of Education & Training, 2010, *Annual Report, 2008-2009* Darwin, NT: Northern Territory Government.

Our research set out to explore this gap by spending time with close to fifty Indigenous families (and carers who were biologically or socially responsible for students at our participating schools), visiting the participating schools, talking to teachers and other school-based personnel—especially the community liaison officers—and interviewing policy personnel in the NT Department of Education and Training and the Darwin office of the Australian Government Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

Within the NT context, it is safe to say there is a conflicting field of authoritative opinions vying for dominance in how Indigenous futures are best governed. A unifying assertion is that educational attainment—particularly the ability to read, write and enumerate to a level of industry competency—is the key to ending Indigenous immiseration.⁶ Depending on its advocates, education is the means for social and economic mobility; community empowerment; the eradication of poverty and violence; or a means of stemming preventable disease and early death. Policy responses focus on school-level ingredients—teacher credentials, school facilities, early childhood enrolment and leadership attributes—and on family-level contributions. With the latter, two urgent prescriptions are repeated: first, the need to mandate consistent school attendance; and second, the issue that concerns us in this report, the need for Indigenous communities and parents to be ‘engaged’.

What our research shows is that parents in this study differ in the ways that they monitor and intervene in their children’s schooling, and that this difference is as much, if not more, defined by social class and affluence as by culture specific logic. Indeed, the international research on parent engagement with schools not only reveals the class specificity of engagement modalities, but shows the nuanced ways in which families reproduce the class position of their children in the very manner and form of their school involvement. Stephen Ball’s and Carol Vincent’s work, for instance, shows the tactics of the professional (university-educated) middle class are toward active intervention and risk management (to the point of shifting suburbs or cities) in the interests of their child’s educational outcomes.⁷ Their interventions go beyond attending school functions, caring about the school grounds, or fund-raising activities, to proactive gathering of intelligence about the reputations of teachers; querying the pedagogical practices of the school; being mindful of giving their children competitive extra-curricular advantages; and if necessary, insisting on changes if their academic ambitions are not being met. They navigate the schools that their children are in with a fervent sense of the stakes involved if as parents they fail to pay attention,

⁶ According to the Australian Government’s website, the ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy aims ‘to reduce Indigenous disadvantage with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement and employment outcomes’. See <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Initiatives/Pages/closingthegap.aspx>

⁷ Ball S. J., and Vincent, C., 2001, ‘New class relations in education: the strategies of the fearful middle classes’ In J. Demaine (ed.) *Sociology of Education Today* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave pp.180-195; Carol Vincent (2001) Social class and parental agency. *Journal of Education Policy* 16: 347-364.

undertaking what education theorist Annette Lareau calls the 'concerted cultivation' of their children's advantages.⁸

Indigenous socialisation practices in the school communities studied here are not oriented toward treating children as special projects whose skills and attributes need to be intensively cultivated through multiple extra-curricular activities and dense scheduling efforts. Nor is there a developed sense that this level of investment is what education achievement requires of parents. In this light, it is not clear from policy recommendations, exhorting the importance of engagement, what exactly is desired. Is the aim to have parents, who are able to make more explicit demands on schooling, knowledgeable advocates for the academic progression of their children? Are the institutional decoding capabilities of middle class professionals the 'invisible' attributes which education specialists believe Indigenous parents need if education outcomes are to be attained? Or is it, as our research into policy suggests, that engagement is seen in vaguer terms as an inarguable proposition that will somehow create connections that are potent enough in themselves to do the work of unpicking some of education's inherent incommensurabilities?

Amidst all the confusions of purpose and need, what can 'engagement' be taken to mean?

Engagement

Engagement has been used in a variety of ways in school education. Two key modes are i) to view parental engagement as involving the parent in their child's learning activities (often outside the school environment); and ii) to describe those activities that engage parents in school activities and decision-making processes. Within this latter category, previous research has also defined the level of parental engagement, for instance, Vogels⁹ distinguished four groups of parents in research conducted in the Netherlands. The first group, 'partners', were highly active in informal and formal engagement activities, from volunteering to engagement in the formal governance of the school. These parents were more likely to have a high socio-economic status (SES). A second group was called 'participants'. They were highly involved in informal activities at the school and had middle to high SES. The third group were 'delegators', who viewed teachers as the appointed experts and therefore responsible for the education of their children. The fourth group were the 'invisible' parents, who were not engaged or visible to the school. The 'invisible' parents were primarily parents with a low SES.

Critical to this study has been the finding that 'engagement' has been largely restricted by schools to the implementation of programs that bring parents into the school environment.

⁸ Lareau, A., 1987, 'Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital' *Sociology of Education* 60: 73-85.

⁹ Vogels, 2002, cited in Drissen, G., Smit, F., and Slegers, P., 2005, Parental involvement and educational achievement. *British Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 509-532.

This is undertaken through various programs, such as breakfast with a mentor programs, barbecues and other school based activities, facilitated by special personnel who are employed by the school to act as cultural brokers. We discovered a number of dissonances between the good intents of programs, such as nutrition interventions, which seek to provide incentives for attending school whilst simultaneously providing the sustenance deemed necessary for a child's learning, as these can inadvertently disengage and alienate some parents who resist the perceived paternalism. As one parent put it, it was preferable to let her children stay home if there was no lunch money because "I don't like the emergency food. The kids don't want it."

Engagement approaches often assume that the invisibility of Indigenous parents is associated with an Indigenous aversion to school institutions and an associated naïveté (or apathy) around the importance of schooling. This is certainly the message commonly enunciated by politicians, who insist that until parents' value education; little change will be seen in outcomes. From this position, the dominant strategy for increasing Indigenous parent visibility is shaped by the promotion of schools as being safe and welcoming spaces. It is assumed that increasing parents' level of comfort with school will overcome their aversions so that they then 'value' education, in turn leading to positive educational outcomes for children. It assumes a correlation between parent participation and student improvement through embodied interactions between parents and schools; but does not articulate what sorts of education-cultivating behaviours parents are otherwise meant to adopt, other than inconsistent appeals for supervised book reading in the home.

At the same time we found that Indigenous parents participating in this study placed considerable value on schooling and rarely regarded school spaces as sources of anxiety or fear. While we did not gather conclusive data on the effectiveness of specific programs, it is feasible that in our study, schools' prior commitment to engagement, expressed through their partnership with The Smith Family, has contributed to this sense of security within the parent body. It is also the case that the majority of parents in this study remembered their own school experiences with affection and saw schools in general as good places to be. Traumatic events in peoples' lives were more likely to be associated with what was generically called 'welfare', with parents describing children being taken away, loss of custody or the breaking up of families at the hands of welfare authorities as the events that best explained their current composition.

In terms of school engagement, parents in this study were comfortable with the educational spaces that schools provided and viewed their role in the school as minimal unless it was concerned with issues related to the behaviour or emotional state of their child. In this regard, the parents perceived themselves as highly visible and struggled to suggest ways in which the schools could be any more engaging than they already were, given that they are intensely involved with the school in various negotiations related to their child's attendance

and behaviour. Indeed, our research shows how, for many Indigenous families, it can be a challenge to maintain a consistent focus on education when there are many more basic day-to-day difficulties and life crises taking place, which would reasonably take priority over school in most Australian family contexts. This matches Jill Crozier's and Jane Davies' findings in their study of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents in the United Kingdom, who likewise seldom initiated contact with the schools:

Instead they expressed a 'trust' in the schools and some suggested that they were satisfied with the ways in which the schools organised and managed their children's education. In most cases they made limited demands on the school. Any contact they did have tended to be made by the school and was often related to negative issues such as truancy, poor attendance or punctuality. Most parents welcomed this contact and interpreted it as evidence of the school 'caring' for their children. In other words, the parents expected the school to contact them rather than the other way round.¹⁰

Rather than being a matter of indifference to the school or non-valuing of education, Crozier and Davies suggest this parental reserve is based on deference to professionalism and to the educational knowledge that professionals hold.

From the perspective of participating teachers, engaging with parents over behavioural and attendance matters was not as highly regarded as volunteer parent participation in school-based events or responses to newsletters and requests for signatures. Even so, teachers had a relatively generous view of engagement and despite their preference for particular forms, were conscious not to impose middle class norms onto Indigenous participation. Teachers were reluctant to comment on the behaviour of individual Indigenous kids, or more generally on their pedagogical approaches to teaching Indigenous students; and conveyed the sense that they try to teach all children equally whilst recognising the particular social disadvantages faced by Indigenous families.

To return to Vogel's categories of engagement, it is important to note that the type of parental engagement very much depends on whether this is from the perspective of teachers or parents. Importantly, Indigenous parents were rarely engaged in school decision making processes around such issues as staff selection or infrastructure investments which, at least in theory, occur through parent run councils which tend to be accessed by non-Indigenous parents. Nor was it expected that they should be engaged on matters of curricula reform or in instructional decisions about how to close the gap in literacy and numeracy attainment. We might note as an aside that this is probably generic for all parents within public schools, regardless of ethnicity, as educators see this as firmly their domain

¹⁰ Crozier, G., & Davies, J. 2007. 'Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home-school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents' *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(3), 295-313 (p.309)

and not the subject of community engagement. It tends to be a closed topic for discussion and critique. This concurs with wider research revealing the frustration experienced by white parents who have learnt not to expect a positive reception if they mount critiques of teaching.¹¹ As Crozier and Davies note, 'perceived parental interference in the professional's domain is a major tension for schools wanting to encourage parental involvement.'¹²

Compounding these unintended exclusions was limited knowledge of teachers and schools about the evidence concerning the effectiveness of things like 'breakfast with a mentor' programs on educational outcomes¹³ – programs which teachers feel compelled to support but which they also question in terms of their claims on their time, as well as the potential erosion of parental responsibility.

Similarly, while engagement is ubiquitously recommended as an important strategy for the advancement of the quality of education, with the ultimate objective being to expand the social and cognitive capacities of students, few engagement activities are ever this precisely targeted. Schools are left to find the strategies and the resources for engagement activities entirely on their own. It is left to the schools to work out how to make it all work. Educators described working through different ideas using the energy of late night submission writing and herculean logistical efforts to attract carers into the school, without being certain these intensive activities are doing much in the way of bridging gaps in outcomes.

In considering these different perspectives and issues, we came to the view that social activities, like film nights or food fairs, should not be dismissed or de-valued: they are important in building trust and relationships with all families. At the same time, they cannot bear the burden of improving student outcomes alone. Given the energy expenditure demanded of schools to host social interactions, their purpose needs to be clear. Although social activities have their place in building school communities and should be conducted in their own right, they should also be strategically planned as an interim step within a more explicit program of support for skilling parents in the complexities of extracting success from the educational system. Such skills include building parent capacity to engage with their children in ways that promote the emotional and cognitive development necessary for academic achievement, with practical methods that are doable in overcrowded homes fielding many other social pressures. It should not be assumed that failure to visibly display interest in ways that are recognisable to the school is an absence of interest amongst parents in the education of their children. Rather, parents believe that getting their children

¹¹ See Crozier, G. 1999 'Is it a case of 'we know when we're not wanted'? The parents' perception of parent-teacher roles and relationships' *Educational Research*, 41(3), 315-328

¹² Crozier and Davies op.cit: 310

¹³ Cooper, C. E., and Crosnoe, R., 2007, 'The engagement in schooling of economically disadvantaged parents and children. *Youth and Society*, 38: 372-391

to attend as much as possible is a major contribution on their behalf and trust the school to do the rest. They want help in dealing with the resistance their children start to display about school in general as children get older, and start shrugging their shoulders when children are too old to be told what to do anymore and parental sanctions have no effect. Put simply, parents don't need to be visible in the school to be interested in their children's education.

There is no doubt that not understanding what happens at school is a great disincentive for family and community engagement. But our research shows that parents in this study want and need help in acquiring the techniques of cultivation that will help coax greater outcomes from the system on behalf of, and for, their children. Over and over parents told us of their frustration in not knowing how to handle the children in their care, let alone how to monitor their progression within schools. Indigenous parents commonly referred to matters related to the individual behaviour of their child and an associated loss of authority over their children to explain absenteeism or child misbehaviour. They viewed the school as the prime place where their children's behaviour could be modified and where education is meant to happen. However, they placed little emphasis on their own involvement at home in developing school-oriented knowledges and routines – which is suggestive of the ways in which skilled educators might be able to assist. In many instances, schools are working hard to engage with families but, without underestimating the dimensions of this challenge, we recommend that schools not necessarily do *more*, but that they focus their current activities with a more precise set of outcomes in mind.



Finally, it should be noted that the term 'parent' is used throughout as a proxy for adult caregiver, recognising that biological parents may or may not be the people most responsible for primary care in a child's domestic life. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, formal or informal foster parents are also likely to be involved.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The Australian literature available on engagement stems in the main from practitioners sharing information about what they have respectively trialled in their schools; from the discipline of education psychology; and from education administration perspectives. Parental and community involvement in schools is generally considered to have wide-ranging positive affects, influencing both the educational attainment of students and building strong social capital in communities.¹⁴ Importantly, parental involvement in their children's schooling has been uncritically accepted and promoted as a positive and often essential strategy to improve educational outcomes in the NT¹⁵ and most schools provide information about how parents may be involved in the happenings of the school.

A critical review of this literature reveals that parental involvement in their children's education and especially the assumption that this involvement will lead to improved educational outcomes are problematic and somewhat under-theorised concepts. The international case examples broaden the parameters considerably and form an important resource.

What does parental involvement mean?

Parental involvement, engagement or parent-school partnerships generally describe two types of relationships with the school: parents participating at the school (attending events, providing voluntary service, talking to teachers, etcetera); and parents taking a role as educators after school hours. When authors talk about the positive effects of participation, they generally group all types together, although the evidence for this categorisation is not clear cut. Despite the vast and growing quantity of literature about the importance of parental engagement in schools, there is little evidence to support the notion that it automatically yields positive academic outcomes.¹⁶ Parental involvement in school based activities may increase their social capital and their confidence in dealing with educational issues.¹⁷ The first type of participation involves building social capital and providing environments where parents are supported and confident to be involved in their children's school. However, not all parents are equally able to assume such a role. Parents who have limited education themselves, who work long hours, who have limited ability in the language of tuition, or who are marginalised by their socio-economic status, may be excluded.¹⁷ As the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu points out, those people who already have

¹⁴ Hill, N. E. and Taylor, L. C., 2004, 'Parental school involvement and children's academic achievement' *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13 (4): 161-164.

¹⁵ Department of Education and Training, 2010, <http://www.det.nt.gov.au/>, Northern Territory Government, Darwin, accessed 06 December.

¹⁶ Finn, J. D., 1998, 'Parental engagement that makes a difference', *Educational Leadership*, 55 (8): 20-24

¹⁷ Bushnell, M., 2001, 'This bed of roses has thorns: cultural assumptions and community in an elementary school', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 32 (2): 139-166. Eccles, J. S. and Harold, R. D., (1996), 'Family involvement in children's and adolescents' schooling', In A Booth and J. F. Dunn, (Eds), *Family- school links: how do they affect educational*

the skills and capacity to effectively engage are most likely to receive benefit from this engagement.¹⁸

Parental involvement and educational outcomes

Historically, the common approach towards parental involvement strategies and research was (and in some instances still is) based on a cultural deficit model. This model assumes that the school's role is to recognise talent and promote talent (provide education) to meet societal need. Under this model, schools hold the responsibility of educating children; a role which is compromised by the dysfunctional aspects of some families—usually poor or working class—whose background and environment complicate the school's work.¹⁹ The history of research findings into parental involvement for cultural minorities and low SES groups demonstrates that the definition and impact of parental involvement is highly variable. One of the crucial features in achieving good levels of involvement and positively impacting educational outcomes are culturally informed teacher/parent interactions, and targeted parent education for involvement that is linked to classroom learning.²⁰

Overall, the concept has come under criticism for the way it constructs parents through a deficit model, and the subsequent danger of reinforcing the marginalisation of already marginalised parents. The standard on which the cultural deficit model is based is a Western middle-class parental archetype, which implicitly invalidates different forms of parental involvement as these vary across ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Crozier and Davies for instance provide an interesting typology of school expectations of parents.²¹ They describe the schools in their study as using either the 'transplant model' or the 'expert model'. The transplant model refers to school expectations that parents would be more competent co-educators if they imbibed educator skills and expertise, through such mechanisms as 'parent classes, induction into hearing their child read, playing with their child, or the use of toy libraries.' In the expert model the professional holds esoteric specialist knowledge and makes all the key educational decisions. The parent's role is limited to that of compliance. However, both models locate the balance of power within the hands of the professionals and at best only 'allow' parents to support them in ways based on their decisions; 'The school's implicit expectations are based on an, albeit

outcomes? N.J. Erlbaum, Mahwah N. J.: pp 3-34. Feuerstein, A., 2000, 'School characteristics and parent involvement: influences on participation in children's schools', *The Journal of Educational Research*, 94 (1): 29-39. Pena, D. C., 2000, 'Parent involvement: influencing factors and implications', *The Journal of Educational Research*, 94 (1): 42-54.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, P., 1977, 'Cultural reproduction and social reproduction', in Karaber and Halsey (eds) *Power and Ideology in Education*, Oxford University Press, New York.

¹⁹ Driessen, G., Smit, F. and Slegers, P., 2005, 'Parental Involvement and Educational Achievement', *British Educational Research Journal*, 31: 4, 509-532

²⁰ Kleinman, A & Benson, P. (2006). Anthropology in the clinic: The problem of cultural competency and how to fix it. *PLoS Med*, 3(10): 1673-1676

²¹ Crozier and Davies 2007 op cit: 300

subconscious, assumption that all parents are 'like us': 'like us' being white and middle class'.²²

Accordingly, the strategies clustered under what analysts have termed the cultural deficit model were aimed at changing 'non-standard' families and helping them to be more like middle-class families.²³ Yet, while some authors have decried the tacit class basis to notions of engaged parents for a narrow education ideal, arguing that the values and strategies that differently-located parents socialise their children with are equally valid,²⁴ when it comes to grooming children for success in school, it seems the education system is still caught in the social stratification dilemma. If family background is a more significant variable in student outcomes than school characteristics, what is the 'value-add' that schools can be expected to confer? Or is it the nature of the enterprise that schools inevitably rely on a more narrow set of social dispositions and attributes from families for education's full benefits to be successfully acquired?

In recent decades, the administrative literature on parental engagement with schools has shifted to a friendlier emphasis on school-parent engagement and early childhood development, where the explicit emphasis on parents as obstacles to a school's ambitions has been replaced by the notion of parents as first teachers, or parents as partners in the education compact. For some, this has simply been a shift in emphasis rather than meaning, with 'responsibilisation' rhetorics being akin to the deficit arguments of yesteryear.²⁵ The type of parental involvement which is considered to most readily impact on student's academic achievement is not involvement within the school in generic terms, but the specific role that the parent takes supporting and extending their children's education outside the school environment:

Parenting, which goes on all the time, counts for more in understanding child development and performance than a particular behaviour, such as level of parent school involvement. Yet work in the area of parent involvement focuses heavily on school site involvement, ignoring this perhaps more significant relationship.²⁶

However, the conditions of involvement need to recognise the cultural practices of home and foster forms of social interaction which tap into these home practices without rendering them superfluous or lesser:

²² *ibid*

23 Valdes, G., 1996, *Con Respeto: bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools*. New York, Teachers College Press.

24 See for example Lareau, A., 2000, *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (2nd edition) Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield

²⁵ Savelsberg, H. J., 2010, 'Setting responsible pathways: the politics of responsibilisation', *Journal of Education Policy*, 25: 5, 657 — 675

²⁶ Zellman, G. L. and Waterman, J. M., 1998, 'Understanding the impact of parent school involvement on Children's educational outcomes', *The Journal of Educational Research*, 91 (6): 370-380, page 379.

If practices such as literacy are recognised as cultural practices, rather than simply cognitive skills, schools and community groups will seek to develop a greater sense of partnership and collaboration between the school and its community.²⁷

Emphasising the importance of curriculum-specific parental involvement is research that insists that meaningful involvement needs to link engagement to learning.²⁸ As education researcher Jeremy Finn²⁹ points out, the types of parental engagement which are associated with school performance are:

- actively organising and monitoring the child's time;
- helping with homework;
- discussing school matters with the child; and
- reading with the child.

The Harvard Family Research Project (www.hfrp.org) has also catalogued the importance of effective home-school interactions for overcoming class and ethnicity related inequalities in education. To the above list they add the importance of parents' being able to decode school achievement data as another important engagement task for schools, if parents are to more usefully monitor and intervene in student learning. While historically 'approaches to engaging families have been event-driven and not always designed to involve families in a consistent and intentional way to improve student achievement',³⁰ it is also the case that academic expectations tend not to be clearly communicated. The Harvard researchers show how helping parents to fully interrogate how students are progressing toward education benchmarks, as well as their grades, attendance and homework assignments, needs to be brought into the engagement rubric.

The following chapters reveal how some of the issues raised in the literature played out in our case study schools. While it is clear many of the experiences of Indigenous people match those of immigrant and working class families elsewhere, a profound sense of the importance of Indigenous cultural distinction gives the NT scene some unique characteristics. At the political level, Indigenous parents are frequently suspected of being indifferent to education, an accusation that is also often made against working class families. Sharing kinship with marginalised families elsewhere, the parents in this study do not really understand that among other things, their performance of commitment is being judged. They have accepted government exhortations that attending is key for education

²⁷ Cairney, T. and Ruge, J., 1996, 'Bridging Home and School Literacy: in search of more effective partnerships', *Forum of Education* 51(1): 103-115 (p.104)

²⁸ Henderson, A.T. and Berla, N. (eds), 1994, 'A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement', Report Danforth Foundation, National Committee for Citizens in Education, Washington, DC.

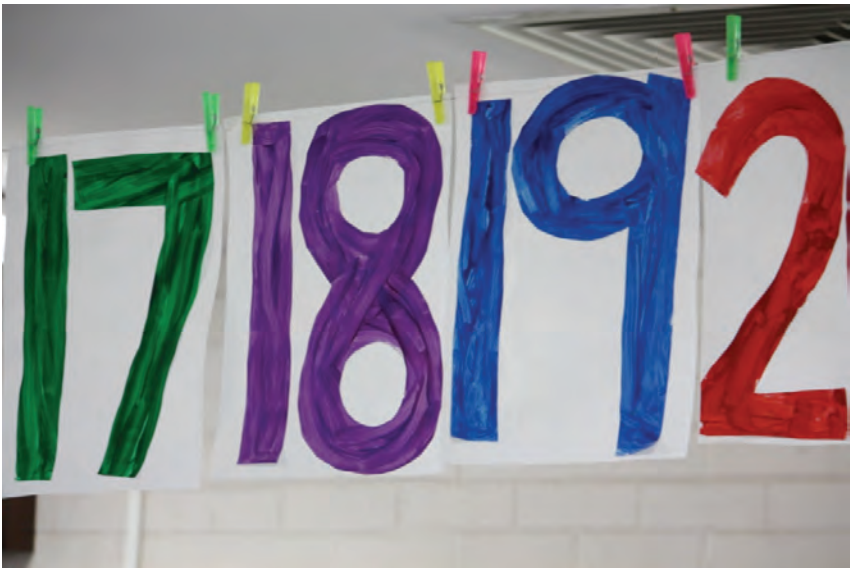
²⁹ Finn, J. D., 1998, 'Parental engagement that makes a difference', *Educational Leadership*, 55 (8): 20-24

³⁰ Taveras, B., Douwes, C., Johnson, K., Lee, D. and Caspe, M., 2010, 'New Visions for Public Schools: Using Data to Engage Families' Harvard Family Research Project, available at <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/new-visions-for-public-schools-using-data-to-engage-families>

outcomes, but do not realise that their own behaviours—such as reading to children, being proactive in response to school requests and the like—signify how they ‘value’ education. But what we have found is that Indigenous parents do value education and share common desires for their children’s success at school. Where they differ is in their understanding of the suite of ‘invisible’ cultivations that middle class parents invest in to realise those ambitions, on what it takes to get what they want from schooling. And if they do have a sense of this, they are structurally unable to act on the understanding in many circumstances. What distinguishes the schools here, and arguably Indigenous schools more generally, is their enhanced sensitivity to these issues of cultural distinction. The schools featured in this report go out of their way to amend the obstacles of distance and poverty faced by the families in their neighbourhood. They are not hostile to ethnic differences, nor do they expect Indigenous families to be the same as middle class families. It is within this mix of class distinction and culturalistic expectations that some of the more difficult and unique issues feeding Indigenous education inequality can be found.

Influencing change

We have been fortunate in being able to conduct this research with willing school partners and the constructive inputs of The Smith Family, who have given the researchers free reign to ask critical questions and pursue the angles suggested by discussions with parents. As we have noted previously, the research was also done independently of The Smith Family's particular school engagement programs. Even so, many of our findings match The Smith Family's separate survey data from a process evaluation of their Parent and Community Engagement (PaCE) projects across the NT, which have also found that parents expressed the need for assistance in managing the demands of student attendance and in de-coding school reports and assessment information. To this end, The Smith Family is negotiating with the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to implement programs to meet some of these identified needs, as they do not want to 'just take a temperature and walk away, commenting on the fever but not helping'.³¹



³¹ The Smith Family, email communications, December 2010.

METHODS

The research applied an exploratory case study approach using a mix of ethnographic and interview techniques. We observed children, parents and schools; interviewed parents, teachers, policy personnel and school based staff; and conducted focus group sessions with key stakeholders. After talking the project through and negotiating access with various departmental and school-based stakeholders, we worked through Indigenous school liaison officers to contact families of Indigenous students. As part of establishing the overall research framework, we recorded our experiences of negotiating the research partnership with The Smith Family and with the schools, of gaining access to teachers and families, and of the situations which best lent familiarity with the research participants.

A total of 48 interviews with parents or carers were conducted, taking on average two hours each, depending on the context. These interviews were open ended and conversational in style, aimed at facilitating meaningful dialogue with parents. In the context of the Federal Government's NT Emergency Response, establishing a safe and trusting space for parents to be candid about their lives and views of their educational experiences was paramount. For interviews held on school grounds, we adopted an opportunistic sampling strategy, whereas a 'snowballing' technique was used to interview parents in their homes. We also conducted in-depth interviews with policy officers (a total of 9), as well as educators (26), taking on average one and a half hours each. Educators comprised teaching staff, school leaders and Indigenous liaison officers and were selected based on the length of employment in their respective fields. We were seeking both people that had worked more than ten years and also newcomers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the breadth of perceptions. Policy officers included representatives from federal and the NT governments. The questions we asked all participants in this study essentially probed three key questions: What does engagement mean? Why is it important? How is it achieved? (Interview protocols are included in Appendix 1).

Extensive ethnographic observations of social interactions were made at key times during the school day, with an emphasis on school arrivals, departures and programmed events. We also paid close attention to activities and spaces that were designed with parent engagement in mind, either as special events (such as a welcome day) or as inscribed features of the school (such as a parent room or reception), and arranged to sit in wherever possible. These field observations took place on a bi-weekly basis, usually two mornings per school, over the two semesters of 2009, coupled with intense periods whereby an observer would be present at the school for extended periods. The observations in Katherine were conducted on a more concentrated weekly block basis, given our need to travel long distances to access the school. In the tradition of case study research, we noted details on everything from the layout of the school grounds and car parks and how close or far away

Indigenous households were from each school, through to the routines of people's movements to and through schools.

In both Darwin and Katherine, observational data was not restricted to the school setting, but extended to the lived environments that parents moved through, such as their homes, bus routes, shopping centres and visits to Centrelink. In documenting these social settings, we noted the adults and children who were present, their relationship to the study participants, whether there was furniture and working equipment, and details on any other issues of note (such as a fight that might be taking place, a gathering together for a drinking session, or the logistics of organising a trek to attend a funeral).

Observational and interview data were recorded through hand written jottings and later elaborated. Combined with school observations, we created over 230 pages of electronic record. With consent, interviews were also tape recorded and transcribed. Additionally, the historical literature on Indigenous education and family participation, and policy and program documents on engagement efforts were collected and analysed. Interviews were conducted until it was clear that saturation had been achieved—that is, when there were clear repetitions (redundancies) in what we were being told.

The data sets were then coded into themes, categories and emergent patterns, using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to verify team analyses. The key themes are discussed as chapters in this report. The data was re-presented to schools both in focus group sessions and individual briefings; and fed back to parents through one-on-one discussions for further reflection. The feedback sessions enabled the research team to collaborate with the participating schools and parents in thinking through forward actions, and were integral to testing and confirming the findings presented here.



PROJECT LIMITATIONS

All research has constraints. We have already noted the way in which the simultaneous advent of the NT Emergency Response shaped the conduct of the research; and how the schools we worked with are highly dedicated to community engagement, which possibly restricts how representative they are. Here we note additional issues that need to be considered in thinking through the generalisability of our findings.

Having had a focus on parents of Indigenous children, other parental groups were not included in this study except through accidental recruitment. Accordingly, this project did not take into account the levels of engagement of non-Indigenous parents with the schools; or the levels of engagement between parents of any description with high performing children. The selection of and associated access to participants proved to be another project limitation. Negotiating access was frequently brokered by liaison staff or was opportunistic. As well, because we wanted to have intensive discussions about sensitive issues, but were conscious of the heightened sensitivities surrounding attendance in light of the Intervention, our sample did not aim to for statistical significance but for volunteer recruitment. We sought to gather rich contextual data to gain a deeper appreciation of not only what was happening in terms of engagement, but why it was happening.

There were many intriguing issues which arose in the research which deserve further study in their own right. We did not include observational studies of classrooms to understand how children interacted with their teachers and peers and how this relates to parent-school engagement. We focused on primary schools, which meant we spoke to families that also have older (as well as younger) children. Here we were repeatedly told that the issue of engaging children in education is easier when children are young and still open to parental influence, but harder when children are older and able to resist parental authority more successfully. The issues facing parents of Indigenous adolescents deserve separate inquiry. Another absence is the voice of students, whose views on parents and schools are even less well known. This was a deliberate exclusion but as one school principal pointed out, the actual link between parents and schools *is* the student; and the best conduit of information home is via the student, whose enthusiasm for an event can help overcome parent reluctance. We consider exploring student views an important focus for future research.

While the importance of understanding the socio-economic basis to education inequality together with factors of class over race emerged from this study, we did not seek empirical data on parental occupation, income level or educational attainment; nor did we match such data to a purposive sample. As it transpired, through interview data it was clear that the overwhelming majority of parents in our study were unemployed and in public housing. The majority either never had a job before or had extremely limited employment experience. Of those few in work, none were in supervisory or managerial positions. Most

families were supported through mixed forms of social welfare assistance; and none were in private housing.

Finally, it bears repeating that while this research was conducted in partnership with The Smith Family, who support schools across Australia to improve childhood wellbeing, our research did not seek to evaluate the school's particular engagement processes; nor the quality of The Smith Family's programs in these schools. Rather, we focused on different perspectives on what engagement constituted, what enabled or disabled it, and why it was needed – or not. If parents spoke spontaneously about specific programs in the course of exploring their relationship with the school, we noted these references, but we did not deliberately elicit value judgements on discrete programs.

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Of our case study sites, all are primary schools with a large proportion of Indigenous students. Two are based in Darwin, the capital of the NT, in the northern suburbs of Darwin and Palmerston, with the third based in Katherine (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Map of the Northern Territory with the areas of the participating schools circled.

As will be seen, all three case study schools had populations drawn in part from town camps, which are a particular form of residential area. Town camps are quasi-permanent Indigenous settlements existing on the periphery of many remote area communities and within all the major service centres (Alice Springs, Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy). An exact definition is difficult to come by, due to their varied history as Indigenous informal meeting and camping locations through to Australian government administrative units. Before the Second World War, Indigenous people were not allowed to work and live in the town, a situation which remained until 1952, when Indigenous labour was sought to fill the sanitation positions to which white employees were averse.³² Clan groups settled in quasi-permanent yet unofficial settlements on the outskirts of the town; which expanded during WWII when numerous Indigenous men were employed by the Armed Forces.

During the 1960s, the then named Welfare Department (now the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) constructed government-financed town camps, providing them with housing and infrastructure.¹¹ This formalised the camps and introduced them permanently, if somewhat haphazardly, into the local urban infrastructure of towns throughout the NT, where they form an urban microcosm. Yet despite their proximity to towns, town camps continue to have poor infrastructure and high rates of social disadvantage: visualise dilapidated housing, improvised dwellings, overcrowding, predominantly Indigenous residents from many different locations and backgrounds. Many residents prefer the term 'town community' to town camp, to express the sanctuary and acceptance that such places provide for Indigenous people, but they are also sites of conflict and violence; alcohol and other drug addiction; of fluid populations with high mobility in and out of the setting; of neglected semi-public spaces and amenities; of overgrown or dead gardens, dumped cars and rubbish, skinny dogs and faeces. Indigenous families are not officially forced to live in town camps, but stay for a range of reasons, including the entrapments of welfare dependence and poverty. Affordable public housing throughout Darwin and Katherine is rare and public rental regulations prevent kinsmen from gathering in large groups, which means maintaining town-based tenancy is often at the cost of Indigenous sociability and reciprocity. For some, town camps are the most secure residential option.

³² Lea, J. 1989. South of the Berrimah Line: Government and the Aboriginal Community in Katherine and Tennant Creek after World War Two. In *Small Towns in Northern Australia*, ed. P. Loveday and A. Webb. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

MacFarlane Primary School – Katherine

Katherine is a small country town, approximately 310km SE of Darwin. It has a large and very visible Aboriginal population, with 28 per cent of Katherine’s population identified as Indigenous.³³ This population comprises both long term residents and family groups or individuals who travel in and out of the regional centre from remote communities. On school days and during school hours, it is not uncommon to see large numbers of children with parents or family groups throughout the town. For a variety of reasons they are not attending school.

In transport terms, Katherine is a crossroads town connecting to the east, west and south of Australia. Originally established to service the district’s pastoral lands, it is now also a service centre for the nearby Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Tindal, fifteen kilometres south of the township. RAAF Base Tindal personnel and families make up almost 25 per cent of Katherine’s population, and MacFarlane Primary School in Katherine East, a suburb that is a fair distance from the town centre, was once their school of choice. However, a newer school closer to the RAAF residential area has since attracted the RAAF student cohort, shifting MacFarlane School to one which caters predominantly for Indigenous students who come from the urban areas of Katherine, town camps (see Figure 2) that surround the urban area of Katherine, as well as communities from outlying areas.

There are some private houses in this suburb but most are rental properties and/or public housing. The primary school is next door to Katherine High School and it was common to see high-school students walking younger siblings to school or just hanging around the area. A small supermarket and a take away shop are opposite the secondary school and are only a short walk from the primary school.

The entry path to the school directs parents and children to classrooms and the canteen area. The canteen area is where ‘The Smith Family breakfast with a mentor program’ operates from and accommodates multiple tables and chairs for the use of parents and children. Most mornings during our fieldwork, there were five or more parents sitting with their children in this area and they mentioned feeling very comfortable in the space while they waited for their children to finish school.

The reception area is generously proportioned and divided into public and private areas by a single long counter. On the public side of the reception area there is a table with a couple of chairs (like those found at a cafe) and a flat screen TV that rotates photos of schoolchildren

³³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2007. *2006 Census Community Profile Series: Katherine (T) - Town Camps* Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Commonwealth of Australia

engaged in school activities. Parents do not tend to spend time in this area but use it to briefly transact with reception staff.



Figure 2: Map of Katherine - the participating school in a regional context

Moulden Park Primary School – Moulden

Moulden Primary school is located within the suburb of Moulden in the satellite town of Palmerston, approximately 20 kilometres to the south east of Darwin’s central business district.³⁴ Developed in the early 1980s, Moulden is dominated by housing commission houses and flats. Many of the blocks have huge drains that run through the low lying areas and which become torrents of fast moving water during the wet season. A number of children and adults have drowned in these waterways over the years. The school had assumed full duty of care for tree lopping, culverts and drains on its boundaries – just some of the additional responsibilities being placed on the school resulting from recent changes to town council by-laws.

Formally, Moulden has a population of 3,600, of which 26 per cent are Indigenous and 13 per cent are born overseas.³⁵ In this suburb, a large number of people are living in state provided (public) housing or are currently renting, with only a minority of the population

³⁴ Sinclair Knight Mertz, 2003, *Palmerston Integrated Community Plan: Background Paper 2 - Community Profile*. Darwin: Sinclair Knight Mertz

³⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, *2006 Census National Regional Profile: Moulden (Statistical Local Area)*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia

privately owning their home. Moulden Park Primary School is the only primary school in this suburb. One town camp is located within close proximity of Moulden.

The Aboriginal population is diverse and includes individuals who have grown up in Darwin or other urban centres around Australia, as well as many people with strong ties to different remote regions throughout the country (including the Torres Strait Islands). There are many single-parent households and also a considerable amount of houses and flats which would be considered, relative to middle class suburbs, as overcrowded and in a state of disrepair.

During the course of the study, many people commonly referred to the suburb affectionately, and as a matter of fact, as the 'Palmerston ghetto'. The residents and visitors to Moulden are highly visible both during the day and at night. It is common to see many people, including school-age children, moving around the local area or travelling to and from 'Up Top' (meaning the Palmerston city/shopping centre). People can be often seen congregating in groups of ten or more outside in front yards or on the street socialising. During the research, it was noted that there was a high level of interaction between residents. They were related or were friends, with regular and close contact, providing support to one another. Over a short time, outsiders are likely to sense a strong social fabric in the community.

Within a small suburb, the school is in easy walking distance from almost all houses. The local shop is about a two minute walk from the school and many people from the local area walk past the school on their way to the shop. A busy public bus stop, catering to the wider community, is located right out the front of the school grounds and is a hive of activity throughout the day. While the school itself has limited parking, a parking spot can almost always be secured in a vacant block opposite. The car park is mostly filled by teacher and school staff cars, and rarely the vehicles of school parents. Most parents, if they have a car, drop children off and drive away immediately. Of those parents who walk their children to school and enter the grounds, the pedestrian traffic flow moves towards the canteen or the classrooms.

To an outsider, initially locating the front office or school reception area is not immediately obvious. The public space in the reception area is about six square metres and in the mornings can appear a little frantic and chaotic but despite its size, appears social, welcoming and a comfortable space to be in. This feeling of community in the school reception area is facilitated by the fact that many of the non-teaching staff also lived in Moulden and were familiar with many of the parents and children outside of school hours.

Karama Primary School – Karama

Karama, in Darwin's North, is an established residential area which was primarily developed from the late 1970s to the early 1980s and is some twenty minutes drive from the Darwin CBD near the edge of the suburb of Malak. The school is a short walk from the main Karama

shopping centre. 15 per cent of its population of close to 5000 people were identified as Indigenous in 2006.³⁶ One third of the population is of foreign origin with the majority coming from the UK, Philippines and Indonesia.³⁷ While it is not considered the toughest neighbourhood in the Darwin/Palmerston region, its self-named group, the 'Karama Ghetto Boys', has drawn media attention and has created an exaggerated public perception of the suburb's problems.³⁸ Karama is also considered a multicultural melting pot and has a thriving migrant and refugee community. Reflecting this, it has a combined refugee and family centre to assist migrant and refugee families. The majority of households and dwellings are purchased (40 per cent) or rented (34 per cent) with only 15 per cent privately owned. Karama Primary School is one of two primary schools in the suburb but the only government primary school.

A key difference between the Karama Primary School environment and the other schools in this study was that it was surrounded by a big fence. This fence was locked up during the night and only opened at 7.45am on school mornings. It was also re-locked when school was in progress. In the mornings it was common to see children waiting near the reception area for the gates to be opened. If parents happened to be in the school grounds after school had started they were encouraged to leave through the reception/staff room building. This involved walking down a short corridor and through the reception area. Despite predictions that this 'locked' situation might be intimidating or unwelcoming, parent participants suggested that the fence was highly valued as it offered a sense of security and safety (whether keeping children in or keeping others out). Noticeably, parents applauded Karama's focused attention to bullying and aggression issues, with some having proactively sought residency in the area or daily commuting from other suburbs to have their children enrolled at this particular school.

³⁶ Darwin City Council, 2010, City of Darwin Community Profile. Retrieved 19 February, 2010, Available from <http://profile.id.com.au/Default.aspx?id=146>

³⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2007d, *2006 Census QuickStats: Katherine (Urban Centre/Locality)*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Commonwealth of Australia

³⁸ Cavanagh, R. 2008 Top End 'gangsters' brag of being thugs *Northern Territory News*, January 14th 2008.



Figure 3: Map of Darwin and Palmerston - the area of the two participating urban schools

In the following section, a discussion on key findings to emerge from the data is presented. The report then concludes with an outline of opportunities for future practice and policy development as it relates to engagement and the desire for improved educational outcomes.

THE FINDINGS

POLICY MORALS AND VALUES

At the heart of policy recommendations about engagement is the assumption that Indigenous people do not value education, fail to ensure regular attendance, and are fearful of the school milieu. This was clear in our own discussions with policy personnel:

I would really like to see a major shift in the mindset of all parents and carers to really start to value education and really start to understand how their children will have better lives through education. (Policy Officer)

From this position, a further remedial assumption is made: namely, the need to increase the level of engagement between schools and marginalised parents, generally within the school-controlled setting, to counter the poor educational outcomes plaguing Indigenous children in the NT.

...where we've got good principals, what we see those people doing, those men and women doing, is actually empowering their teachers and their school communities to have a conversation together about [education] things. Often by leadership, they'll go out and do it [engage]....spending their time doing 'non-professional' things that actually don't look like work in the normal course of events: it's not in the classroom, it's not behind the desk, it's not with a book, it's not curriculum driven. It's sitting down under the tree with a parent, having a conversation about the things that impact their daily lives, it is actually about an engagement, but it's not around the classroom enterprise. And yet it will have an immediate impact on the classroom enterprise because it's about the building of trust and a shared concept of what's going on in the world. (Policy Officer)

School-based educators similarly believed lack of engagement by Indigenous parents was an issue that needed a response. While also strong advocates of the inherent goodness of engagement, educators identified engagement as contributing to the building of social capital – the foundations necessary for improved educational outcomes. To this end, supporting awareness and interest in school activities (rather than active input into their design) was viewed as the first step in engaging parents:

Well I think taking part basically in what we're doing. Not necessarily in the programming of the preschool and how we run it, but they're free to look at the program any time and in my newsletter every week I always put the activities that we're doing. We work on themes and we put the activities that we're doing. We have the smartboard; I show what we're going to do on that. They love that and [it's] very good for Indigenous kids on the visual side of learning. Just little things like that

but I put that in the newsletter, whatever's happening and they're always welcome to come and speak to me at any time. (Teacher)

Throughout our interviews with teachers they all cited limited or lack of participation by Indigenous parents in various programs designed to engage parents. Events were often organised, such as big breakfast with a mentor programs and cinema evenings, however participating teachers worried it was only the same families who attended such events. In explaining the reasons behind this low engagement with schools, educators cited a number of possible causes, the most common being that Indigenous parents did not value schooling:

And I think it comes back to the value that some parents might place on schooling. If they've had a bad experience themselves or don't understand the importance of it, you know, those children maybe are rocking up late, you know, are turning up at different times, they're having lots of absences and yeah, so that's difficult. (Teacher)

From this stance, we found that the dominant perspective of educators and policy officers was that a parent's willingness to engage in the social capital endeavour correlated with the value they placed on education. Although, as one teacher observed, just because Indigenous parents do not become visibly involved in the school, it does not mean that they do not place value on their child's schooling:

I think it's important that we have our parents involved to some degree, okay, but I also think it's important for us, and the people who work in the school, to understand that because the parents - the child's parents - aren't necessarily interested in doing things in the school doesn't mean that parent is not interested in their child's education, okay? Because there's a very big difference, all right? (Teacher)

Consistent with policy officers, school based educators were generally unable to articulate the relationship between common forms of school-parent engagement and their links to concrete educational outcomes. Reflecting this, generic policy framings tend not to question the 'worthiness' of engagement; and few policy statements specify which particular activities or modes of engagement will yield the best outcomes for student gains; nor the precise data that supports one approach as more effective than another. Our challenge became how to explain the apparent contradiction between placing a premium on parent-school engagement as a remedy for poor outcomes, given the tenuous link between expected educational outcomes and engagement, and the equally ambiguous relationship between engagement activities and how education is 'valued' by parents.

To fulfil the engagement charter, schools are encouraged to build their own idiosyncratic approaches, on the (highly reasonable) assumption that school and community stakeholders are best placed to build consensus about locally attuned approaches. Grant funding is

available to support such eclectic activities. Yet both the submission-based funding processes that resource engagement activities draw ideas about ‘what works’ from shared paradigms. ‘Evidence’ is not usually available in this commonsense mix. Instead, the tremendous local energy necessary for galvanising an original consensus about what activity should be pursued and then to sustain engagement activities through normal erosions of intent gives resilience to a smaller number of tried and true behaviourist approaches – such as breakfast with a mentor programs and family nights, for example. The Smith Family’s interventions, as an external agency, are thus a valuable mechanism for injecting outside ideas into what can otherwise be a tried and true mix; and our participating schools show their awareness of this very problem through their alliance with TSF and their willingness to participate in independent research. In the main, however, it is within this hinterland of established practices and departmental funding regimes that the imperative to engage for the sake of engagement is affirmed, while what it symbolically represents – a relationship with parents which encourages their skilled involvement in the education enterprise to the point of cultivating improved outcomes for students – remains tenuous and something that schools are left to puzzle through on their own.

What about parents? It is clear that assumptions about the lack of value placed on education by Indigenous parents have led to the contemporary emphasis on engagement policy and practice. But participating parents had a different reality. They found schools comfortable, non-threatening, and welcoming.

When I go in [to school] to drop off money for the kids’ lunches, the staff area [is] always nice and friendly and I don’t get any bad feelings going in. (Parent)

They were uniformly satisfied with school processes, and with their own levels and forms of engagement, and contrary to educator beliefs, generally had fond memories of their own schooling. While arguably, their comfort with schools is a direct result of staff efforts to make schools welcoming and accessible in our participating schools and thus may be a unique attitude, the key point is that from the parents’ perspective, present engagement practices were perfectly satisfactory. Indeed, the idea that *more* engagement may be required was deemed unreasonable.

Some parents might not have the time to get more involved in the school. I don’t want to be more involved. (Parent)

At the same time, parents placed a high value on the imagined possibilities that education affords; such as employment, housing, a good life, and even university for their children. But the intricate and multiple steps required to link their child’s participation in education with such desired academic achievement, housing and employment outcomes are beyond comprehension. How the magic of schooling operates is in the realm of mystery.

Ironically, governments' repeat messaging that attendance is the principal mechanism to achieve educational outcomes has been internalised; and possibly has had unintended consequences. If education is a function of attendance, how do we then explain why students who attend still do not do so well? Parents were perplexed as to why their children did not succeed at school, particularly when students were attending as regularly as possible. For the research team, this suggests the potential of engagement efforts which focus on the repertoire and skills required for coaxing education outcomes beyond simply turning up; a theme we return to in the conclusion.



CULTURALISTIC EXPLANATIONS

A consistent theme arising from the interviews with school staff was that linguistic and cultural differences were key barriers preventing Aboriginal parents from developing a good relationship with their school. They were concerned about parents feeling a sense of shame in an environment which was either perceived as unfamiliar or unfriendly. The majority of teachers viewed this lack of engagement by Indigenous parents as something intrinsic to the parents themselves, rather than influenced by school policies or teacher/programmatic approaches. The majority of teachers interviewed often cited shyness and lack of confidence as essential qualities that explained low parental engagement by Indigenous families. For example:

For Indigenous people I think we find they're a little bit shy and not very confident but they're welcome to come in if they would like to but we don't usually get anybody like that. When we had a Teddy Bear's picnic we invited people to come and only one mother came in the afternoon. In the morning there were a few, from the white side, if you want to call it that. Yeah, but there are opportunities there but it's – how do you get them to come? How do we encourage them to come and take part? (Teacher)

Because they're not as confident as other parents. And if [we] were to put them all in a whole group, the not confident people wouldn't talk out much, they only talk out if they're familiar with people, and that's why I try and push to try and have Indigenous parents come in, because they become familiar and maybe when they become more confident then they are trying to drag them into mainstream stuff. (Teacher)

These discussions centred very much on the essential differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and a related apprehension of the difficulties that Indigenous parents face in dysfunctional communities with high levels of poor health, alcohol abuse and poverty:

Well I think a lot of it is cultural, not having the understanding of what the schools are actually teaching and having the language barrier, that they might not understand what we're saying, which is in English, and then health is another one, a really big one. A lot of our parents are alcoholics and their grandparents are very ill so trying to get a parent or a grandparent in for a day, you've got to be considering the health, the wellbeing as well because yeah sometimes it's not right for them as well. (Teacher)

I think some of the people that in the areas that might have social issues, their lives may be a little bit chaotic and it's difficult for them - you know, and with lots of

children it's difficult for them to organise time to come in and just organising their own lives because they've got issues, you know? And I think, too, if you're financially secure and you've got a car and you've got all of that stuff it's much easier to come in and be involved. But if you're struggling, you know, and perhaps they feel that they might be judged, if their children aren't coming in clean and with food and all of that. So I think that is a bit of a barrier for some parents, yep, for sure. (Teacher)

Infusing notions of the lower value placed on education by Indigenous families was a sense that this related to differences in socio-economic status and expectations:

I just think that, with our clientele, I think the parents are not interested and they've been brought up where it's just not normal. You send your kids to school and the teacher's the one that looks after your kids and educates them and then they think, well they educate them in their own culture at home. We educate them in the white culture here. I think that's what they think. (Teachers)

This is close to how some parents viewed things, with school education definitely being seen as the provenance of educators within the school. However, parents did not consider that their Aboriginality *per se* was a barrier to their involvement in the school. Most parents said that they felt comfortable entering the school and some parents described their relationships with the school as being 'like family'.

I just be myself, I don't care what they think, I feel fine when I go into the school. (Parent)

Parents should be involved with the school and go to meetings with the teachers. It's good to have interaction with schools and your children. It is the key. (Parent)

These did not appear to be statements designed simply to please the interviewer or to brush a difficult topic aside. It was clear from the interviews that parents were very aware of equity issues and they used their observation of these to inform their assessments of the school, for example:

X (School) is a good school, where there had never been any colour issues and everybody was treated equally. (Parent)

Being treated justly, having concerns about bullying or family troubles heard with fairness and reason and having a sense that the school was a secure place for their children to be mattered greatly to Indigenous parents and was a factor in how the school's reputation was judged, far more than the academic progress of their children. The ongoing responsibilities associated with family and cultural obligations, however, often meant that families were faced with conflicting priorities. Although they were aware of the long term benefits of regular attendance, the immediacy and moral resonance of other obligations meant that these usually had to be attended to first. Throughout the interviews, there are stories of

children missing school due to family commitments and recognition that these absences could often make it difficult for the child, both academically and socially.

We found that parents had multiple, and sometimes conflicting, realities when it came to explaining their children's educational performance. On the one hand, they did not see Aboriginality or culture as impeding educational success. At the same time, they were acutely aware of and on guard for racially-based equity issues and described a suite of culturally-based explanations for lesser student outcomes, from having less control and authority over their children compared with non-Indigenous parents, to absenteeism related to ceremonies. Parents praised the schools for their embrace of Indigeneity, expressed through events like National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration (NAIDOC), the employment of Indigenous staff and liaison officers and events focussed on sharing customary culture when Elders and parents tell stories, paint and teach handicrafts to children. The power of a visible, living Indigenous presence in the school setting to make Indigenous kids feel a connection between home and school was both noted by parents and appreciated. At the same time, as we note in the section on 'Liaison Workers', while Indigenous employees formed a critical link between Indigenous communities and the school, they can also prevent teachers from overcoming their own fears in forming closer relationships with the families themselves.

While a sympathetically framed deficit model informed teachers' perspectives on culture and parental engagement, Indigenous parents saw their cultural activities and commitments as an important and valued part of their family's responsibility. For parents, of greater concern was a child's absence from school due to a child's negative experience with other children or with teachers, and in some cases, specific behavioural or learning difficulties (see also 'Bullying').

How many times I tell him 'you go to school'. I get worried. I think there is something there that he is really afraid of...I say to him 'you tell me what's wrong, why you not want to go to school, somebody touching you or something? You can tell me, I won't growl, me your mother'. But he just swear at me, go right off his head when I say that, mad I tell you. But all he say is – 'I'm finding too hard to read' – I think [other] kids make him feel uncomfortable. (Parent)

THE LABOUR OF ENGAGEMENT

School staff, policy makers and family all agree – getting Aboriginal kids to school is hard work. The children in this study came from families where participating parents described their day-to-day life in terms of chaos, adhocery and exigency. Across all school community sites, households swelled with people of all ages – young and old – not all of whom were permanent members of the house and not all of whom were enrolled in the local suburban school. More than one family group – not necessarily closely related but certainly obliged to one another in some way – share public housing in both the town camps and suburban estates feeding the schools. Families living as guests in someone else’s already overcrowded home keenly hoped the arrangement would be temporary, and anxiously awaited news that they’d reached the top of public housing waiting lists to access their own place to stay.

Clothing, footwear and food were shared and in great demand, while access to working washing machines and private transport was highly desired but unreliable. Childcare, tending to sick children, protecting one’s possessions and taking responsibility for the care of other people’s children all compete with getting kids to school; a task that is severely exacerbated when there are only one or two children enrolled in the local school among a crowd of other youngsters who are neither locally enrolled nor expected to attend, as strangers, a new school. The point is that when Indigenous carers nominate ‘getting their child out of bed’ as evidence of their strong commitment to education, they are indicating the labour of participation against myriad forms of everyday resistance which make this seemingly simple task harder than words can convey.

Trying to make ends meet in situations of radical (peri-) urban poverty compounds the already labour-intensive tasks associated with getting children through the day; that is, with getting them up, washed, fed, dressed and to school on time. All our families were reliant on public assistance and thus were over-exposed to the demands of state institutions. A large part of everyday life is ordered by thickly layered external bureaucratic timetables, from appointments with Centrelink (social security) to visits to health centres, hospitals and the gaol. If the toilet leaks or the washing machine is on the blink, there’s protracted plea bargaining with housing maintenance bodies to be had. The primary householder is under additional pressure to accommodate many bodies whilst complying with increasingly tight tenancy rules. There are issues of depression, disoccupation, deaths and chronic disease; and dependence on public transport means that getting groceries into the house to feed multiple people is a regular logistical ordeal – for which the extra bag-carrying hands of children can be vital. In fact, pay day shopping offers a joyful experience for the family, a fortnightly celebration, a time when parents feel they can treat their children, proffering food they can not normally afford and compensating for the usual absence of expensive material assets – cars, investments and houses – with more temporary consumer goods. As one parent put it,

Every kid's dream is shopping day, pay day. We try and wake up early and go up to the shops for money, do a little bit of shopping. So we can give them some money for lunch to bribe them [to go to school]. Then we ask 'will you go to school or do you still want to come shopping?' It's hard to get them to school on pay day. (Parent)

So while education is highly valued as an idea, in actuality it competes with the realities of an everyday life permeated by radical poverty.

School personnel who liaise with families on a regular basis – the outreach workers, reception staff and the school principal – are quite familiar with the pressures poor and disadvantaged families are under (see also section on 'Culturalistic Expectations'). When following through on student absences, school personnel accept the accounts families give – that a child was not able to come because the s/he was ill, say, or that a funeral needed to be attended out of town and then transport back became a problem – and they factor such relentless contingencies into their follow up actions. Deemed 'legitimate' absences, they are not penalised, but rather, educators express considerable sympathy about families and the pressures they are under:

... it's really difficult because a lot of them come from very dysfunctional families where, you know, the kids don't even get enough to eat. I mean we feed them at school but we wonder 'Where else do they get food?' you know? I mean, it's as bad as that so, maybe they've got more in life to worry about than coming in to the school. (Teacher)

Teachers are in a double bind. They recognise culturally distinct aspects of students' lives, such as funerals or being tired in class, and are forgiving of absences, inattention and disruption. Yet these very attributes are also seen as contributing to Indigenous student underachievement, creating a fatalistic circle between expectations and circumstances. Classrooms might even be arranged so that irregular attendees or children who are falling behind are given extra classroom tuition and greater emphasis is placed on making the school attractive for such students lest the stigma of under-achievement sees them proactively avoiding school altogether. Engagement efforts aimed at making the school friendly for both children and parents alike are thus intensified. It creates what Ian Hacking³⁹ has described as a looping effect, where institutional responses shape a subject's conditions of possibility. Here, the problem is the inability of parents to get their children to school with the regularity required for intensive instruction. The solution is to make it easier for parents to have their children attend, removing structural obstacles, by providing assistance with transport, or an understanding ear when financial troubles become an issue and a discretionary forgiving of absences. Changing the social circumstances in which people are ordinarily enmeshed is more costly, complex and overwhelming than providing outreach attempts which soften some of the everyday constraints parents are labouring under. While such ameliorations do not amend structural circumstances, they make the school a place that is valued by parents (positive benefit). It may also risk eroding parents' sense of what is involved in cultivating the academic achievement

³⁹ Hacking I., 2007. Kinds of People: Moving Targets. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151:285-318

of their children, becoming a form of disempowerment ‘through kindness’, or what Indigenous education reformer Dr Chris Sarra has described as ‘collusion with watered down expectations or a negative stereotype’:

It is worth noting that sometimes we think we are being ‘culturally sensitive’ when we go easy on Indigenous students, or we somehow lower the bar for them. The truth here is that often this is not being ‘culturally sensitive’, this is simply colluding with low expectations or a belief that they cannot rise to the challenge.⁴⁰

While Indigenous parents assigned responsibility for education to the educators (just as teachers suspect they do), parents consistently expressed satisfaction with schools and expected no more, believing they were doing the best possible job under the circumstances, as captured by one parent, ‘It is not the school – it is everything else’. As Australian anthropologist Victoria Burbank points out, many western institutions lack enough relevance within Aboriginal people’s schemas to compete with all the other pressures on their lives:

... when there is competition for the school child’s time and attention, when family matters arise, as they often do, school is easy to give up. That is to say, school is not the only game in town; and family feels better.⁴¹

With so many competing pressures, parents may put considerable effort into ensuring that their children just attend school, but the latent education model requires so much more from them. The notion that parents will continue schooling their children and supporting and enhancing what has been taught in the curriculum does not seem valid to many Aboriginal families, who consider that once they have performed their part of the arrangement in getting children to school, the responsibility for educating children rests entirely with the school. While it is difficult to specify what a transformative education system would be like given the multiple barriers, herein lies an opportunity for targeted engagement activities that address the nub of education’s inherent dissonances.

⁴⁰ See <http://chrissarra.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/collusion-with-a-stronger-smarter-indigenous-student-identity/>. Accessed 14 January 2011.

⁴¹ Burbank, V., 2006, ‘From bedtime to on time: why many Aboriginal people don’t especially like participating in Western institutions, *Anthropological Forum*, 16(1): 3-20.

ARE SCHOOLS ALIEN SPACES?

'Space' or more accurately, specific places, both do and do not matter for Indigenous parent-school engagement. On the one hand, educators (policy advisors and school-based personnel) are uniformly concerned that schools are alien places. School architecture is by definition institutional, arranged in grids with a hierarchy of glass-doored entrance ways and reception desks that need to be navigated before classrooms can be approached. Education personnel repeatedly pointed out that the yards are fenced and that signs warn about illegal trespass, and worry that these present new barriers to access. Books have to be signed before visitors can be admitted, and the facilities are seldom used for anything other than classroom teaching, despite the wealth of equipment – computers and audio-visual media – that adults might access if only the school could be made more welcoming. Class based differences and cultural alienation were invoked to explain the imagined source of disconcertment:

I think the low socio-economic status of the area might impact on that, that some parents perhaps don't feel as comfortable in a school setting as others. So if you were to compare us to a school like Parap or, you know, the much higher socio-economic and those parents who've had really positive experiences at school and have high educations themselves are more comfortable talking with teachers and coming into an education setting; whereas some of our - some of our parents maybe don't feel comfortable to be here so I think that impacts. (Teacher)

Yet, the institutional architecture was of far less concern for parents in this study, who laughed off the idea that they might find school reception areas and fences so intimidating it would prevent their entry. They are aware that school space is not constructed to be occupied by parents, other than to monitor or respond to issues concerning their children. Indeed, school securitisation was identified as a benefit by parents, whose singular concern was the safety of their children. With its fences and security screens blocking unauthorised access, parents were content that students could not be harmed by strangers or familiars (alienated partners or bullies). This accent on bullying also dominated reasons why parents would forthrightly contact the school, independent of engagement overtures (see section on 'Bullying').

Other barriers were mentioned through indirect reference. For instance, most teachers preferred to make contact with parents via the school's Indigenous liaison officers. Similarly, it was very rare for teachers to visit homes directly. It was as if talking directly or crossing domestic boundaries without an intermediary was at least as intimidating for teaching staff as it was imagined to be for parents. This raises the possibility for thinking through spatial barriers through concepts of embodiment and transgression rather than architecture alone.

LIAISON WORKERS

Across all sites and all participant groups, the importance of Indigenous liaison officers or Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) was manifest. It underscores political scientist Michael Lipsky's insight that policy is not a function of words in documents but is enacted in the embodied interactions of 'street level bureaucrats' and their clients.⁴² Using the significant discretion and autonomy that is afforded street level or face-to-face roles, Indigenous liaison officers are the key nodes through which parent-school interactions take shape. They are called upon by teachers to contact families, deferred to for intelligence about community issues, and relied upon by all to intervene in the case management of students by providing contextual information that might otherwise be overlooked. They are known on first name terms by students, and nominated as the first port of call for parents seeking to make contact with the school. As one parent put it, when it comes to engagement, the liaison officer 'is the main one for me'. For their part, liaison officers draw significantly on idiosyncratic sporting, family, gender and generational links to represent community and family interests, and take considerable pride in the networks they bring to the school.

The liaison function is indispensable and yet under-theorised, in both policy and academic terms. There are few frameworks available for describing what liaison officers ought to do, what career progression they might look forward to, how exactly their work contributes to improved education outcomes or how the moral judgements which necessarily infuse all aspects of their daily decision making can be managed in a fair and responsive manner. At the level of day to day interaction, if liaison officers do not deem a family worthy of their support – perhaps because of incivilities in past interactions – engagement suffers. Not only do liaison officers exercise considerable role autonomy, how they fulfil their role is also a function of their status within the school.

At one site, the liaison worker spent comparatively less time working their connections with community members and more time being on call for those teachers needing more hands-on (Indigenous adult) classroom support. Sometimes liaison officers hear things being said about families and their flaws or circumstances that they disagree with but feel powerless to interrupt; other times they may judiciously repress what they know about families or students. 'Closing mouths' in this way can be to good or ill effect. One principal described how vulnerable a school – and its leadership – had once been made when vital information about community disaffection was withheld. In this (historical) case, the relationship between the principal and the liaison worker was not based on easy camaraderie and trust but was one of mutual suspicion and blocked information flows. At the very least, more

⁴² Lipsky, M., 1980, *Street Level Bureaucrats: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* New York: Russell Sage Foundation; see also Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno, 2003, *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

needs to be known about these important 'street level' liaison positions, including through examination of the possibility that liaison officers might inadvertently disempower parents from assuming their full education responsibilities.



BULLYING

As noted in section 'Labour of Engagement', few carers of Indigenous students agree that they face trouble engaging with schools to attend to the concerns they have as parents. So what are these concerns? The single most important issues nominated as something that would provoke parents to independently engage with the school were fighting and bullying. Parents want their children to be protected from teasing, harassment, inter-family fighting and aggression and expect to receive contact from the school about such matters. Anthropologically we might note that the parents in our study have had to develop advanced skills in dealing with violence, and that they demonstrate their parenting prowess and care in the negotiation of conflicts.⁴³ Fear of being the subject of shaming was also mentioned as a reason for absenteeism. As one parent noted, describing the impact of deaths in the Indigenous community:

When family passes away, kids have go to be home, it takes a long time to get over. Then they think – I don't want to go to school. They shy, think they might get teased coz they missed too much. I think that's what happening with my daughter.

In this context, a summons to deal with a matter of bullying is expected. Schools – and Indigenous liaison officers in particular – would be wrong to ignore such instances. Reinforcing this, far from resenting the school as a place of foreign discipline and external cultural value, the school's stricter regulation and enforcement of behaviour codes were desired attributes, creating security and shelter. In fact, schools are expected to be places where the lack of discipline of other environments is reversed.

In a related vein, parents also posited an 'angel abroad, devil at home' verdict about their children: 'it's different at school. At home they run amok. They change when they come back from school'. 'Ruby', for instance, did not want to become more involved in the school and just wanted to drop her children off. 'I've got no need to go to the office', she insisted. She believed that if she went to the school or sat in the classroom, her 'daughter would run amok'.

The following discussion is between a young mother, her aunt, a school liaison officer and one of the research team. It concerns the mother's ten year old boy who is obese and deeply unhappy both at school and at home:

⁴³ This compares with Eva McRae-Williams' research on Indigenous social careers whereby violence and conflict were critical parts of everyday life and in some respects, was 'work', situated in the context of managing relationships and relatedness (See McRae-Williams, E. (2008) *Understanding 'Work' in Ngukurr: A Remote Australian Aboriginal Community*, Unpublished PhD thesis: Charles Darwin University).

Mother: 'Some kids in the class say he has a big nose, big lip. It's true, he always telling me'.

Aunty: 'That's bullying'.

The mother adds that she thinks maybe this teasing is making her son eat even more and that he is unhappy at school:

Mother: 'He used to like that school but now nothing'.

Liaison Officer: 'He is a good kid – not like some of them'.

Mother (disagreeing): 'Maybe at school but home!' (Grimly making actions suggesting the son had tried to strangle her).

Schools are closer to the lived realities of Indigenous households in the suburbs and fringes of urban towns than the more generic understandings about engagement, which are embedded within education policies. They are at the front line of family ruptures. Schools told us, in turn, that one of the more difficult issues they face is preventing adult bullies from bringing intra-family tensions into the school grounds. There is seldom a week where the school leadership and liaison personnel are not dealing with police matters, custodial disputes or child protection issues. In this sense, schools are as exposed to welfare and social policing institutions as the Indigenous families, and it is here that practical forms of engagement – helping families deal with evictions or administrative paperwork – come to the fore. This consumes much of the time of the school's leadership team and blurs the line between schools and social services in ways which are not adequately resourced or accounted for in demands for rapid improvement against standardised national tests.

CONCLUSIONS

Policy morals and values

A key assumption underpinning policy imperatives around engagement is that greater parent participation in the life of the school will result in the improvement of education results. The political pressure to address engagement has reached the point where greater engagement has entered into a system of unchallenged beliefs. However, engagement as it is currently urged upon schools requires a lot of energy and is under-specified. Engagement efforts are mixed up with governmental policies, which embroil school attendance with welfare entitlements and notions of responsible parenting. Our research shows that the message that attendance matters above all else for the magic of education to take effect has been absorbed by Indigenous parents. The act of sending kids to school is to assume responsibility for their education. Yet, it is not a simple matter to send kids to school, nor is it the case that attendance equates to improved outcomes. It is a simplification of the complexity of education to imply it rests solely on attendance, yet this is the message that has been reinforced to parents through multiple forms.

For their part, schools tend to focus on behavioural engagement strategies and family-friendly events which are valuable to facilitate relationships but in isolation are not sufficient to improve educational outcomes. The risk is that while educators work tirelessly to bring about improved educational outcomes, the demand for more, rather than *better targeted* engagement strategies, will simply add to their already exhaustive span of extra-academic responsibilities.

Culturalistic explanations

It was clear from this research that schools firmly believe that schooling itself is so inherently foreign that Indigenous parents would automatically face access barriers. This was simply not the case for participating parents who negotiated the different institutional spaces very effectively. Yet cultural differences, real and imagined, are clearly pertinent. The idea of cultural difference has inspired complicated and variegated discussions about the causes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous education disparities which neither schools nor parents can avoid participating in. What emerges is a muddled, and sometimes conflicting, set of explanations for education inequality, mixing stereotypes, compassion, opportunism, manipulation, legitimation and straightforward explanations. It remains important for education stakeholders to do the work of disentangling this muddle, as parents and educators alike are searching for a better understanding of why Indigenous students continue to underperform; and clarifying the forces at work will assist the better targeting of engagement efforts.

Labour of engagement

The rich, nuanced and complex social worlds of participating families in this study can make prioritising schooling an absurd notion. The labour of having children regularly attend should not be underestimated. Visitors arriving at homes at 4.00am, the serial demands of multiple authorities, payday shopping adventures, trips to community, joyously sharing a windfall, funeral and ceremonial commitments and simply walking about socialising all compete with education timetables and their inherent rigidities. Educators in this study work hard to accommodate these different priorities and accept explanations of erratic absences with sympathy. However, these are the very contradictions which underpin inequalities in school outcomes and the heart of how educational expectations are inadvertently lowered. If we add to this genuine conundrum the fact that parents are saying teaching is the job of the professionals (who are trusted to do their job well), the massive competition for a child's time and attention in everyday life, and the idea that simply attending sees the work of education done (a message repeated in attendance campaigns), we begin to see the origins of Indigenous education failure. The education system under-articulates its expectations of families while parents handover responsibility for education to the schools. The tension here is that children are being socialised and shaped within this equivocal space.

Are schools alien spaces?

Despite the widespread professional fear that schools are inherently alien as spaces, our research finds this is far from the case. Indeed the very attributes that are most commonly associated with alienation – security fences, controlling pedestrian traffic and mediating contact through the reception areas of school – were welcomed by parents. A similar fear that Indigenous parents harbour dreadful experiences of their own schooling was dismissed by participating parents. This last concept underpins much of engagement logic. It is assumed that bad memories of school need to be combated by present day inclusiveness, from unpleasantness to heroics; yet in this study, parents recalled their own schooling with laughter and fond delight. There are two things occurring here. For their part, professionals tend to homogenise an imagined horror of schooling onto Indigenous parents, using a stereotype of bad education which is itself partly a problem of historical compression. In finding that schools are not alien spaces for parents is not to say that schools are not inherently exclusionary. Schools are meant to repel most people from classrooms during instructional time, and they are meant to streamline external disruptions in the same vein. They do this through multiple devices: the layout, the procedures for gaining admission, the compartmentalising of time, classroom structures, and the establishment of clear hierarchies of authority. These rules are necessarily different from the rhythms of home, and are intended to establish control and cede authority to teachers. Parents and other outsiders negotiate school spaces – *and expect to do so*. This then explains why educators' emphasise the cultural distinction of schools as total institutions and as such, worry schools

will be intimidating for Indigenous parents; and equally, why parents experience no such intimidation.

In concentrating on imagined sources of alienation, however, actual separations are not discussed. It was clear from this study that teachers do not tend to make relationships with actual parents or to know them beyond mediated exchanges in the schools. If there is a barrier between schools and families, it is mediated by Indigenous liaison workers, who assume a complex brokerage role. It is Indigenous liaison officers who enter houses, not teachers. This raises the question: is it the teacher's job to get beyond the school and into peoples' homes in order to work with parents to enhance their capacity to engage their children in learning? We have repeatedly noted that engagement efforts that focus on the cognitive and emotional development of children are less well attended to than engagement efforts which coax more immediately visible parent-school interactions. At the same time, we consider that dealing with the profound requirements of assisting parents in effective childhood development goes far beyond the school and the responsibilities of educators; and points to the need for systematic early interventions that address issues of parenting and parent/child interactions to be resourced and implemented by relevant service agencies with germane expertise.

Liaison Workers

Indigenous liaison officers are pivotal to the entire engagement enterprise. They are important to getting students to school and for interacting with parents in a friendly and accessible manner. In the sense of making the school open, liaison officers are indispensable. Yet if engagement rests on the shoulders of undertrained liaison officers working in under-specified roles, the part of engagement that is meant to be about improved education outcomes is not necessarily attainable. In this sense, liaison officers represent the problem of policy emphases on engagement. They are undertaking essential work, using intuition, discretion and nous, yet the link between their practices and touted learning and academic achievement outcomes remains ambiguous. Without attributing blame to liaison officers, but using their situation as illustration, this ambiguity goes to the nub of a more fundamental ambiguity in the politics of engagement. While it remains the job of schools to mastermind engagement efforts without a related policy resourcing of intensive, expertly delivered cognitive and emotional development programs, engagement efforts risk being part of low rather than high expectations schooling. A friendly happy relationship can become the end point of the relationship quest, not its beginning.

Thinking about liaison officers more specifically, we found there is little of substance in the academic literature about this complex role, yet much rests on its mediation power. Given the importance of liaison officers to school-community engagement, this should be remedied. The opportunity exists to have this important role more carefully defined and

with clear career pathways. It is an important conduit between parents and schools. The opportunity exists to have the link between liaisons workers, students and learning outcomes more explicitly inform their practice.

Bullying

When parents contact the school, it is most likely about bullying and teasing. We also know that kids with low levels of attendance are more likely to be subjected to bullying, in part because they do not have the social networks to protect themselves or to draw resilience from, but also because they are self-conscious about falling behind. Conversely, schools are most likely to contact families around absenteeism and behavioural issues. 'Deficit issues' paradoxically become the comfort zone of parents in their engagement with educational institutions. At the same time, the school's increasing efforts to engage with families and make schools more approachable can result in family disputes, violence and traumas being brought into the school. This is a tension that parents and educators are both acutely aware of, and again highlights the logical tendency of (and expectation on) schools to extend their role and function beyond numeracy and literacy, for example, to include custodial issues, housing disputes, financial management, welfare and family counselling matters. Similarly, other government institutions also turn to schools to address a suite of issues relating to their own portfolios. Few reports on issues to do with the wellbeing of children fail to invoke an expanded role for schools in remedying societal problems. To put it mildly, the increasing expectation that schools need to be all things to all people and simultaneously improve educational outcomes at radical rates is unrealistic.

Schools should either be serviced with all the resources and specialised personnel necessary to achieve the expanded social remediation expected of them or community services (and related institutions) should be resourced to do their jobs within and beyond the school setting.

Concluding comments

The efforts of the school to dismantle barriers between home and school are certainly reflected in the praise parents have for their school and school-based personnel. Within the complexity of everyday life, parents think that schools are doing a good job. They separate the school from their everyday worlds, and do not expect the school to be part of their worlds more than it is. Parents are committed to the idea of education and register their support in various ways, including getting their children to attend as often as feasible. The flipside of this is that parents, whilst clearly valuing education, cannot prioritise education over the demands of family and the ongoing need to respond to crisis situations in everyday life; and rely on or expect a division of educational labour whereby teacher expertise and schools generally are trusted to do the job. This reduced expectation of the role of the school and limited interference in decisions around teaching approaches, restricting

interventions to follow through when their children are in trouble, is part of what some might call ‘low parental expectations’, but as this report has shown, both educator and parent pragmatism is more complex again.

Much of our research suggests that there are disconnects between parent and teacher expectations. Like ‘engagement’, the whole business of expectations seems rather under conceptualised in policy documents, and suggests it is a matter of disposition rather than architectures of everyday practice and compromise. To this end, we suggest that a specific project exploring teacher expectations and their relationship to parental expectations, should be conducted. As a practical action, policy personnel, researchers, teachers, NGO support staff and parents stand to benefit from carefully delivered training which has a focus on education for social justice and social inclusion. As noted, the views of students and the issues facing families as their children get older also deserve independent analysis if family support is to be better targeted.

We also found that the policy promise that attendance is the single most important key to school success has proved misleading. At the national policy level, engagement has been recommended as one of the top priorities for increasing participation and retention in schools, on the underlying premise that there is a positive relationship between attendance, employment and socio-economic gain. However, just as under-performance in education does not reduce to participation, nor does ‘engagement’ alone target the ways in which parents can prepare their children for academic success.

The key message from this research is that to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, schools and policy makers need to consider a re-focus of their engagement efforts on one aspect more intensely: namely, how to help parents invest in the cognitive and emotional development of their children toward academic attainment. This should be considered in terms of school appropriate activities and other-agency delegations. It is clear that the schools in our study are doing an extraordinary job with stretched resources to meet the challenges of educating socially disadvantaged young people. It is clear that engagement has a place in improved outcomes, but more focused methods for encouraging parental responsibility and involvement in all aspects of their children's education are required.

Finally, advances in educational outcomes of children in this study depend on shifting the responsibility from educators alone to include not only parents, but also the different tiers of government and their departments—such as housing, health, families, employment, arts, sport—that respond to the social and economic circumstances of families and the worlds that they occupy. Schools cannot be held solely responsible for undoing compounding regimes of inequality in the wider society.

APPENDICES

Interview Protocol – School staff



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Interview protocol

Project: The Invisible Parents Project

Time of Interview

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

The Invisible Parents Project - exploring the barriers to effective parental and community involvement in three Northern Territory Schools

Questions School staff:

- 1) How would you define 'parental engagement' / involvement / with schools?
Probe: What does it encompass? What do you think is most appropriate in form of engagement?
- 2) What has been your personal experience engaging with parents in this school?
Probe: If you have worked at other schools, how does this compare?
- 3) Are there particular groups of parents who do/do not engage with the school?
Probe: What differentiates these groups? What does the engaged/disengaged parent look like? Reasons for not being engaged?

- 4) What barriers do you think might inhibit communication between some parents and their children's teachers?

Probe: barriers from the school's perspective / barriers parents face

- 5) Do you feel it is important for you to meet and engage with all kids' parents?

Probe: why/why not

- 6) Are there any formal mechanisms in place specifically to encourage staff and parents to interact?

Probe: if so, what are they / do they work / if not why not

- 7) How is information about children and their families communicated between relevant staff in the school?

Probe: Communication between teaching and support staff such as AIEW

- 8) If there are specific mechanisms in place, how do these impacts on your work?

Probe: affect on workload / changes to the way you work?

- 9) What impacts, if any, do you think that the level of parental engagement has on a child's education?

Probe:

- 10) What do you think can be done to improve the level of engagement with parents?

Probe: at school level / at policy level (DET / by you as a teacher). With or without additional resources?

- 11) Have you ever participated in any training/professional development activities specifically addressing engaging with parents?

Probe: As part of teacher education at university/during career?

- 12) Ultimately who should take responsibility for increasing parental involvement with the school?

Probe: e.g. individual parents / teachers / principals / community leaders / government? Why?

13) Interested in participating in a workshop addressing ways of responding to the issues that both school based staff and parents have raised?

Interview Protocol – Families

Interview protocol

Project: The Invisible Parents Project

Time of Interview

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

The Invisible Parents Project - exploring the barriers to effective parental and community involvement in three Northern Territory Schools

Questions Families:

1. Where did you go to school?
2. How often and for how long did you go to school?
3. What kinds of things did you learn from your parents?
4. Did they help you with school work i.e. read to you?
5. Did they think school was important?
6. Are you single or do you have a partner (father of the kids/ and trouble)?

7. Do your kids tell you stories about what they get up to at school, what kind?
8. Have you ever talked to their teachers (why, who and what about)?
9. Have you had anything to do with any of the other school staff (who and why)?
10. How would you describe a good teacher?

11. What would you like your kids to get out of school (outcomes)?
12. Have you noticed that they are learning things (what kind of things)?
13. Are you happy with how they are going at school?
14. Why do you send you kids to this particular school?

15. Have you ever felt uneasy or had a bad feeling when you have come into the school or had to talk to someone from the school (what about contacting them if kids can't come)?
16. Do you think parents should be involved with the school (in what ways)?
17. What kinds of parents do you think have a good/bad relationship with the school?
18. Have you heard of the Smith Family Program (what do you think of it)?
19. Do you think more Indigenous culture should be taught at schools (what and how)

20. What are some of the reasons why your kids might miss school days?
21. Is there anything the school could do to help you?
22. Is there anything that makes life hard for you (effect on kids/family problems)?
23. Why do you think that there is a focus on getting kids to attend school everyday?
24. Why do you think some kids go to school all the time and others don't?

25. What do you think this education thing is all about? (What should it be about)
26. Where would you like to see your children in 10-20 years?
27. What kind of dreams do your kids have about the future (barriers)?
28. Could the school do anything to make you want to be more involved?

Living arrangements

Violence

Sport/activities

Employment

Alcohol

Transport/Travel

Health

White/Black relationships

Wellbeing

