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*Footprints in Time Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children: Primary School Report.*

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Qld.

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***Footprints in Time:***  
**The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children**

**Primary School Report  
Summary**



The authors acknowledge all the traditional custodians of the land and pay respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging. We also acknowledge the LSIC study participants including families, communities, schools, and state and territory departments of education for their essential contribution to this landmark Australian study. We acknowledge the LSIC Steering Committee and Department of Social Services colleagues for their leadership, feedback, and collaboration in the development of this report.

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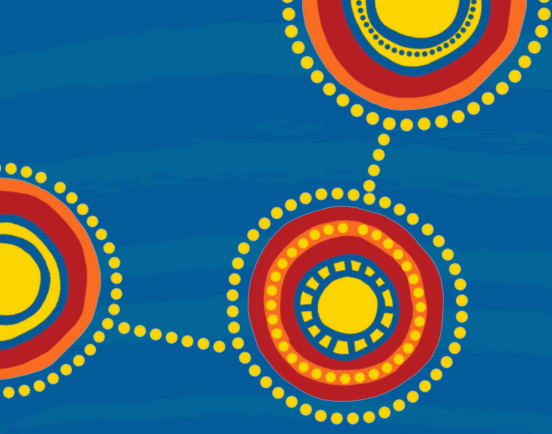
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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons are warned that this publication may include photos of deceased persons.





# *Footprints in Time:* the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children

## Primary School Report Summary

**2022**

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This report uses unit record data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC). LSIC was initiated and funded and managed by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS), who also commissioned this report. The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DSS or the Indigenous people and their communities involved in the study.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC; also called *Footprints in Time*) is the only longitudinal study of developmental outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. *Footprints in Time* follows the development of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to understand what Indigenous children need to grow up strong. LSIC involves annual waves of data collection (commenced in 2008) and follows approximately 1,700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in urban, regional, and remote locations.

This LSIC Primary School report has been produced following the release of the twelfth wave of data collection, with the majority of LSIC children having completed primary school (Preparatory [aged ~5 years] to Year 6 [aged ~12 years]). Primary schools play a central role in supporting student learning, wellbeing, and connectedness, and the *Footprints in Time* study provides a platform for centring Indigenous voices, connecting stories, and exploring emerging themes related to the experience of Indigenous children and families in the Australian education system.

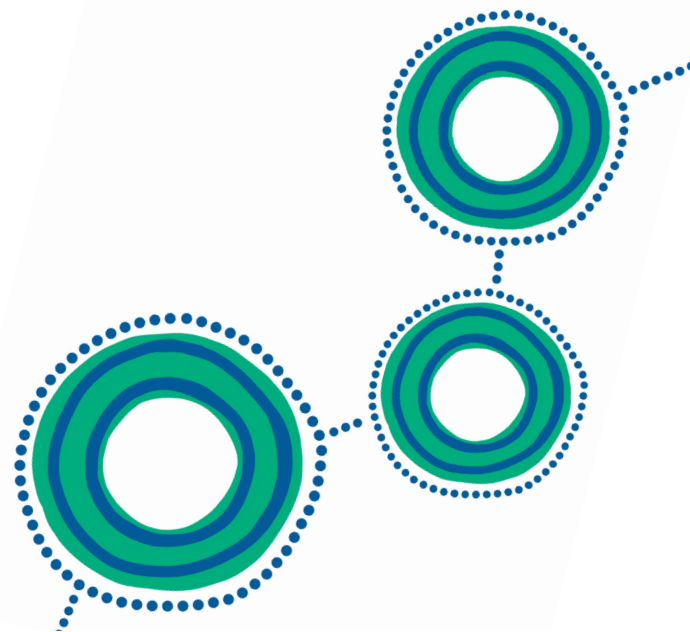
This report uses a mixed-methods approach, analysing both quantitative and qualitative data shared by LSIC participants, to explore primary school experiences from the perspective of children, parents, and teachers.

Analyses are framed using a strengths-based approach and are underpinned by the understanding that all aspects of life are related.

The report documents a range of topics including teacher cultural competence, racism, school-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education activities, parental involvement, engagement, attendance, and academic achievement.

As the LSIC sample comprise children from two cohorts (a Birth cohort and a Kindergarten cohort), there is a wide range of ages and school grade levels represented within each wave of data collection. In previous reports from LSIC, data have been typically reported by wave. By contrast, in preparation for this report focussed on primary school experiences, we restructured the LSIC data according to children's year level at school (school grade) and, for the most part, conduct our analyses by Year level, as opposed to wave of data collection.

Despite the young age of study children at data collection periods across the primary school years, this study utilises children's voices, stories, and reports of their experiences in the school system, and places their strengths and needs at the forefront of our analyses and recommendations. This report determines avenues for future research and proposes recommendations for areas of educational policy and practice that should be addressed to meet the needs of Indigenous children and help them to grow up strong.



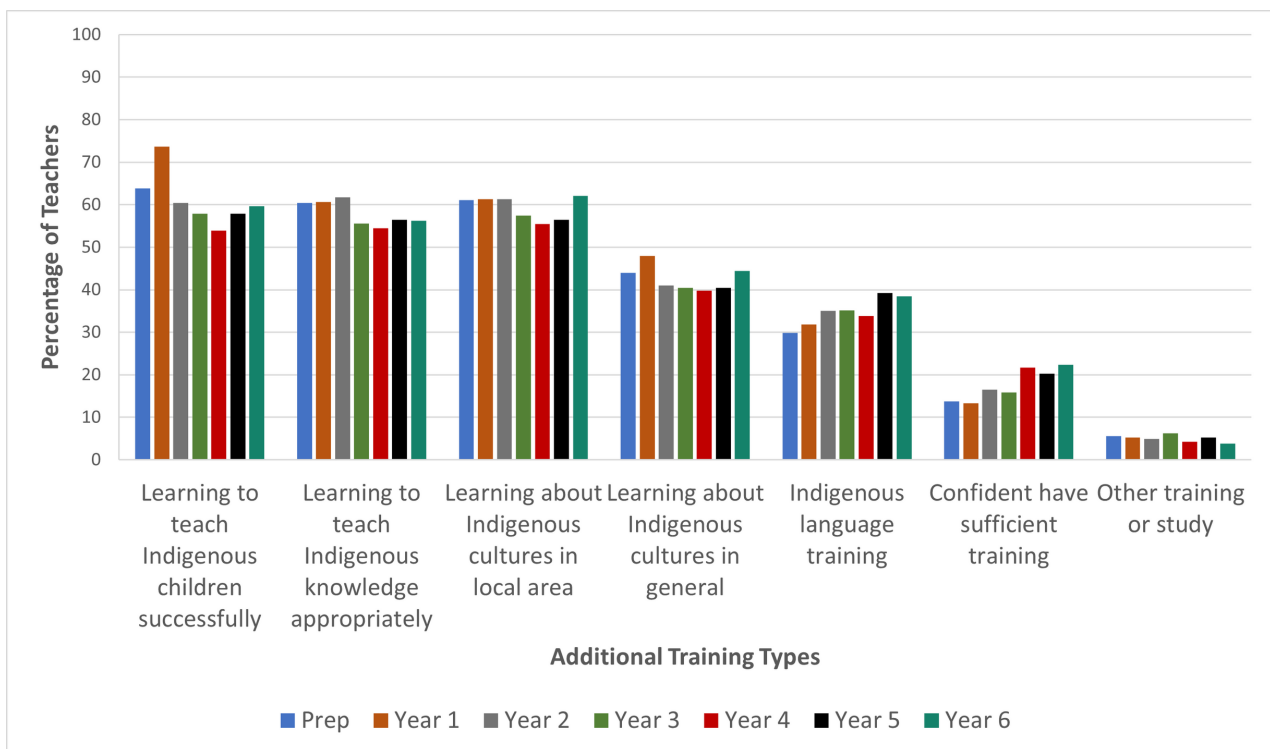
# MAIN FINDINGS

## TEACHER’S CULTURAL COMPETENCY TRAINING AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS RACISM

Analysis of teachers’ reports of their experiences of and desires for cultural competency training revealed that:

- Over half (53%) of the children in the LSIC sample, for whom teacher data were available, were taught by teachers with insufficient professional training in cultural competency. A large majority of teachers (84%) reported that they would benefit from additional cultural competency training (see **Figure 1**).

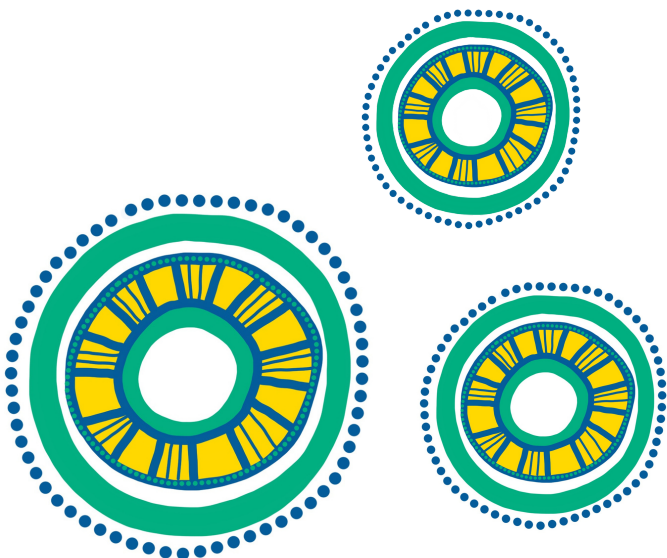
**Figure 1** Proportion of teachers reporting that they would benefit from additional training and/or learning, by type



Qualitative analyses of teachers' responses to questions that asked how they deal with racism, discrimination, or prejudice in their classroom found that:

- There was a prevailing pattern of 'colour blindness' with teachers reporting that they addressed racism by 'treating everyone the same'.
  - *"I aim to treat each child the same as any other in terms of race. I also aim to teach this to my students. I emphasise that a colour or religion is not what makes us different. We are each unique and we should appreciate this."*
- Some teachers reported that racism was not an issue due to the multicultural nature of their school community.
  - *"Being a culturally diverse school, these issues are not really present"*

These findings indicate that teachers may be projecting their dominant views and perpetuating racial inequalities and inequities. Culturally responsive teachers recognise cultural differences and centre student identity within the classroom and school.



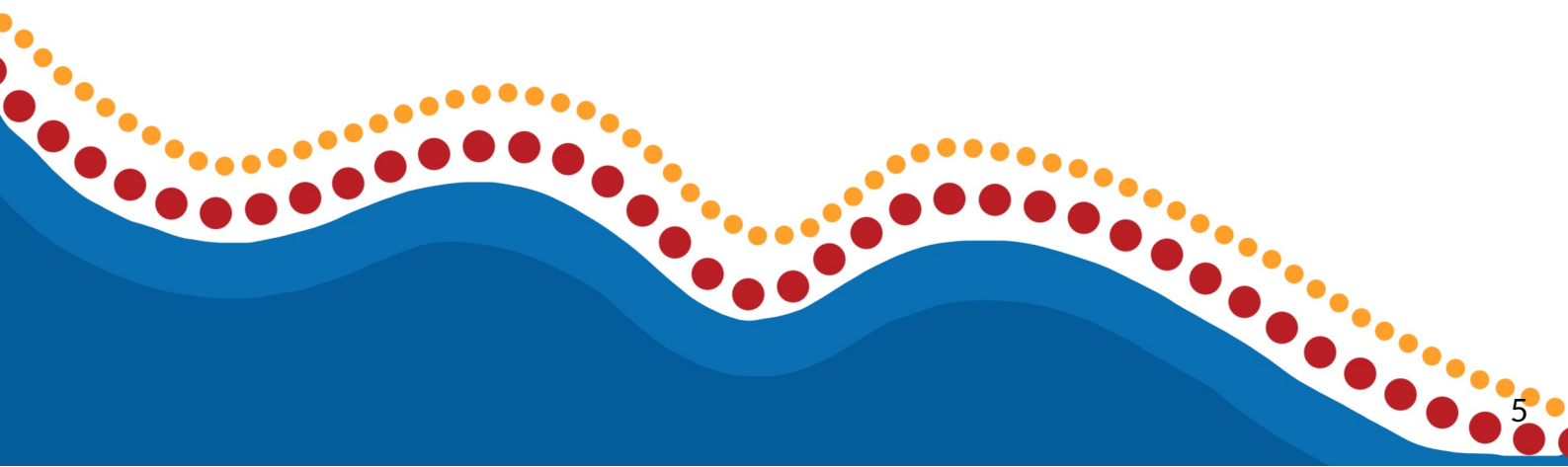
## RACISM IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Despite teachers' views that racism was generally not an issue in their classrooms, parents' reports revealed that school-based racism was experienced by a significant proportion of parents and children:

- More than one in five parents (22%) had themselves experienced racism at their child's primary school.
- A quarter of study children (24%) had experienced bullying or had been treated unfairly due to their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity at school.

Children's experiences of racism were distributed across all geographic regions. These experiences were more prevalent in major cities and less prevalent in remote regions and in schools with a higher proportion of Indigenous students.

Children who had not experienced racism at school (based on parent-report) demonstrated better social-emotional, school managing, and academic outcomes in their middle (Year 3 and Year 4) and later (Year 5 and Year 6) primary school years.



## INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO SCHOOL-BASED ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION INITIATIVES

The commitment of schools to delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives was explored, identifying that further development of these initiatives is needed:

- Despite many schools celebrating Indigenous days of significance and having teachers who know their Indigenous students, fewer schools taught about Indigenous culture or had Elders visit or teach.
- Over a quarter of LSIC students did not have Personalised Learning Plans (according to parents' reports).
- Two in five (38%) teachers reported that their school did not have a Reconciliation Action Plan.
- Two in five LSIC parents (41%) reported no or limited representation of Indigenous teachers or staff at their child's school.
- A majority of parents (59%) and teachers (57%) reported that the study child's school did not deliver an Indigenous Language program.
- One fifth (21%) of children were learning an Indigenous language at school. These children, relative to children learning a non-Indigenous language other than English, were less likely to have experienced racist bullying, less likely to be living in major cities, and were attending schools with a higher percentage of Indigenous student enrolments.
- Access to specialist services and teachers, including Indigenous Language teachers, was inequitable in remote areas, despite the majority of children with an Indigenous language as their first language living in remote regions.
- Classrooms with a higher proportion of Indigenous students were more likely to be conducting activities involving Indigenous arts, practices, singing, or storytelling.



Using parents' reports of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives within their child's school, these schools were organised into:

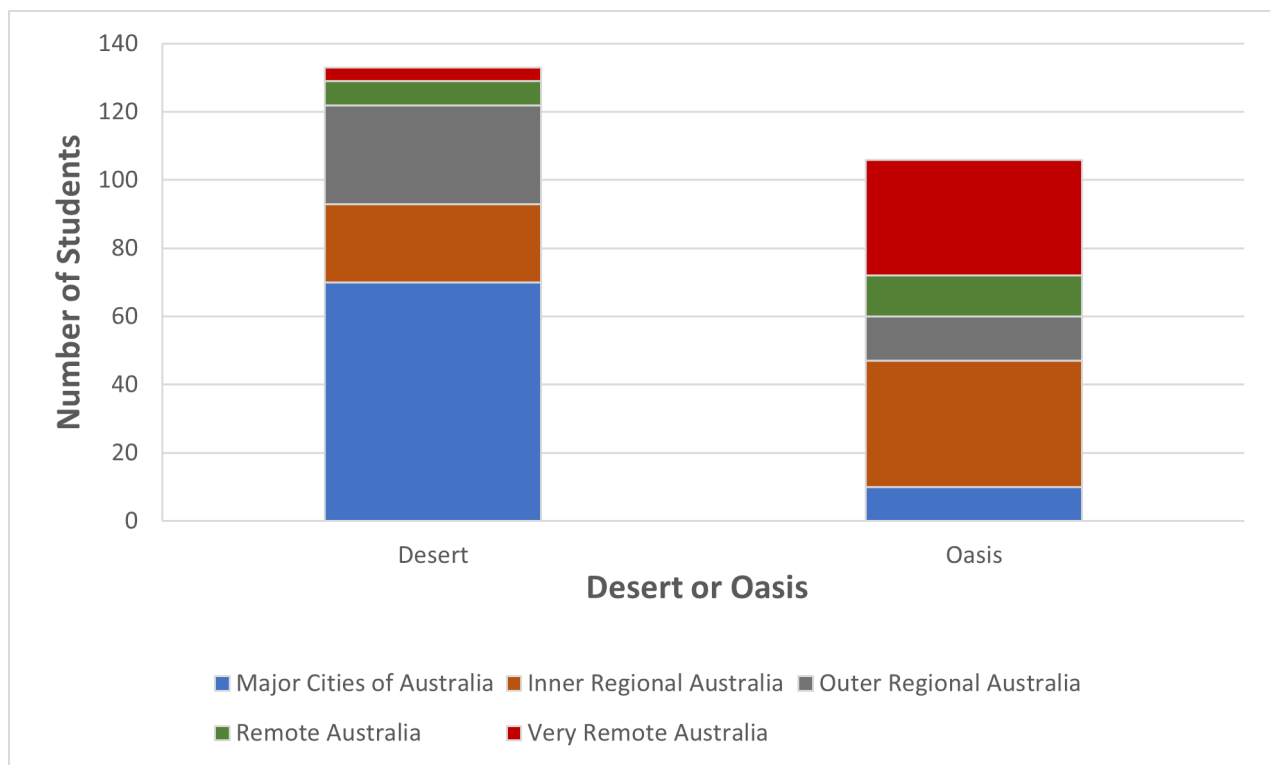
- **Deserts:** schools that never engaged in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives.
- **Oases:** schools that engaged in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives all of the time.

Compared to children attending *Deserts*, children attending *Oases* were:

- less likely to be living in major cities and more likely to be in very remote regions of Australia. (see **Figure 2**).
- less likely to have experienced racist bullying at school.
- attending schools with a higher proportion of Indigenous student enrolments.



**Figure 2** Remoteness region for Deserts and Oases





These findings reveal a proportionate-dosage approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education that reflects a broken system, whereby initiatives and engagement activities that should be universal are more likely to be delivered in schools and classrooms, in which there are higher proportions of Indigenous students.

A quarter of parents reported that their child's school was not supporting Indigenous children well, indicating a desire for schools to:

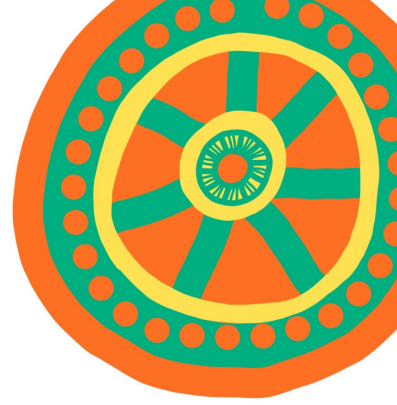
- deliver Indigenous language programs.
- have Elders visit the school to teach culture.
- teach Aboriginal histories.
- deliver improved and more consistent embedding of cultural teaching.
- have special events such as NAIDOC week.
- teach Aboriginal practices and arts.

Parents appreciated when Elders came to the school and when days of significance were recognised.

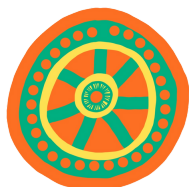
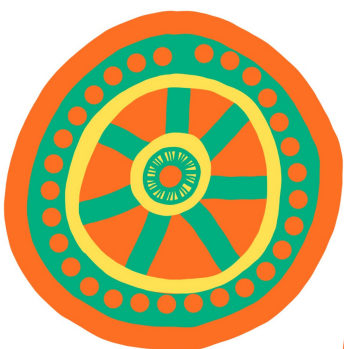
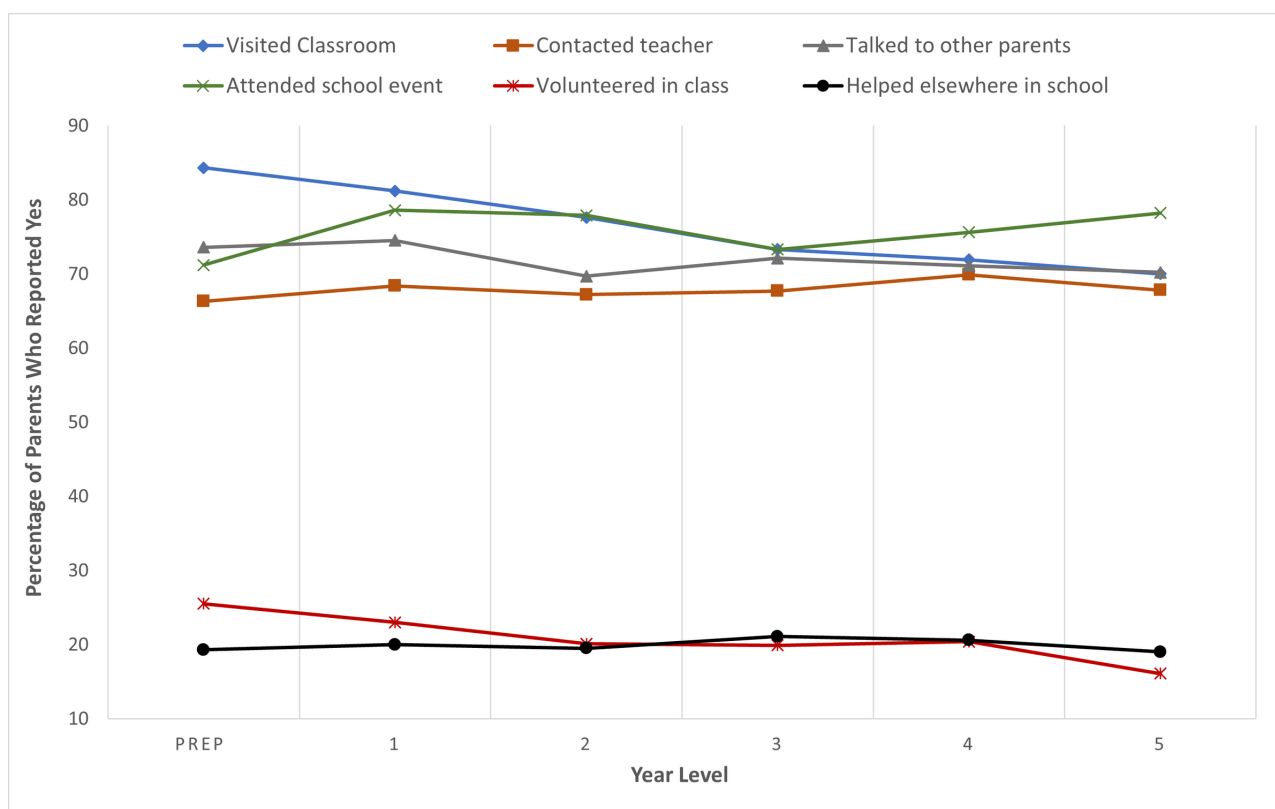
- *"I'm happy they always acknowledge NAIDOC and other significant ATSI events at assembly so all students at the school can be involved and understand the significance."*
- *"The students built an Indigenous garden and painted a mural. Elders come from the community to teach the students weaving and dot painting and they also have fortnightly activities teaching about culture"*

## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL-BASED ACTIVITIES

Parents' reports on their involvement in school (which were also endorsed by teachers' reports) revealed relatively high and stable participation in school-based activities across the primary school years (see **Figure 3**) regardless of family socio-demographic factors.



**Figure 3** Parent-reported participation in school-based activities across primary school



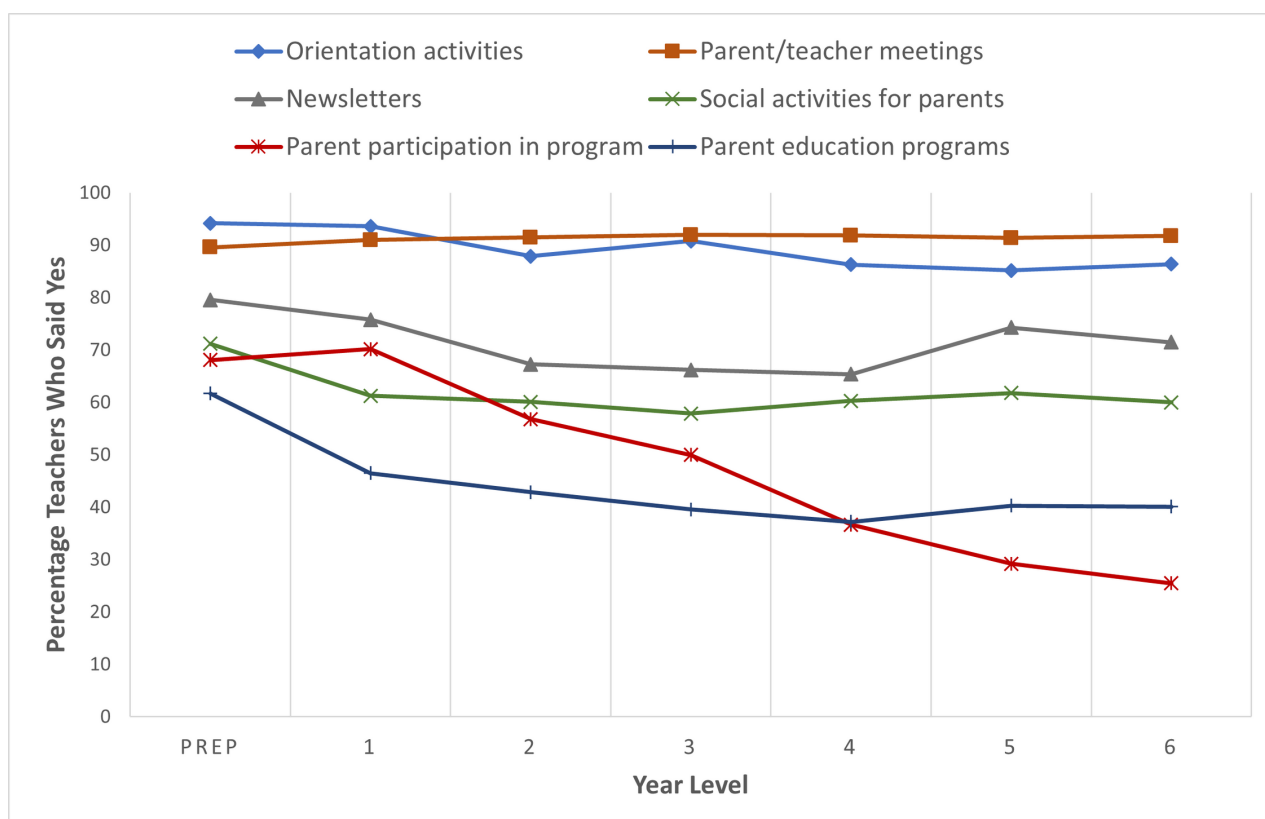
Longitudinal modelling found that parental involvement during Years 3 and 4 was a significant predictor of academic (NAPLAN) outcomes over and above sociodemographic influences and children’s early developmental skills. Strong school readiness skills in early primary school (Preschool to Year 1) also made a significant contribution to academic outcomes.

Regarding teachers’ practices to promote engagement, according to parents:

- Majority of teachers (70%) made parents aware of opportunities to engage with their child’s school.
- Almost two thirds (62%) of teachers understood the needs of families from Indigenous backgrounds.

Schools and teachers play a role in supporting parental involvement and building a school culture that fosters parent-school engagement. Teachers reported a range of strategies for supporting parent involvement (see **Figure 4**), with the most common being orientation activities and parent/teacher meetings. Parent participation in classrooms and parent education programs were less frequently reported, with declining usage across the primary school years.

**Figure 4** Teacher report of practices to involve families



Teacher comments on how they built relationships with children's families included sending communication home, being approachable and available, inviting parents into the classroom, connecting with families at events, and conducting formal parent teacher interviews.

- *"Inviting parents to school for formal and informal events which foster community spirit."*
- *"Encourage them to contact me at school at any time via phone call, visit, letter or note."*

Homework and direct communication with parents were the most often reported strategies for encouraging parents to engage in their child's learning at home.

In this sample, there was also a high and stable level of parental trust in the school. Overall, parents' qualitative responses suggested that their children's school experiences were more positive than their own primary school experiences had been. They referred to positive changes in school policy and practices related to increased recognition of Indigenous heritage and culture, as well as less racism in schools.

- *"...they're learning about [Indigenous] heritage now, and they do this in all classes whether the children are Indigenous or not."*
- *"[Indigenous children] are more accepted now"*

However, some parents noted the continued presence of racism and other issues, such as staff turnover and lack of Indigenous staff representation.



## PATTERNS OF STUDENTS' SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

When looking at patterns of student engagement, encompassing cognitive engagement (e.g., academic self-concept), emotional engagement (e.g., closeness with teacher), and behavioural engagement (e.g., how well child is managing school) latent profile analysis revealed three profiles (see **Figure 5**).

**Figure 5** Three primary school engagement groups



### Low self-concept/weakly engaged (15%)

Low but improving levels of emotional engagement (relationships with teachers), low behavioural and cognitive engagement. Lowest early levels of academic self-concept (cognitive engagement), but these improve over time.

### High self-concept/weakly engaged (35%)

Likes teacher in early years of school, but shows lowest levels of closeness with teachers over time (emotional engagement). Highest level of behaviour contacts between school and families, lowest teacher-rated cognitive engagement. High academic self-concept (cognitive engagement) which decreases over time.

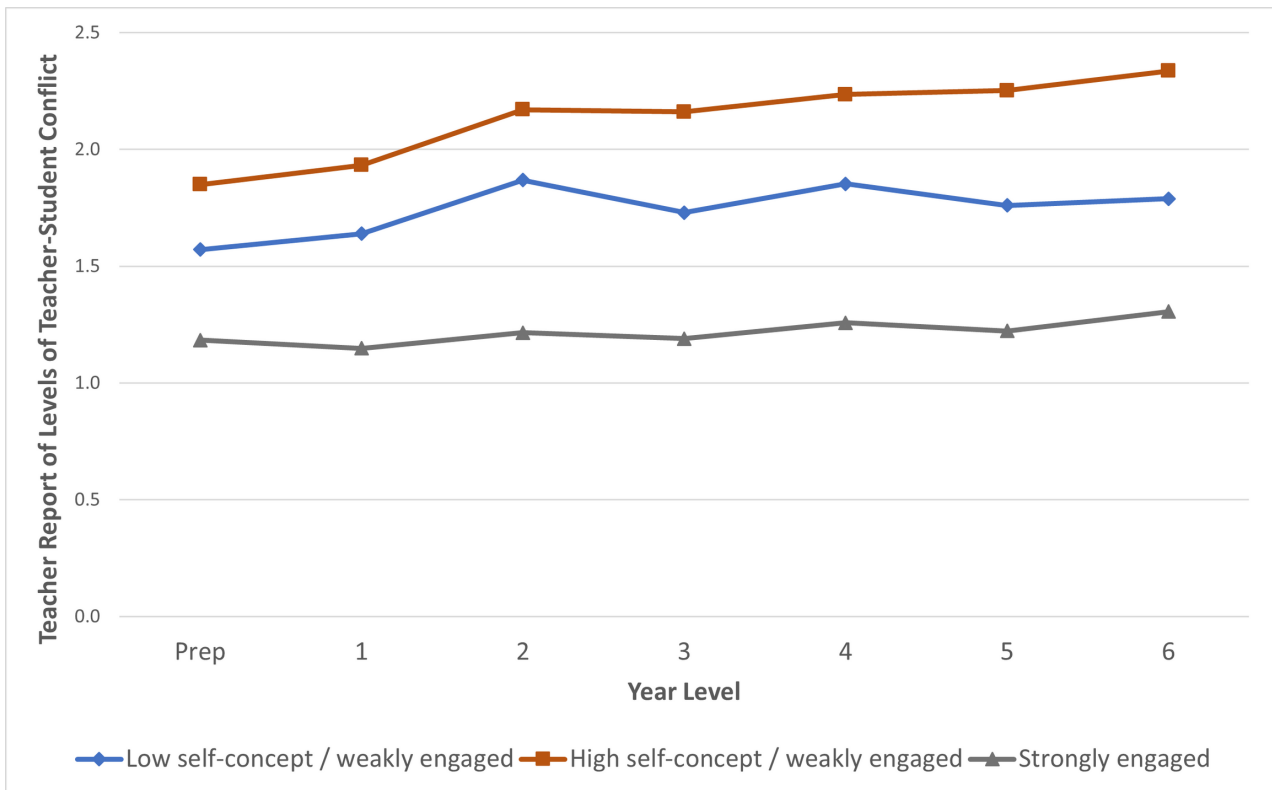


**Strongly engaged group (50%)**  
High and stable emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement across primary school.

Children with strong engagement were more likely to be girls than boys; had better academic achievement and wellbeing outcomes; and fewer experiences of racist bullying. The strong engagement of these children appeared to be supported by:

- early developmental competencies.
- strong social skills.
- a positive school climate.
- positive student-teacher relationships and lower student-teacher conflict (see **Figure 6**).
- high levels of teacher-parent engagement.

**Figure 6** Levels of teacher-reported teacher-child conflict across primary school for the student engagement groups



Notably, engagement was not related to remoteness or the number of Indigenous children in the local community. However, more experiences of financial and life stress and lower socioeconomic status were associated with weak engagement.

The strongest predictor of cognitive engagement was lower levels of teacher-student conflict. Higher self-concept for reading skills, higher prosocial skills, and fewer peer problems were also important for both behavioural and cognitive engagement.

When asked what they would like to change about school, children reported reduced homework, resolution of staffing issues (turnover, teacher behaviour, and teacher commitment), better play areas, and efforts to address bullying.

Children’s responses when asked “what’s good about school right now” also provided insights into what aspects of school facilitated engagement from students’ perspectives. Most children reported friendships, learning, sport, and school events.

- *“I get to see all my friends and play with them and my classes can be fun. The people in my class are funny and they make me laugh.”*
- *“It’s a fun school and you learn about new stuff.”*

## TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ATTENDANCE

More than half of the parents (52%) reported school attendance as being a problem in their community, with these reports being more frequent in remote and very remote locations. Across all year levels, an average of 25% of parents reported that their child had not attended school every day of the prior week; however, a third of these absences were due to the school not being open or available.

Children in the strong engagement profile reported more consistent attendance across their primary school years than children in the weakly engaged profiles.

Teachers reported using a range of strategies to promote attendance, including extrinsic motivators, encouraging engagement within the classroom, following up with parents, and explicitly discussing the importance of attendance with students.

To assist children who have been absent, teachers reported providing children with one-on-one assistance from a teacher aide, sending work home, working with children individually, and embedding revision activities into their learning programs.



## FACTORS THAT SUPPORT ACADEMIC GROWTH

Using a strengths-based approach, this report also explored factors related to progress or growth in literacy and numeracy using two groups of children:

**1. Stronger progress group:** children who demonstrated stronger progress on literacy and numeracy relative to peers who entered school with similar skill levels.

**2. Weaker progress group:** children who still made progress across primary school, but their gain was not as substantial as those in the stronger progress group.

Stronger progress across both literacy and numeracy from early to later primary school years was associated with:

- positive teacher style (reported by students).
- lower teacher-student conflict (reported by teachers).
- greater overall student wellbeing (reported by parents).
- stronger approaches to learning by students (reported by teachers).
- access to more socio-economic resources both at home and at school.
- fewer significant life events.
- more socio-educationally advantaged schools.

Stronger progress in literacy was associated with:

- higher reading self-concept.
- fewer behaviour difficulties.
- lower prevalence of early childhood developmental vulnerabilities in the community.

Stronger progress in numeracy was associated with:

- higher levels of parent involvement in school activities.
- attending a school that parents perceive to be 'good for Indigenous children'.
- fewer experiences of racist bullying.
- greater early emotional self-regulation skills.
- fewer social-emotional difficulties.

These findings collectively highlight the importance of promoting a positive school climate that supports Indigenous children, addresses racism effectively, facilitates parental engagement with the school, and fosters positive student-teacher relationships and student wellbeing.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

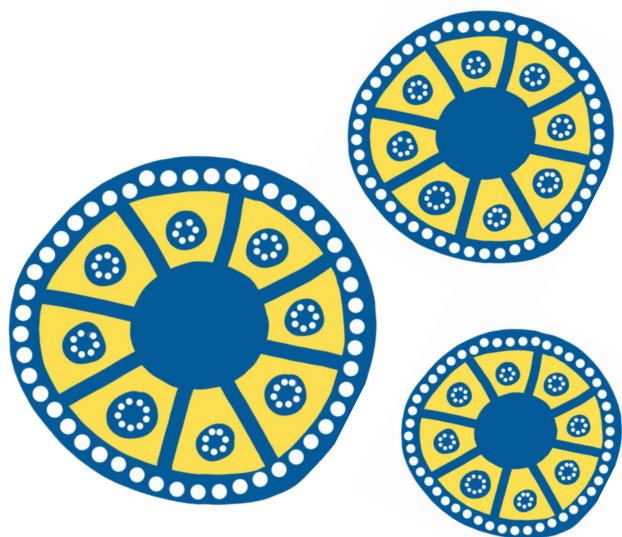
This report reiterates the responsibilities schools have to be 'ready' for Indigenous students and to support Indigenous students to grow up strong. This report makes recommendations relevant to policy and practice and to future research. Despite some overlap, we organise policy and practice recommendations according to the agency called to action.

### Teachers

- Reflect on views of racism and practices to address racism in the classroom.
- Strengthen relationships with families and build opportunities for engagement with parents throughout the primary school years.
- Reduce teacher-student conflict and build more positive student-teacher relationships.
- Foster a strong sense of academic self-concept among students, especially in the early years of schooling.

### School leadership

- Engage in community-informed policy development related to school-based policies and practices for explicitly addressing racism.
- Promote a school culture that values and actively celebrates Indigenous culture, engages with community and Elders, and delivers universal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives, regardless of the degree of representation of Indigenous families within the school community.
- Build school policies and practices to prevent the marginalisation of Indigenous families, build trust and respect, and empower Indigenous families and communities in educational contexts.
- Engage in active outreach to students and their parents to promote parental involvement in school activities and in their child's learning.
- Embed Indigenous knowledges and delivery of the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures consistently and equitably, regardless of Indigenous representation levels within the school community.
- Deliver whole-school social-emotional programs and positive behaviour programs to support student wellbeing and, relatedly, academic progress.
- Engage the broader community in developing, adapting, and evaluating school-based initiatives for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children to ensure their effectiveness, feasibility, and sustainability in Australian schools.



## Teacher education and professional development

- Uphold culturally responsive teaching practices in initial teacher education and professional development to counter colour blindness and, instead, promote the centring and valuing of students' identity and cultural differences.
- Deliver additional pre-service and professional development cultural competency training.
- Expand and update the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers to address racism in the classroom and 'colour blind' views.



## Education policy

- Develop policy for addressing racism and bullying and promoting culturally safe classrooms and schools.
- Establish distinct policy and initiatives that build an Indigenous education workforce and properly remunerate and support Indigenous education career paths.
- Create policies that increase participation in high quality evidence-based approaches to supporting early development.
- Embed school-based practices that focus on children's school entry skills, particularly self-regulation, in the early years of school.
- Develop educational policies that address staff turnover.
- Judge teacher performance not solely on academic results for children, but by the ways in which they are forming important and positive relationships with students and their families.
- Make homework policies across primary schools in Australia more transparent and evidence-based. Future educational policy that aims to enhance both student and parent engagement might consider whether and how homework presents as a barrier to engagement in primary school.
- Attend to the inequitable access to multilingual teachers and specialised services for children in remote areas of Australia.
- Meet the demand for Indigenous language programs within Australian schools.

## Future research directions

- Centre the voices of Indigenous students regarding their perspectives on schooling and knowledges of the education system.
- Use the longitudinal capacity of the LSIC study to explore factors that relate to student engagement, wellbeing, and academic progress as children transition to high school.
- Centre the voices of Indigenous educators regarding their insights and perspectives on the education system to inform policy related to increasing the presence of Indigenous educators and preventing staff turnover.
- Determine specific practices that foster culturally safe schools and classrooms.
- Identify additional school- and teacher-led strategies for fostering parental involvement in their child's schooling.



