

SNAPSHOT

Evaluation of the Parental and Community Engagement program



BACKGROUND

A significant gap exists between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous Australians regarding life expectancy, child mortality, employment and education, including student school attendance, retention and academic achievement.ⁱ The literature indicates that family engagement in their child(ren)'s education has a positive impact on their learning and educational outcomes, including doing better in school, staying in school longer and enjoying school more.ⁱⁱ

This snapshot presents the key findings of an internal evaluation of the Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE) program, which the Benevolent Society delivered in Southern Cairns between 2013 and 2015.

Key Points

- The PaCE program was designed to support initiatives that assisted families and communities to engage with schools and enhance their capacity to support children's education.
- The program targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with children aged from birth to 19 years.
- A collaborative evaluation approach, which involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, clients and other stakeholders in the design and implementation of the evaluation, was trialled.
- The collaborative approach involved understanding community needs, contextual barriers and identifying culturally appropriate data collection methods.
- Socio-economic disadvantage and poverty were identified as major barriers preventing parents, caregivers and the community from engaging in their child(ren)'s education.
- The evaluation found that as a result of the PaCE program, clients became more engaged in their child(ren)'s education, by learning how to read to them and help them with their homework.

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Key Points

- Clients also became more aware of school processes, systems and environments, which increased their confidence to connect with their child(ren)'s teachers and school.
- The program was perceived as a culturally appropriate vehicle for communication between the community and the school. The use of soft entry points to facilitate the development of relationships between the schools, clients and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community were vital in bridging the gap between school, home and the community.

ABOUT THE PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

The PaCE program was funded for three years (2009 – 2012) by the Federal Government under the Indigenous Education Targeted Assistance Act 2009, with funding later extended to June 2015.

It was a community driven program for parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from birth to 19 years. PaCE assisted families and communities to engage in their children's education, with the aim of improving educational outcomes.

PaCE was delivered in six primary and secondary schools in the Southern Cairns area. Four Parent Liaison Officers (2.4 FTE) were employed, including some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified positions.

The objectives of the program were to:

1. Engage with the schools and education providers in order to support improved educational outcomes for children
2. Build strong leadership that supports high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational outcomes
3. Support the establishment, implementation and/or ongoing progress of schools-community partnership agreements
4. Support and reinforce children's learning at home.

The program included a number of activities:

- Advocating for a school environment that is welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families/communities such as painting a mural at the school
- Offering information for school staff to increase their cultural competence
- Providing case management services and personal support, for example organising a bike so a child can ride to school
- Facilitating groups and workshops about parental and family wellbeing, for example on budgeting and nutrition
- Providing information and support to families to access other services such as employment and education services.

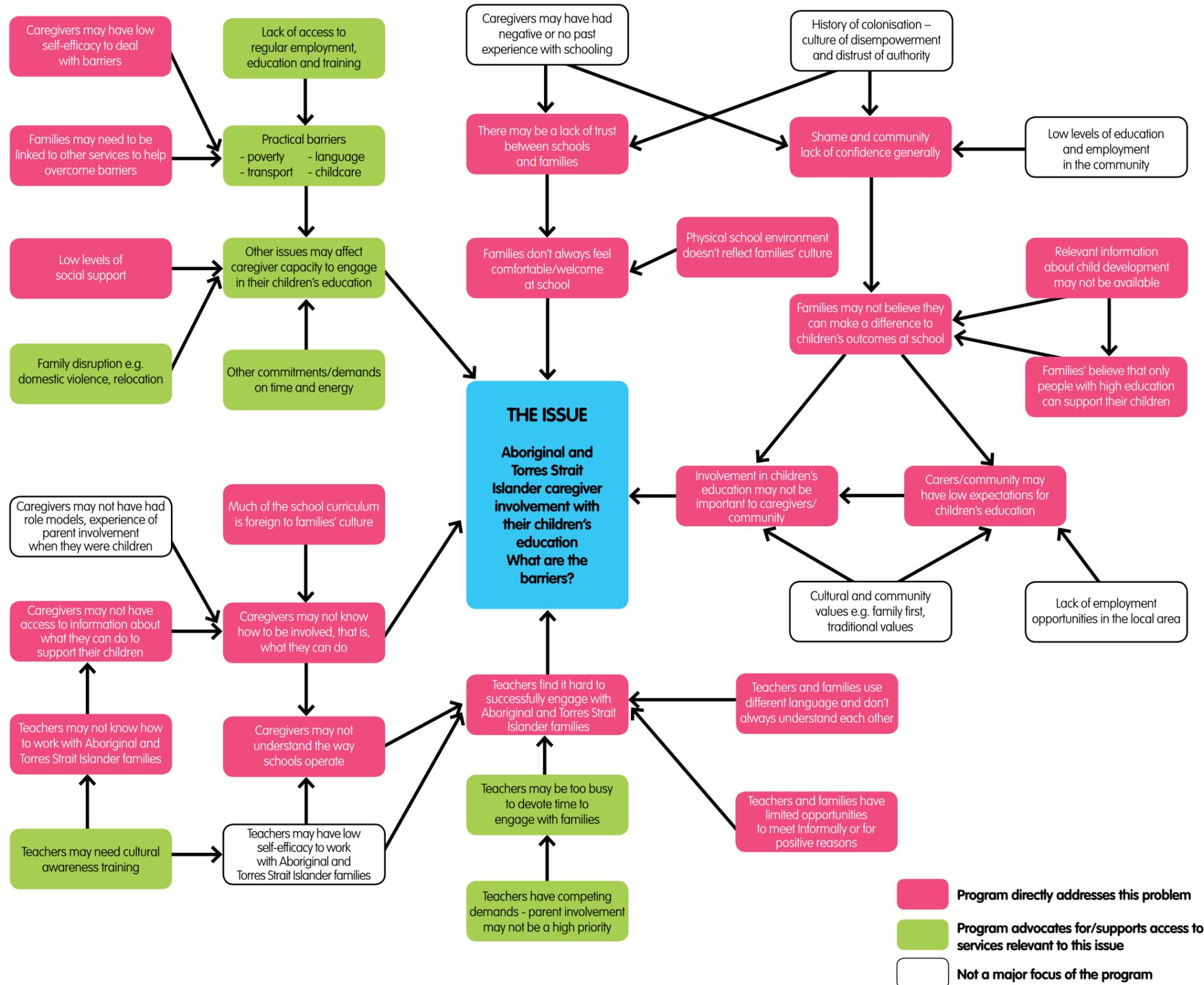
THE AIM OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness of the PaCE program in achieving outcomes for children and parents/caregivers. A collaborative evaluation approach, which involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and clients was also trialled.

The evaluation questions were:

1. How effectively was the PaCE program delivered?
2. How effective was the program in improving outcomes for clients?

Collaborative development of a program logic with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients



METHODOLOGY

The Benevolent Society is committed to ensuring that evaluations are relevant, meaningful and useful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, communities and staff. As such, the evaluation employed a collaborative methodology, involving clients, program stakeholders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders and local schools, to develop a program theory and to determine the most appropriate evaluation design.

The mixed methods design collected process and outcomes data through yarning sessions with six PaCE clients and semi-structured interviews with eight school personnel (from five local schools) and PaCE staff. The interviews included the Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique, which is a qualitative, participatory evaluation approach involving the ongoing collection of stories of significant change. Data was also collected via program activity templates and the client management system, although the availability of this information was limited and inconsistent.

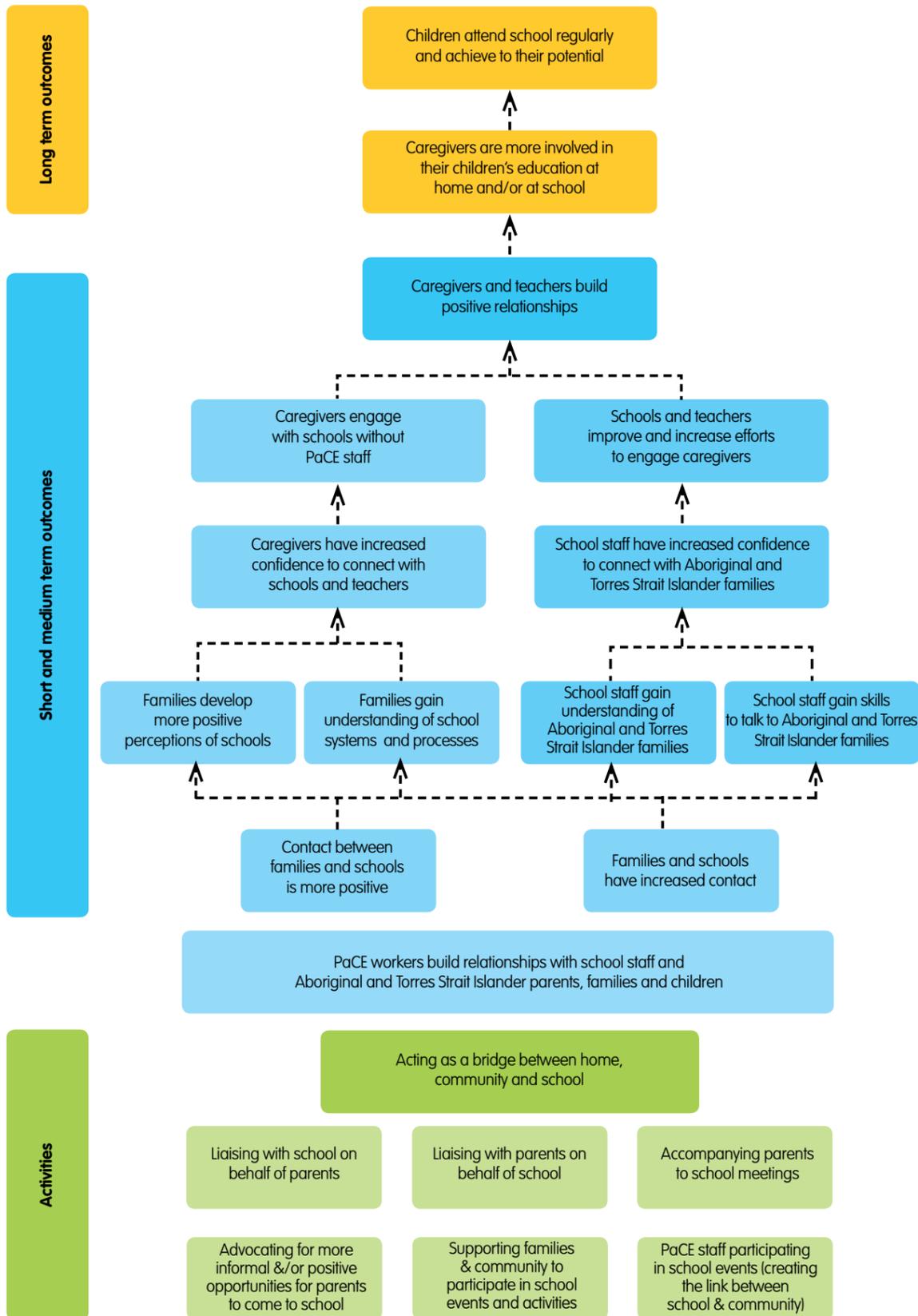
The program logic identified two long term program outcomes and four main components of service delivery. Program outcomes were:

1. Caregivers are more involved in their children's education at home and/or at school
2. Children attend school regularly and achieve their full potential.

Service delivery components were:

1. Acting as a bridge between home, community and school
2. Activities that support schools to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
3. Activities to support general parental and family wellbeing
4. Direct support for parenting, child development and children's education.

During the development of the program logic the contextual factors and barriers that impacted parents and caregivers engagement in their child(ren)'s education were also mapped. These were identified in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, PaCE staff and school personnel. The evaluation used the diagram, as well as the short and long-term program outcomes and service delivery components, to guide the evaluation design, data collection and analysis.



Limitations

The retrospective evaluation design, short timeframe to conduct the evaluation, limited quantitative outcomes and program performance data and the small number of clients who participated in the evaluation were the main design limitations. These limitations meant it was not possible to draw overall conclusions on the effectiveness of the program.

FINDINGS

Overall, the evaluation findings suggest that the PaCE program worked to overcome significant barriers in order to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregiver and community engagement in child(ren)'s education at school and home.

Barriers and needs

Socio-economic disadvantage and poverty were identified as major barriers preventing parents, caregivers and the community from engaging in their child(ren)'s education and creating a home environment supportive of their education. A lack of family routines and social support, overcrowding in some families' homes, transience and regular relocation were also reported to be key challenges that needed to be addressed in order for children to be successful at school.

"How much are you going to value education when you've got nothing to sleep on and no food?" (School personnel)

"Myself and my little [young child], we live alone. She just started kindy - due to financial, all our bills have been hitting us at once....so hopefully next week I should have money for her to go to kindy." (Client)

Caregiver's confidence in their ability to contribute to their children's education was also a significant barrier for some clients. Clients, staff and school personnel believed that some caregivers and community members did not place a high value on education, or did not see supporting education to be their responsibility, but rather the school's responsibility. A number of reasons were suggested for this including the negative educational experiences that caregivers had been through themselves at school, shame or fear, the impact of an intergenerational cycle of

disadvantage, and a lack of knowledge in dealing with the school system.

Clients of the program also raised a number of school related barriers, such as difficulties speaking with teachers and school personnel due to the language or jargon used, as well as not feeling valued or understood by the school.

How effectively was the PaCE program being delivered?

Overall caregivers were highly satisfied with the PaCE program. They described their involvement as being informative and helpful and expressed a great appreciation for the program.

"I have other friends in other areas and towns and they are gutted, they are like I wish we had something like that too, so I feel really lucky" (Client)

Schools provided mixed responses regarding their satisfaction with the program. Some school personnel said that if funding ceased the program would be missed, while others requested increased engagement with program staff and a greater understanding of the suite of services the program could provide.

"If you didn't have the service you'd sure as hell be thinking we miss that service" (School personnel)

PaCE staff outlined critical barriers to delivering the program and suggested a number of improvements. These included:

- Increasing program clarity including aim, target group and delivery of activities
- Refining the case management component of the program to address practical barriers impacting clients
- Increasing community involvement and ownership of the program
- Clarifying and promoting the program within local schools.

How effective was the program in improving outcomes for clients?

The findings suggest there has been some success with the short and medium program outcomes, as identified in the program logic.

Bridging the gap between school, home and the community

The findings suggest that the PaCE program was effective in increasing client's knowledge of school processes, systems and environments. Caregivers reported that their confidence to connect and contact schools had increased and in some cases quality of contact had improved, with greater communication and improved cultural appropriateness. Increased communication had in turn positively impacted caregiver's perceptions of the school. There was some concern, however, that this would not be maintained without the PaCE program.

Important program activities included facilitating information exchange about school activities, general things happening at the school and any significant changes, as well as supporting clients in their interactions with teachers and the school.

The program was also perceived as a culturally appropriate vehicle for communication between the school and the wider community. The use of soft entry points and maintaining and developing strong relationships with the school and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community was vital to bridge the gap between school, home and community.

"Yeah just sitting down and talking to the teachers... and having that support there because sometimes when they bring out the big words, you're dumbfounded, you don't know what they're until later when you get home... so having someone there it's easier because then they explain to you what the teachers are talking about." (Client)

"They help us contact families that we've had difficulty contacting. They provide a culturally appropriate conduit I suppose to some of the Indigenous families, the Indigenous families that we need to engage on a higher level." (School personnel)

Improved parental and family wellbeing

Caregivers reported that the program had improved their and their family's wellbeing by helping to connect them to a range of services to address issues such as budgeting, nutrition, financial management, culture, and drugs and alcohol. This was usually done through the Yarn and Craft Group, information brochures

and one-on-one support or workshops. A number of caregivers also felt that their self-esteem and confidence had increased through their involvement in the program. This had resulted in them becoming more active in their community and in some cases clients had begun to engage in further education, were planning to find employment or had become employed.

"I would have to say for myself it has just been great for my self-confidence. It has really helped me just get out of the house and start mixing with people again because my child's father, he was very violent and stalked and harassed for a very long time so I went through a lot of bad stuff with that domestic violence ... so craft has helped me big time. I am a single mum and yeah I don't have a great deal of friends and just talking to other ladies in general is good, I wasn't connected at all before I started going to these groups. it is a friendly relaxed atmosphere and it is a place where we can ask (workers) questions about kids schooling, their education and all sorts of stuff" (Client)

Improved family routines at home had also increased caregiver capacity to get children to school. Joint home visits by the school and PaCE staff were reported to be critical in addressing practical barriers that were impacting caregivers' ability to get their child to school and their engagement in their children's education.

Improved understanding of and capacity to support child development and education

Some caregivers reported that involvement in program activities, such as the Yarn and Craft group and workshops, had increased their knowledge of child development and early learning, particularly regarding positive parenting strategies. They also felt that these program activities had increased their understanding of teenage development and needs, managing grief, as well as exploring their own experiences of education and their aspirations for their children.

The evaluation also highlighted that the PaCE program had encouraged and supported clients to become engaged in their child's education at home, by learning how to read to them and help with their homework. School personnel also confirmed that they had noticed positive changes with some caregivers being more interested in how they could support their children.

“Encouraging your child to do their best and to try do – try new things. Just encouragement and just being there for them along their journey that’s what, you know, we can do.” (Client)

“A really good attitude on how to do things differently to how we did before. It helped the kids learn more, and wanting to learn more because the parents are encouraging them and helping them with their school work as well.” (Client)

Supporting school’s ability to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Some schools reported improvements in their ability to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and the wider community. Clients also felt that schools had become more aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and individual families’ circumstances. They referred to specific activities such as asking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share their history and culture at school activities, which made them feel valued.

Activities aimed at creating a culturally welcoming school environment were important to successfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and caregivers.

“The deputy principle was so happy to have (PaCE workers) come over and have support with the family, because it just made it really easy for him to be able to interact with the parents as well because he knew the parents were feeling more confident that somebody else was there supporting them.” (School personnel)

“I think the teacher’s attitude is more differently. Well, to me, they are more different to how they speak to me know...But now they’re more open and they’ll sit down and talk to me about how [my child] is going which is really good.” (Client)

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The evaluation highlights a number of implications for policy and practice:

- Ongoing and targeted funding is needed for culturally appropriate community programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregiver and community engagement with the education system, to improve children’s learning outcomes.
- Programs aimed at building the capacity of caregivers to support learning at home is critical, as research shows that the home environment is important for promoting children’s development.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The case management component of programs should be strengthened so that families can be referred to services for additional support as required.
- Investment in culturally appropriate services to support vulnerable families, particularly early intervention services and services for children during the early years is essential for promoting positive outcomes.
- Programs should map a community’s needs and strengths, to ensure that the program design is targeted and responds to the needs of the community.
- Programs must include a strong focus on community engagement and ownership, especially in relation to design and delivery. They should also incorporate soft entry points and build informal community networks and relationships to increase their accessibility.
- Participation in cultural competency training should be a requirement for all school personnel to promote positive interactions between schools and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- The Australian Government must continue to lead, and appropriately invest in, the COAG Closing the Gap Strategy.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IMPLICATIONS

The evaluation identified a number of research and evaluation implications:

- Research design that is relevant, meaningful and useful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, communities and staff is critical. A collaborative or participatory approach to evaluation can be used to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and staff are involved in evaluation design.¹
- Culturally appropriate data collection techniques should also be used to ensure that, respectful, thorough and well informed research is conducted.
- Involving stakeholders in evaluation and research activities may also result in more useful findings that can be used for program improvement and social advocacy.
- Evaluation processes must be embedded in service delivery to ensure that measurement is relevant to ongoing program improvements, as well as the measurement of program effectiveness and outcomes.
- Collaboration with program staff is critical in order to respectfully engage clients and to ensure that they are engaged in the evaluation process.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the clients, staff and school personnel who gave their time to participate in this evaluation.

References

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¹ In line with the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies, AIATSIS (2012), principle 12 that states research outcomes should respond to the needs and interest of Indigenous people.

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