Footprints in Time: the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children

Primary School Report

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 deparments of educations 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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Footprints in Time: the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children

Primary School Report

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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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 are available) were being 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.

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

- There was a prevailing pattern of 'colour blindness' with teachers reporting that they addressed racism by 'treating everyone the same'.
- Some teachers reported that racism was not an issue due to the multicultural nature of their school community.

These findings indicate that teachers may be projecting their dominant views and perpetuating racial inequalities and inequities. Instead, 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 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; however, 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 wellbeing, were perceived by parents as managing school better, and had stronger 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).
- Overall, 38% of 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.
- less likely to have experienced racist bullying at school.
- attending schools with a higher proportion of Indigenous student enrolments.

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.
- have special events such as NAIDOC week.
- deliver improved and more consistent embedding of cultural teaching.
- teach Aboriginal histories.
- teach Aboriginal practices and arts.

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.

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 regardless of family socio-demographic factors.

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:

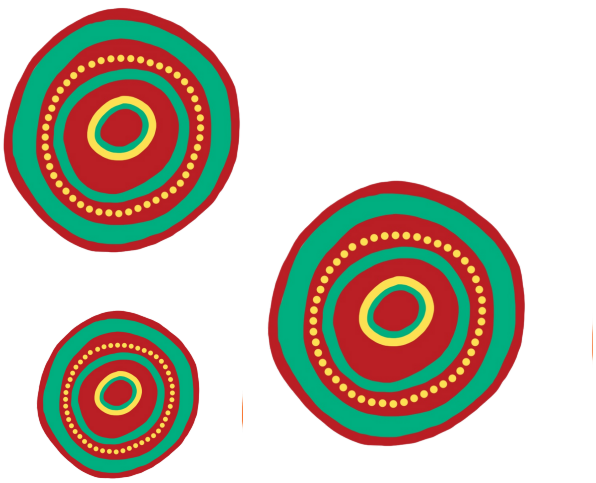
- Majority of teachers (70%) made parents aware of opportunities to engage with their child's school.
- Almost two thirds (62%) of teachers understood the needs of families from Indigenous backgrounds.

In this LSIC 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. 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., child reported academic self-concept), emotional engagement (e.g., teacher reported closeness with teacher), and behavioural engagement (e.g., parent perception of how well child is managing school) latent profile analysis revealed three profiles:

- Strong engagement: 50% of children demonstrated high and stable emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement across primary school.
- High self-concept/ weak engagement: 35% of children demonstrate the lowest level of closeness with teachers over time, highest level of contacts between the school and families about behaviour, lowest teacher-rated cognitive engagement and highest early levels of academic self-concept.
- Low self-concept/ weak engagement: 15% of children demonstrated low but improving levels of emotional engagement, moderately low behavioural and cognitive engagement, and the lowest early levels of academic self-concept.



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

- early developmental competencies.
- strong social skills.
- a positive school climate.
- positive student-teacher relationships.
- high levels of teacher-parent engagement.

Notably, engagement was not related to remoteness or 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 reading self-concept and 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 measures to address bullying.

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.

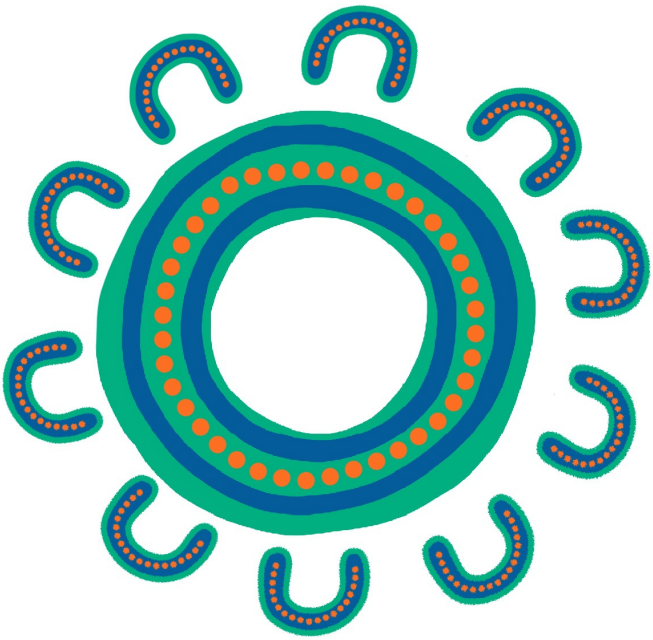
These findings collectively highlight the importance of promoting a positive school climate that supports Indigenous children, addresses racism effectively, facilitates parental engagement with the school, and fosters positive student-teacher relationships and student wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report reiterates the responsibility 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, here 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 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 an engagement barrier 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.

Chapter 1:

LSIC Background and Approaches to Data Analysis

ABOUT *FOOTPRINTS IN TIME*: THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN (LSIC)

Australia's Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) is the only longitudinal child cohort study focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The study is funded by the Australian Government and administered by the Australian Department of Social Services. LSIC is guided by a Steering Committee of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic experts, with a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership. The LSIC Steering Committee provide advice on survey design, implementation, community engagement, ethical and cultural protocols, data analysis, interpretation, and reporting.

The LSIC study *"aims to support the development of culturally appropriate services and programs that are effective in making a positive difference to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children."*

Walter et al., 2017, p. 22

According to the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services, Housing and Indigenous Affairs at the time of implementation, LSIC was designed to answer four key research questions that continue to guide the study (Biddle et al., 2019):

01 What do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to have the best start in life to grow up strong?

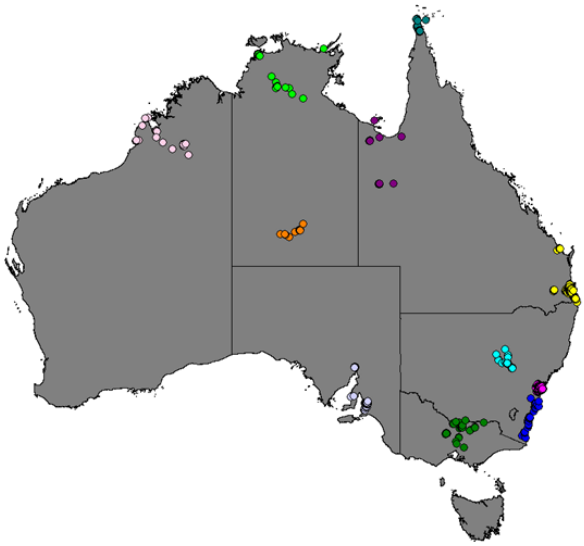
02 How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children raised?

03 What helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to stay on track or to get them to become healthier, more positive and strong?

04 What is the importance of family, extended family and community in the early years of life and when growing up?

The LSIC study includes children from very remote communities to major cities. Children were recruited to the study (a total of 1,671 in 2008, and an additional 88 in 2009, for a total of 1,759 children) from specific sites where there were high levels of representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

Darwin, Katherine, Galiwin'ku, Alice Springs and Hermannsburg (Northern Territory), South East Queensland (including Brisbane, Gold Coast and Toowoomba), Mount Isa, Mornington Island, Doomadgee, Normanton, Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Areas, (Queensland), Western Sydney, Dubbo (New South Wales), Greater Shepparton (Wangaratta, Seymour and Bendigo) (Victoria), Derby, Fitzroy Crossing and Broome (Western Australia) and the Adelaide area (including Port Augusta) (South Australia) (Walter et al., 2017, p.24).



Respondents' locations at study entry. LSIC continues to follow children as their families move across the country.

LSIC is an Australian study, and the data, analyses and results presented in this report sit firmly within that context, and in the context of the sites where data collection has occurred. There is no claim that the LSIC data (nor our analyses using the LSIC data within this report) have wider generalisability. However, the characteristics of the LSIC sample do provide useful data from a broad cross-section of this population. For example, in terms of geographic remoteness, comparing the LSIC sample of children when they were in Year 1 of primary school (see **Table 1.1** on p.23) to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, there is appropriate representation across remoteness areas.

Specifically, 2016 population data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) shows that:

- 37% lived in Major cities (28% in LSIC Year 1 dataset),
- 24% lived in Inner Regional areas (27% in LSIC Year 1 dataset),
- 20% lived in Outer Regional areas (16% in LSIC Year 1 dataset),
- 7% lived in Remote areas (11% in LSIC Year 1 dataset), and
- 12% lived in Very Remote areas (19% in LSIC Year 1 dataset).

Beyond understanding the classified remoteness areas within LSIC, it is not possible to identify participants by their specific jurisdiction at any level (e.g., State / Territory, or Local Government Area). This is important in terms of maintaining privacy for LSIC participants but does mean that any comparisons based on jurisdiction cannot be made. Many aspects of children's primary school education are likely to some extent to reflect state and territory-based education policies and contexts, and so this should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

Data are collected annually in LSIC, with each time point being referred to as a wave. Data collection with children and their families is conducted face-to-face by a team of locally employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research administration officers (RAOs). Data are collected from:

- LSIC Study Child (using a verbal interview and some direct assessment measures).
- LSIC Study Child's Main Carer (using a verbal interview).
- LSIC Study Child's Teacher (using a teacher survey).

The LSIC dataset also includes linked administrative data on school characteristics and children's achievement in the national standardised school-based assessment program (NAPLAN) supplied by state/ territory governments where parent or guardian permission was granted.

It is important to note that the analyses presented in this report use data drawn from across Waves 1 to 12 of LSIC, collected between 2008 and 2020. The findings therefore represent primary school experiences for LSIC children during this specific time-period only.

For further information on the study please visit the LSIC study website: www.dss.gov.au/lsic

LSIC Study Children and their Main Carers / Parents

The term 'LSIC Study Child' is used within LSIC to identify the child participating in the study. While all LSIC children identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 87% of Main Carers identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or both.

Main Carers for children were those that identified themselves as knowing the LSIC Study Child the best. In Wave 1 of LSIC data collection these included:

- Biological mother: 93.2%
- Grandmother: 2.8%
- Biological father: 1.8%
- Aunty: 1.1%
- Other (e.g., adopted parent, step-parent, other relative): 1.1%

Throughout this report we use the term 'parent' to refer to LSIC Main Carers, to reflect and be inclusive of the nature of the 'parenting' that this person is likely engaged in, given that they know the Study Child best. Rather than continue to refer to 'LSIC Study Children' we simply refer to 'children' when discussing the study participants, so the reader should keep in mind that, like all research, the data reflect only those in the LSIC study.

Our overall approach to the LSIC Primary School Report

We were informed by the approach to Indigenous quantitative methodology described by Walter, Martin and Bodkin-Andrews (2017, p.3): “we epistemologically prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and bring an Indigenous worldview to our understanding.” This was achieved through co-leadership of the overall project by Indigenous lead Rogers, and non-Indigenous lead Williams, with extensive time in whole-team discussion, learning, and debate.

The reason we spent a significant amount of time discussing our methodological approach, as a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers working with secondary data, was to ensure that (a) we approached Indigenous data with the respect and principles outlined by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2020) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research and (b) that our analyses were in line with the methodology that LSIC Steering Committee Members Associate Professor Karen L. Martin and Professor Maggie Walter describe of LSIC:

“The base of its success is the study’s purposive Indigenous research methodological framework…this framework permeates through LSIC research questions, design, data collection and analysis practices. Its core is the trust our families have that LSIC is manifestly in their specific interests and in the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more generally. This trust is LSIC’s heart and soul; that it is possible to gather data from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that will work in the interests of those families.”

(Walter et al., 2017, p. 43)

While this report presents analyses by a blended Indigenous and non-Indigenous team, and works only with secondary data (both quantitative and qualitative), the AIATSIS Code applies to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research, regardless of whether the research directly involves human participants, and, specifically, applies to research that extends to the use of collections such as datasets, collections of information, and other research that may not otherwise be categorised as 'human research' (AIATSIS, 2020, p.6). AIATSIS states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research should be understood as research that concerns or impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in any of the following ways:

• The research is about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, societies, culture and/or knowledge, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policies or experience.

- The target population is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, groups, communities or societies.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have been incidentally recruited and researchers wish to do separate analysis of Indigenous-specific data.
- There are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals or communities contributing to the research.
- There is new or pre-existing data related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being used in the research.

In defining our methodology, we were informed by Indigenous academics Walters and Andersen's (2012) work, "Indigenous statistics". In particular, these authors speak to the cultural framework of Indigenous statistics, the methodologies that produce them, and activity regarding them.

"We need to differentiate between methods and methodologies…it is the methodologies within which data are collected, analysed and interpreted that shape the picture that the statistics produce, rather than the research method of statistical analysis itself. Methodology is the active element in constituting the portrait of the realities that statistical techniques eventually create; it determines why and how particular questions are asked (and why others are not) … and how the resulting data are interpreted and, significantly, used."

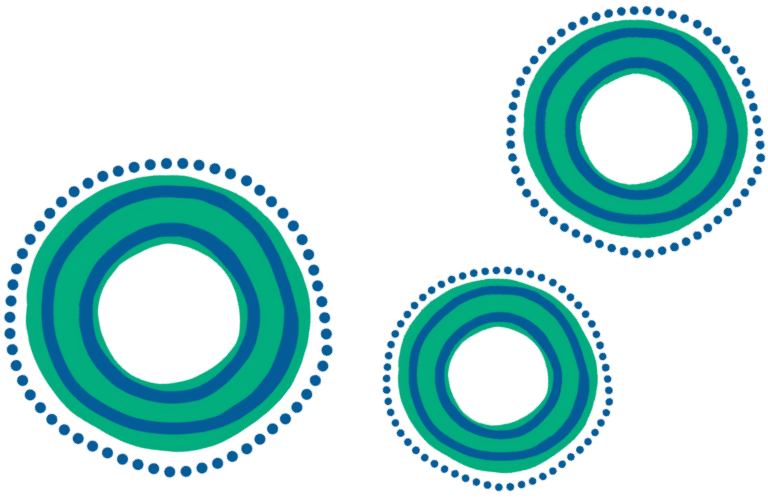
(Walter & Andersen, 2012, p. 10).

Specifically, while our methods for analysing quantitative data were relatively typical (group level descriptive statistics, correlations, regressions), our methodology employed in selecting which LSIC data to use, how to develop quantitative 'scores' representing particular constructs, what variables to include in analyses, and how to interpret and write about findings all embedded Indigenous perspectives. In later sections of this chapter, we provide some examples of how this was done.
As a team of authors, we are Australian researchers from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds.

We acknowledge our understandings are informed by our experiences, culturally and academically, formed primarily within Australian education frameworks and also informed by leading Indigenous and education bodies and organisations. Practical examples of how prior work has informed our approach exist within this report, particularly regarding concepts of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education', 'cultural competency', and other terms which are defined throughout this report by drawing on key Indigenous educators' writings, Indigenous research approaches, and Australian education bodies and frameworks.

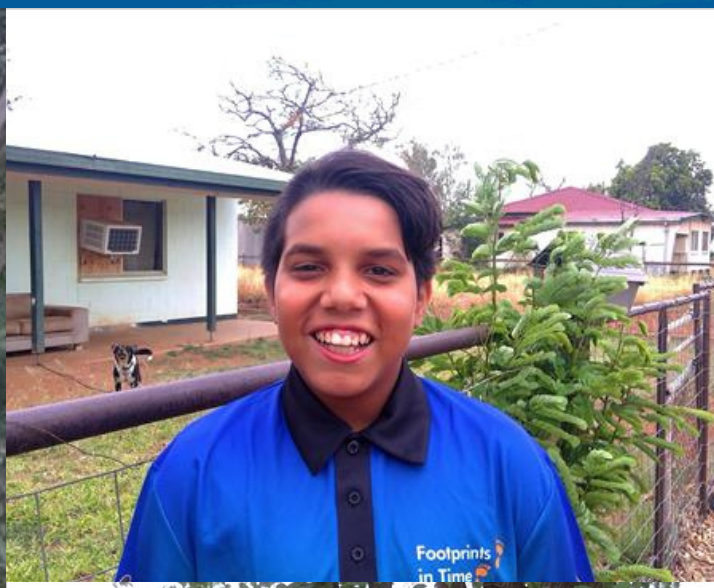
When considering our work with the LSIC data set, acknowledging that it is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research under the AIATSIS definition, we spent a long time working together as a team to apply Indigenous research principles to our approach, well before we started analysing data or defining research questions. In practical terms, this meant acknowledging and defining the epistemological position of our team of researchers and understanding how our ontological position informed how we, as researchers, view the world. It also included our axiological position to ensure ethical research practices and research integrity.

We use the languages of "we" because we acknowledge we are not a faceless unknown entity in the analyses within this report. Just as all the data presented in this report represent and reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families, and teachers. We are a team of individual researchers who have come to this work with our own positionality, relationships, and knowledges. Our research backgrounds inform the analyses and interpretation of findings presented in the report.



OUR TEAM

In our team we have knowledge of education contexts for Australian children, and specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Rogers has worked extensively in the area of educational leadership for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and Indigenous people's school experiences. Berthelsen has been the Education lead for the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children since its inception. Laurens has worked extensively with individual- and school-level primary school data in her role as Chief Investigator for the NSW Child Development Study, and Williams has conducted a range of projects focused on primary school contexts including recent analyses of a decade of school level data on attendance, achievement, suspension, and school climate for the Queensland Department of Education.



How we prepared LSIC data for this report

Due to the spread of ages for LSIC children in each annual wave of data collection, children's commencement and progress through primary school is not well aligned with the LSIC waves. For example, the Wave 5 dataset includes children in their preschool year up to Year 4.

For this reason, we restructured the LSIC data by children's year level at school, rather than analysing the data according to the wave at which children's data were collected. To do this, at each wave of data collection we identified the primary school year (grade) level in which children were enrolled, then combined all Year 1 data, Year 2 data, and so on. This provided us with data at each school year level as shown in **Table 1.1**, which is largely representative of the full LSIC cohort of children, though there are higher rates of missing data for those in remote and very remote Australia across the primary years, compared to the full LSIC sample.

For most analyses we use our newly restructured datasets based on school year level. However, where it made sense to do so for some analyses, we sometimes instead use data from a specific Wave of LSIC (e.g., Wave 8). This was common in instances where perhaps the data for a variable was collected only at one wave or where we wanted to capture responses across multiple years of primary school. Where this approach is taken, we make this clear in the report, and provide the age range of the children in the wave being used.

We include preschool data where it could be identified that children were attending early childhood education and care in the year prior to entering formal schooling. This status is not always easy to identify within LSIC, especially given the different names used across jurisdictions (e.g., preschool, kindergarten, etc). We go on to use preschool data in some parts of the report, but not all.

Table 1.1 The LSIC Primary School Report dataset by remoteness

	Full LSIC study	Preschool	Prep	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
N children (%)	1759 (100)	967 (55)	1237 (70)	1226 (70)	1217 (69)	1221 (69)	1240 (70)	1196 (68)	1181 (67)
Child age months *M (SD)*	-	52.3 (6.4)	66.3 (5.9)	78.8 (6)	91.3 (5.3)	103 (5.3)	115.2 (5.6)	127.5 (5.4)	139.1 (5.3)
Female %	50	50	49	50	51	51	50	52	52
Remoteness *n* (%)									
Major city	433 (27)	271 (28)	346 (28)	341 (28)	342 (28)	337 (28)	358 (29)	338 (28)	347 (29)
Inner regional	421 (24)	278 (29)	297 (24)	333 (27)	319 (26)	330 (27)	334 (27)	332 (28)	320 (27)
Outer regional	228 (13)	145 (15)	172 (14)	192 (16)	191 (16)	203 (17)	211 (17)	204 (17)	195 (17)
Remote	249 (14)	93 (10)	158 (13)	130 (11)	134 (11)	125 (10)	1198 (10)	130 (11)	126 (11)
Very remote	426 (24)	180 (19)	264 (21)	230 (19)	231 (19)	226 (19)	218 (18)	192 (16)	193 (16)
Teacher data available *n* (%)	-	322 (33)	477 (39)	506 (4)	488 (40)	523 (43)	553 (45)	575 (48)	589 (50)
Major cities	-	113 (35)	153 (32)	147 (29)	147 (31)	148 (28)	161 (29)	170 (30)	175 (30)
Inner regional	-	94 (29)	134 (28)	162 (32)	151 (31)	159 (30)	161 (29)	183 (32)	194 (33)
Outer regional	-	52 (16)	69 (14)	85 (17)	73 (15)	95 (18)	112 (20)	93 (16)	108 (18)
Remote	-	36 (11)	58 (12)	53 (10)	44 (9)	58 (11)	33 (6)	58 (10)	48 (8)
Very remote	-	27 (8)	63 (13)	59 (12)	72 (15)	68 (13)	86 (16)	71 (12)	64 (11)
School data available (MySchool) *n* (%)			558 (45)	686 (56)	988 (81)	1184 (97)	1210 (98)	1183 (99)	1169 (99)
Major cities	-		179 (32)	200 (29)	278 (28)	317 (27)	326 (27)	324 (27)	344 (29)
Inner regional	-		129 (23)	175 (26)	275 (28)	314 (26)	327 (27)	326 (28)	320 (27)
Outer regional	-		76 (14)	98 (14)	124 (13)	152 (12)	163 (13)	156 (13)	193 (17)
Remote	-		64 (11)	76 (11)	110 (11)	147 (12)	145 (12)	148 (13)	126 (11)
Very remote	-		110 (20)	137 (20)	201 (20)	254 (21)	229 (19)	229 (19)	186 (16)

For the teacher report, around 40% of Indigenous children at each year level (from Preparatory to Year 6) have teacher data available (see **Table 1.1**) and, while there is a good spread of teacher data available across geographical remoteness, teachers of children in remote and very remote areas are slightly under-represented in the teacher data.

Table 1.1 shows the availability of linked MySchool data, which provides information at the school level for Indigenous children in the LSIC dataset, for children at each year level. The levels of MySchool data available are largely representative of the full LSIC sample.

A NOTE ON SCHOOL TRANSITION

We acknowledge that a positive transition to primary school has important implications for children's ongoing learning and wellbeing, and that schools hold responsibility for ensuring that they are ready to support strong academic achievement and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Because this report focusses on the primary school years only, we do not analyse data related to the transition to school for LSIC children. Readers are referred to existing extensive work by others on school transition and school readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Barblett et al., 2020; Moyle, 2019; Robinson & Tyler, 2020; Silburn et al., 2020). In Chapters 6 and 7 of this report, there are analyses of the role of children's early competencies at school entry in their ongoing engagement and learning. These findings suggest the crucial role of early home, community, and early childhood education and care learning environments, reflecting Closing the Gap Target 3 [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years], and Target 4 [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years] (Coalition of Peaks, 2020). Future LSIC research could further address the nature of children's prior-to-school experiences, how they support positive school transitions, and how primary schools are 'ready' to support strong academic achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Anderson et al., 2022).

PREPARING KEY VARIABLES IN LSIC FOR THIS REPORT

To maximise the availability of data for longitudinal and other modelling, we often use an average (mean) of certain constructs within three distinct periods of primary school:

- Preparatory to Year 2 (early primary)
- Year 3 and Year 4 (mid primary)
- Year 5 and Year 6 (senior primary)

This approach meant that data were available for more children than it would otherwise be if we used only data from one specific grade.

We also defined and used a common set of socio-demographic covariates across analyses, as appropriate. For a full description of these covariates and how they were used in these analyses see the Technical Appendix. Briefly, these are:

- Child gender
- Child age in each year level of school
- Geographical remoteness
- Level of relative Indigenous socioeconomic outcomes (IRISEO)
- Family experience of financial stress in the last year
- Parent total number of significant life events in the last year
- Total number of people living in the household
- Percentage of Indigenous children in the community
- Percentage of children in the community identified as vulnerable by the Australian Early Development Census
- Highest education level of parent, and
- Upward mobility of parent education level

For each of these covariates, we examined the extent to which they tended to change over time for families involved in LSIC. For those that were largely stable, we used data from the early waves of LSIC, where there is a lower level of missing data. For those that showed change over time, we selected the appropriate primary school stage from which to include the covariates, depending on the model being tested.

Our approach to analyses in the LSIC Primary School Report

Drawing on a variety of analyses and tools available, including descriptive thematic analysis of qualitative data and tools including NVivo (software that helps to sort and code text information), our multidisciplinary team drew on our variety of disciplinary backgrounds and educational experiences to ensure our commitment to understanding the deep connections between all aspects of Indigenous life were reflected in the analyses within this report.

While drawing on markers such as remoteness area (as defined by the Australian Standard Geographical Classification), and socioeconomic outcomes (as defined by the Index of Relative Indigenous Socio-economic Outcomes) to help make sense of the data available, we maintained a strong focus on not allowing situational factors (such as low-income or remote location) to drive our inquiries. Practical ways we implemented our approach included:

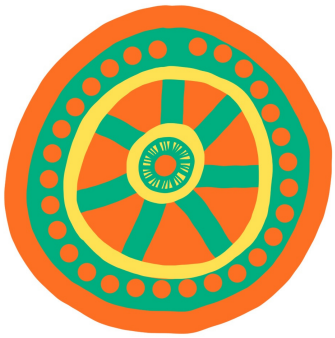
- Constantly checking the ways, in which we operationalised variables and constructs (to create composites) within the dataset to ensure it was in line with our methodology. These processes included long yarns as an Indigenous and non-Indigenous team, and drew on prior LSIC literature and technical reports, particularly those that involved Indigenous team members and that used Indigenous research methods.

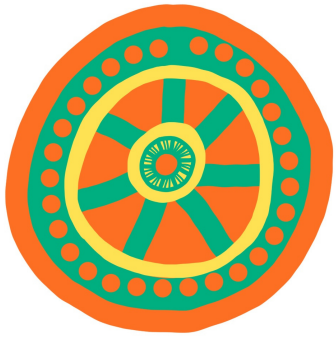
- Maintaining a strong focus on constructs where there was the potential for impact and value. That is, what was changeable by society, policy, the education system, and communities themselves in relation to what supports positive educational experiences and outcomes for LSIC Children.

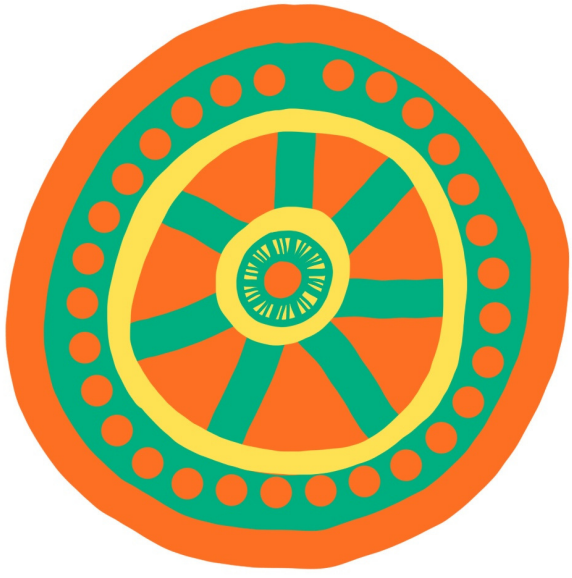
- Taking a critical stance in relation to what is important and of significance to understand, and thus how variables should be considered within modelling. For example, while a gold standard Western statistical approach is to depict and include as much variation as possible within each variable (treating continuous variables as such and including the full scale), there were times when it was more important to explore two or more discrete groups within the LSIC data. That is, rather than use a scaled variable, it was more appropriate to dichotomise or collapse the data into two or more categories.

Most importantly, our methodological approach was to centre Indigenous voices, which we aimed to achieve through multiple means including:

- Presenting the voices of the children whom the data represent.
- Ensuring key Indigenous authors were drawn upon in supporting and contextualising our findings through literature.
- Understanding the intentions of the LSIC Steering Committee to inform our approach.
- Spending many hours reading the writings of the LSIC Steering Committee members and Indigenous researchers who have used LSIC to gain an understanding of the underlying intentions and hopes for the use of LSIC data.
- Engaging in an early conversation with a small group of Research Administration Officers to test our approaches and initial findings.
- Being informed by Indigenous educators and theories, including avoiding deficit discourse and applying a strengths-based approach to our inquiries.
- Making signification revisions to the report after receiving feedback from the LSIC Steering Committee.
- Testing our methodology and findings against the National Agreement on Closing the Gap as signed by the Coalition of Peaks (2020) and all Australian Governments in 2020.







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Chapter 2:

The Primary Years for LSIC Children

Primary school year levels vary in name and description across Australian states and territories, but for Australian children, there are seven years of full-time primary school commencing from Foundation or Preparatory year (called Preparatory in this report, or Prep for short), followed by another six primary school year levels. In addition, most children also attend a non-compulsory preschool year either part-time or full-time. To understand the experience of Indigenous children as they progress from Preparatory through to the final year of primary school (Year 6), we restructured the LSIC dataset from waves into school year levels.

In this chapter, we discuss some of the key educational experiences in primary school for LSIC children. In particular, this chapter discusses the following questions, which set the scene for more in depth and longitudinal analyses presented in the following chapters:

- What are the characteristics LSIC children exhibit as a cohort, during their primary school years?
- Which types of schools are LSIC children attending?
- What are the characteristics of teachers of the LSIC children?
- What is the nature of the primary school classrooms and school services that LSIC children experience?
- What are some features of the LSIC cohort's primary years, such as student first languages, and movement of students between schools?

What are our key findings?

- One third of children (33%) in the LSIC study are multilingual.
- Across the LSIC sample, almost one in ten (9%) children enter school speaking an Indigenous language as their first language. In very remote areas included in LSIC, this increases to almost two in five (39%) of LSIC children.
- Access to specialist teachers, including English as a Second Language and Indigenous Language teachers, is inequitable in remote areas, as is access to other specialised school services.

What needs to be done?

- Urgent attention to equitable access to English as a Second Language teachers for children with an Indigenous language as their first language is required.
- Enhancing access to specialised services in remote areas of Australia is essential and may require technology-assisted and other innovative approaches.

What are the characteristics of children during their primary school years?

In this section we explore: *What are the characteristics exhibited by Indigenous primary school aged children in the LSIC cohort?*

We examined parents reports of children's languages spoken during their early years of school and found:

- One third (33%) of LSIC children spoke more than one language, including 6% who spoke three or more languages.
- Overall, 28% of LSIC children spoke an Indigenous language, with 9% of parents reporting that their child was dominant in an Indigenous language, and 3% reporting their child was equally fluent in English and an Indigenous language.
- All LSIC children, excepting fewer than 10 children who were living in very remote areas, spoke English, with 88% of parents reporting that English was their child's dominant language.
- A total of 7% spoke a foreign language or sign language (AUSLAN).

Figures 2.1 and **2.2** present what the LSIC data showed regarding children's languages, by remoteness area. These data indicate that Indigenous children living in more remote areas are more likely to speak an Indigenous language. These children are also more likely to be dominant in an Indigenous language, or equally fluent in English and an Indigenous language, compared to their peers living in less remote areas.

Figure 2.1 Percentage of LSIC children who speak an Indigenous language by remoteness area

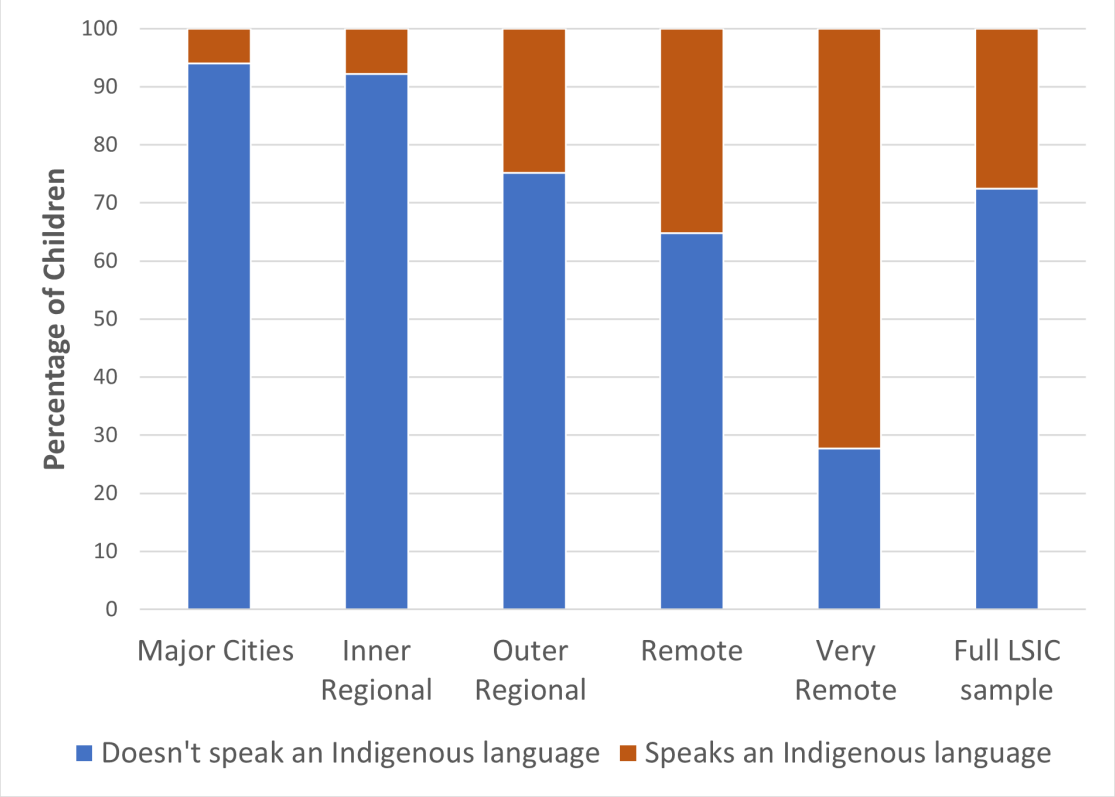
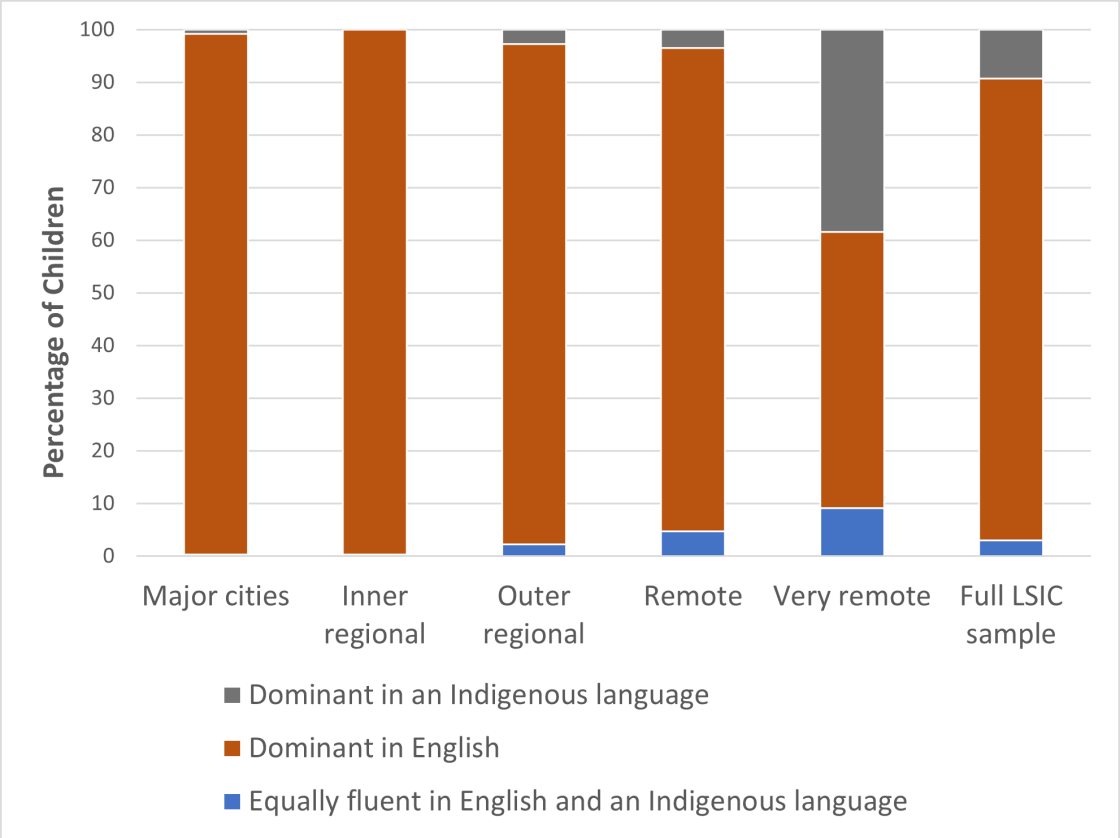


Figure 2.2 Dominant language of LSIC children by remoteness area



In LSIC, parents reported if their child had a **developmental delay or diagnosed disability**. The rate of diagnosed disability peaked at Year 5 when LSIC children were approximately 10 years old, with 5.6% identified as living with a disability (**Table 2.1**). This late peak (Year 5) is unremarkable, given many diagnoses are not commonly diagnosed until the middle childhood period (including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). It should be noted that, due to the way data are collected in LSIC, it is not always possible to ascertain the extent to which parents' reports represent a formal diagnosis (and of what type) or a concern shared by family and others. To avoid making an error in classification or identification of children with disabilities we do not delve more deeply into this group across the report but do recommend that future research seek to better understand the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disabilities during their school years.

Table 2.1 Parent report of developmental delay or disability

	Parents report developmental delay n (%)	Parents report disability n (%)
Preparatory	24 (2.5%)	21 (2.0%)
Year 1	28 (2.3%)	37 (3.0%)
Year 2	24 (2.0%)	31 (2.5%)
Year 3	21 (1.7%)	46 (3.8%)
Year 4	21 (2.5%)	22 (2.6%)
Year 5	13 (2.1%)	34 (5.6%)
Year 6	17 (2.8%)	26 (4.3%)

Which types of schools are children attending?

Figures 2.3 and **2.4** display the proportion of children attending schools within different educational sectors and of different structural type. We gathered this data from the assessments completed when children were in Preschool to Year 2, and we noted a general stability (that is, there are not significant numbers of children changing school sector or type in the early years).

Most LSIC children attended public schools (87%; **Figure 2.3**). National data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students show that approximately 83% attend government schools across primary and secondary schooling (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022), so this figure in LSIC is well aligned with the national picture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely overall to attend public schools than their non-Indigenous peers, with 70% of all Australian children attending public schools for their primary years (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022).

Figure 2.3 School sectors attended by LSIC children

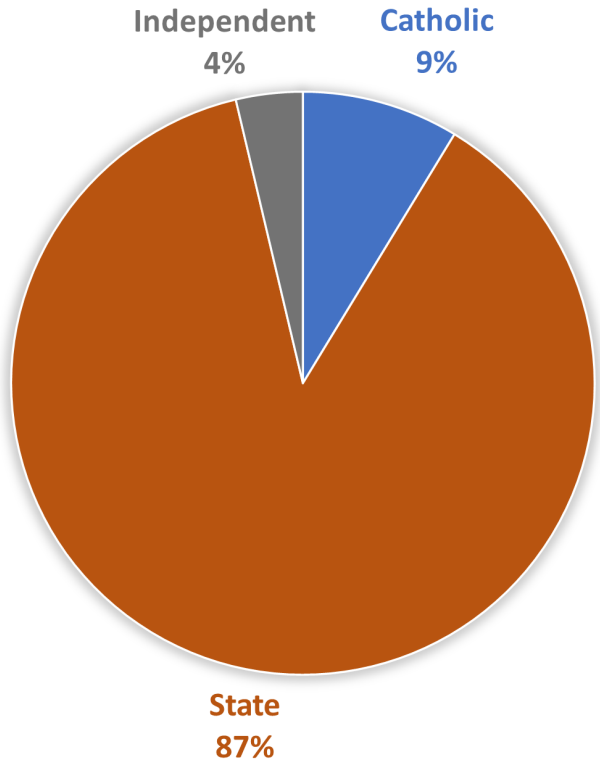
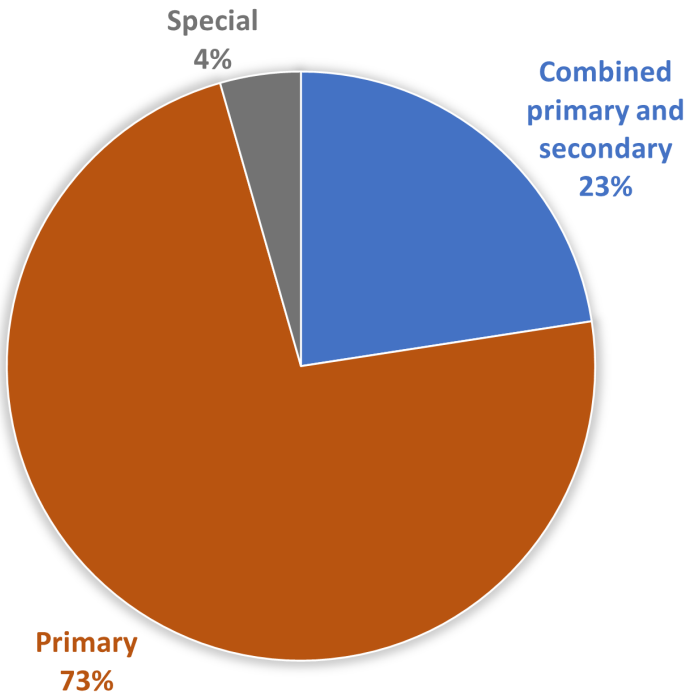


Figure 2.4 Structure of schools attended by LSIC children



Almost three-quarters of children in LSIC attended schools that delivered the primary years only (73%; **Figure 2.4**), though many attended combined primary / secondary schools (23%).

Children attended schools of various sizes. In **Figure 2.5** we used categories of school size based on total enrolments and aligned these with those reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Most LSIC children (40%) attended schools with enrolments of between 200 and 400 students. Approximately 37% of all Australian government primary schools have this same enrolment range (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Two fifths (41%) of LSIC children were in each of the two larger school groupings (400 to 600 students [21%] or 600 or more students [21%]), which is again well aligned with the overall national picture of state primary schools.

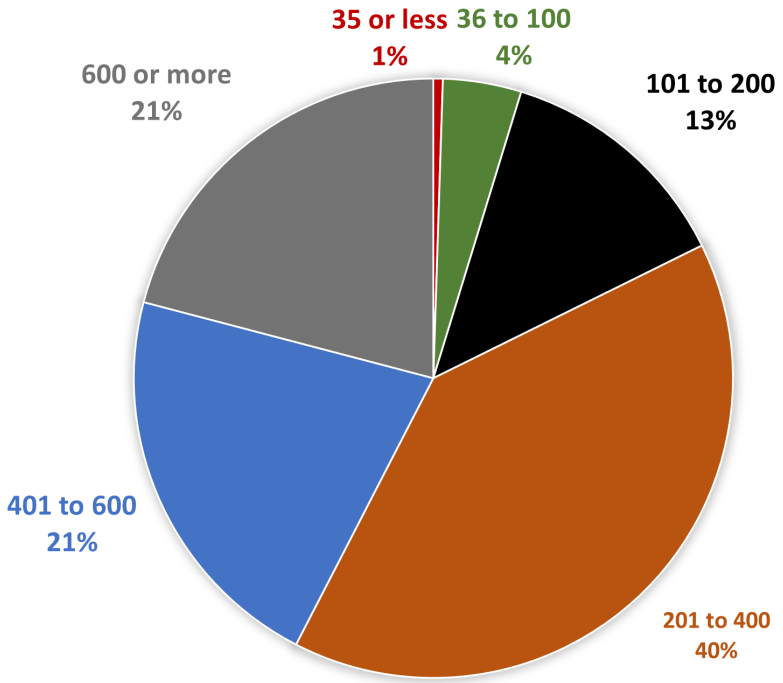


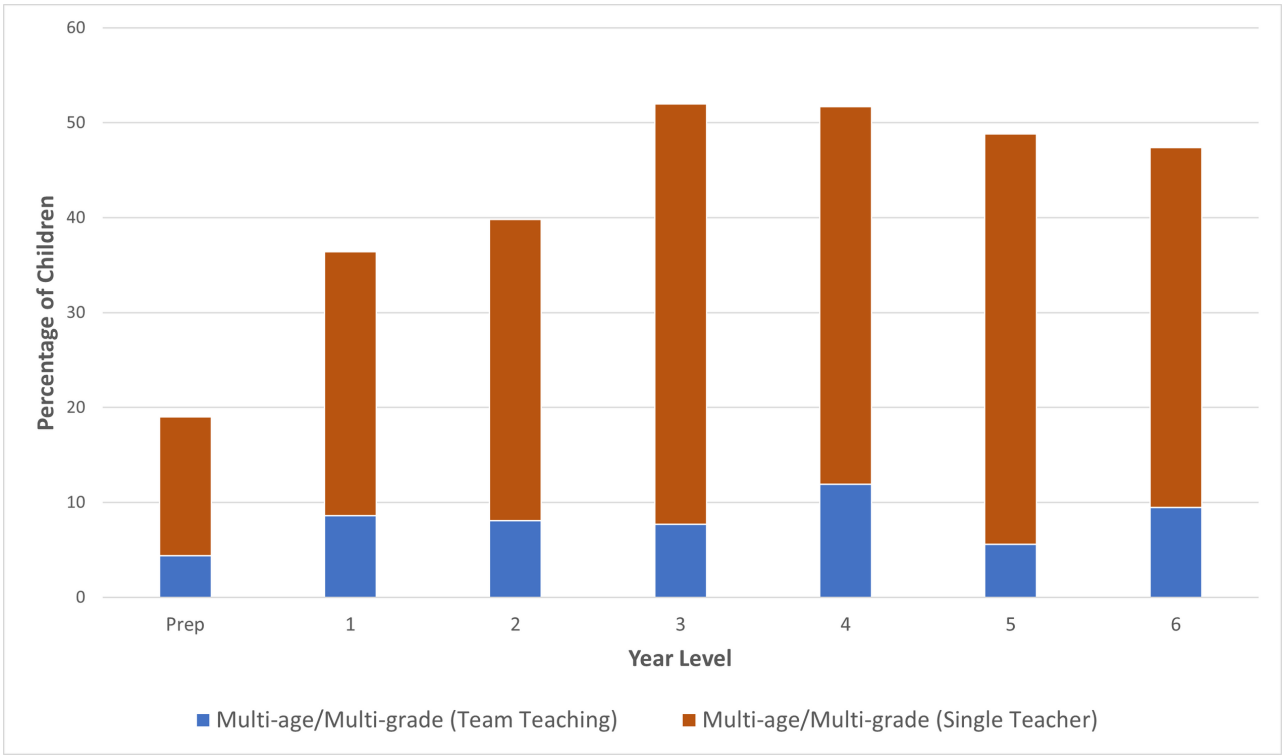
Figure 2.5 Enrolment size (number of students) of schools attended by LSIC children

There were very few children identified as living away from home during their primary school years. A total of 15 children lived away from home at some stage, including for boarding school or with another family (either related to them, or unrelated to their own family).

What is the nature of the classrooms and school services that LSIC children experience?

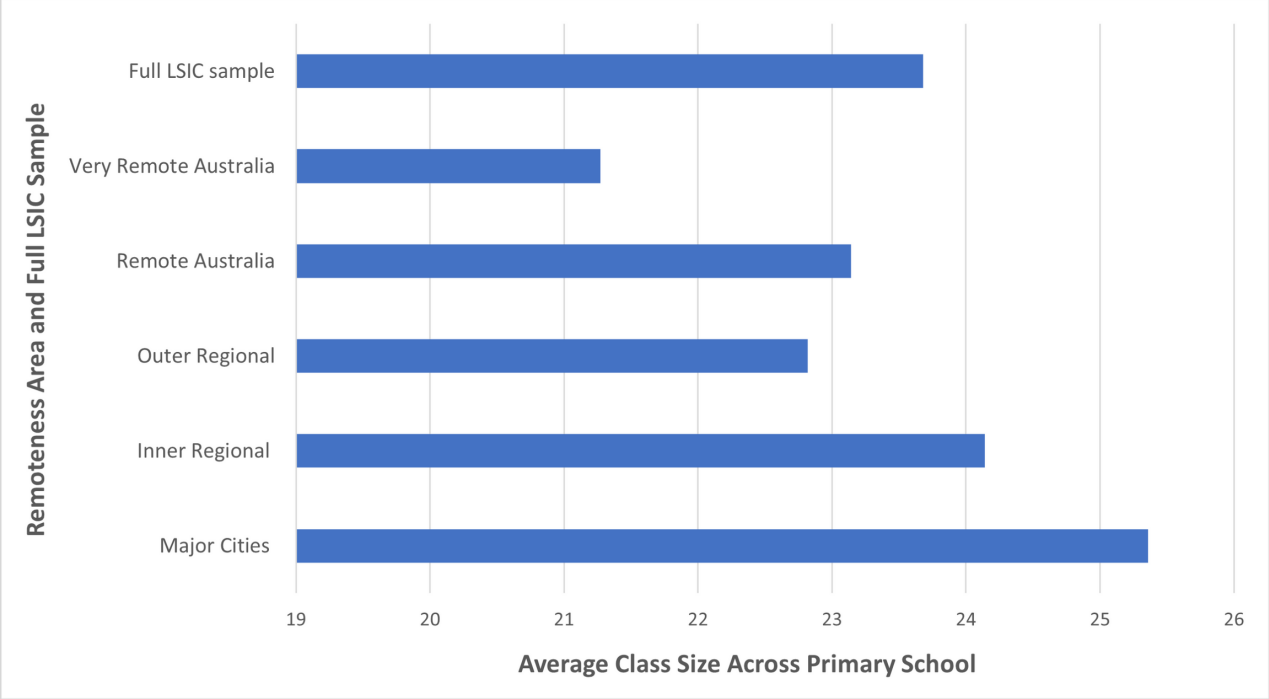
In the LSIC survey, teachers reported on the structure of classrooms for each LSIC child. For those children with teacher data available, in the early years, most children were in single age/grade classrooms (> 80% in Preparatory). Many children, however, experienced multi-age / multi-grade class structures across the primary years of schooling, with greater than half of children in Years 3 and 4 (for whom we have teacher data) being educated in multi-age classrooms. **Figure 2.6** displays the percentage of children in multi-age / multi-grade classrooms, either with a single teacher (most common) or with team teaching (less common).

Figure 2.6 Percentage of children in multi-age / grade classrooms



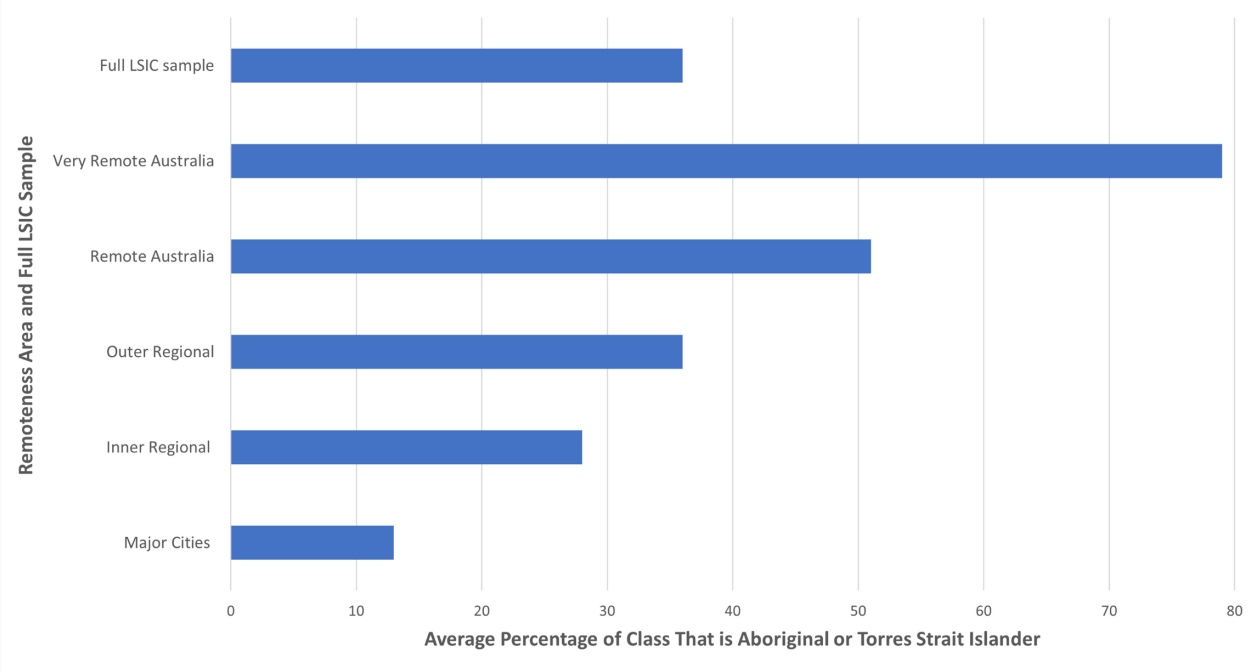
In terms of class sizes reported by teachers, on average, children were in class sizes of 20 during preschool, 22 during Preparatory and Year 1, 23 during Year 3, 24 during Year 4, and classes of 25 students during both Years 5 and 6. Averaging class sizes experienced by LSIC children across Preparatory to Year 6, and examining these by remoteness, shows that children in very remote areas experienced smaller class sizes than those in major cities (**Figure 2.7**).

Figure 2.7 Average class size across primary school for full LSIC sample and by remoteness



We examined the number of Indigenous students reported in LSIC children's classes, as reported by teachers across the primary school years (averaged over Preparatory to Year 6) and found a significant gradient in which all remoteness areas differed from each other (**Figure 2.8**). Classrooms in more remote areas were found to have a much higher proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (almost 80% on average in very remote areas) compared to classrooms in less remote areas (13% in major cities on average).

Figure 2.8 Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (as reported by teachers) in classrooms for the full LSIC sample by remoteness

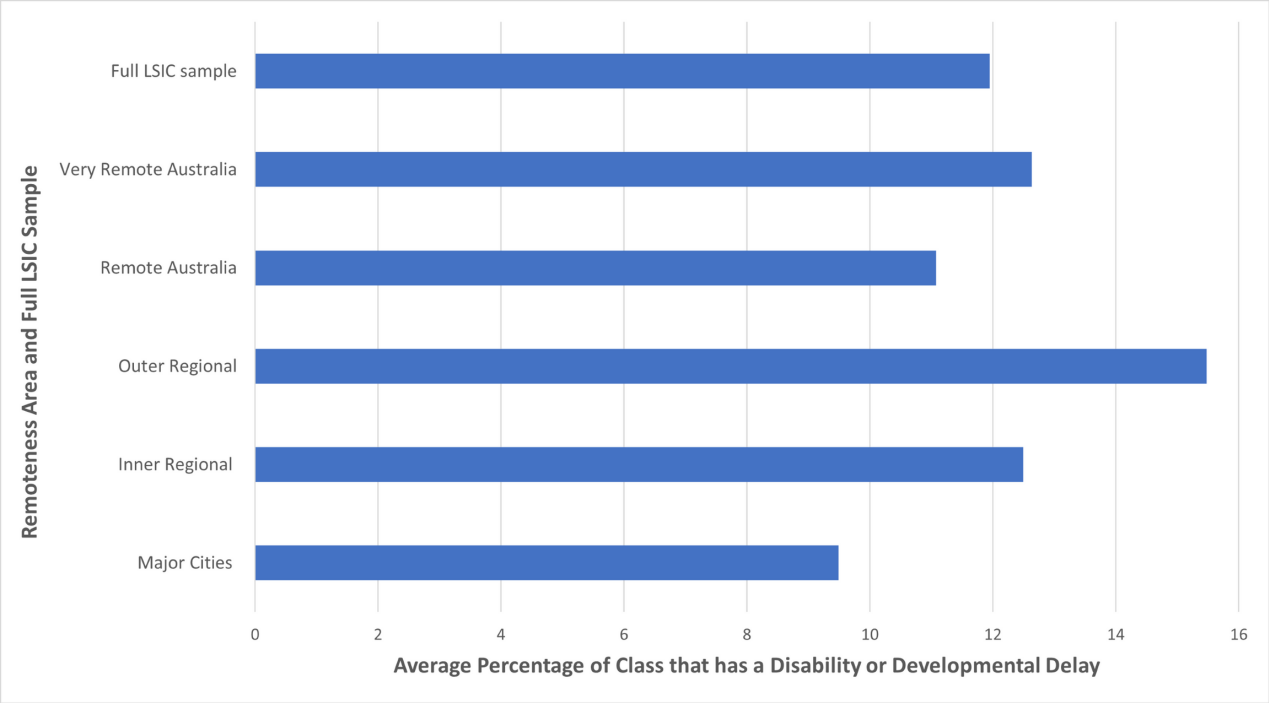


Teachers were asked to report for their whole class (not just LSIC children), what percentage of children had a developmental delay or disability. Averaged across the primary years in LSIC, this figure was 12%. This may be an underrepresentation related perhaps to missing teacher data, given that the first year of National Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with a Disability (2017) suggested that 19% of all schools' students received school adjustments for disability (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022).

However, data collection in this area is still not consistent and may have been difficult for teachers to report.

In LSIC there was generally an even representation across remoteness areas (**Figure 2.9**); however, outer regional areas had significantly higher proportions of children with developmental delay or disability in classrooms (15.5%) compared to major cities (9.5%).

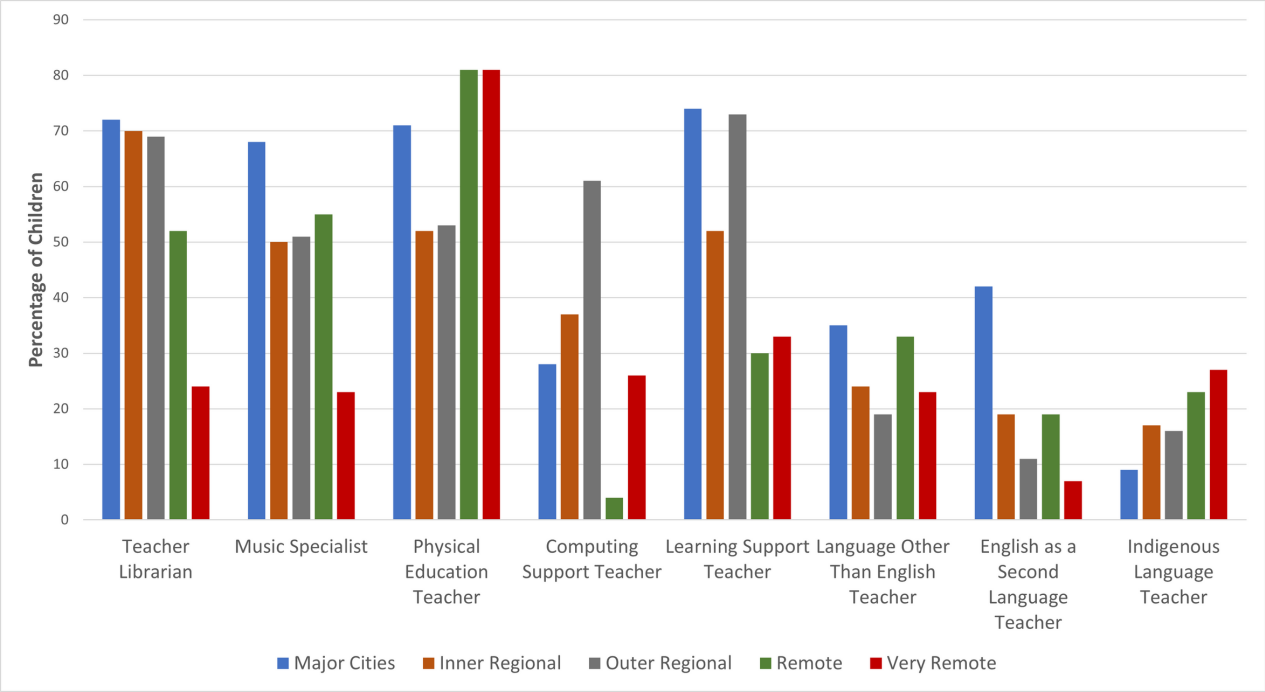
Figure 2.9 Proportion of all children in classes that have a disability or developmental delay (as reported by teachers) by remoteness area



We examined teacher reports of the extent to which their class had **access to a range of specialist teachers**. Across Preparatory to Year 6, levels of access were relatively consistent. We present Year 3 data as an example **(Figure 2.10)**, which shows **inequity of access across remoteness areas.** While LSIC children living in more remote areas have slightly higher levels of access to Indigenous language teachers (though still less than 30% have access), and similar rates of access to physical education teachers, there is a stark difference in access in relation to most other specialist teaching areas. Of note are **the low levels of access to an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher across the population, but particularly outside of major cities.** Indeed, in very remote areas, access to ESL teachers was reported for fewer than 10% of LSIC children for whom teacher data were available.

Given that parents reported that almost 40% of LSIC children in very remote areas are dominant in an Indigenous language in the early years of schooling (see **Figure 2.2**) this is highly problematic, and we discuss this further in the implications and recommendations section of this chapter. There is an concerning mismatch between LSIC children for whom English is an Additional Dialect or Language, and the availability of teachers who are specifically trained to support these learners. We also provide analyses of language programs in schools in Chapter 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Focus.

Figure 2.10 Percentage of LSIC children in Year 3 whose teachers report that their class has access to specialist teachers by remoteness



What are some of the features of children's primary years including moving schools, repeating year levels, and individualised education plans and services?

Repeating year levels

Across the primary school years, 66 children (4.5%) repeated any year level once, and 36 (2.5%) repeated a year level more than once. However, it should be noted that these data are not always easy to interpret, and it could be that parents are reporting the same information in multiple waves (that is, the child repeated Preparatory year once but when asked again in the following LSIC wave of data collection, parents provided this information again).

For children who repeated a year level only once:

- For 39% this was Preparatory year or Preschool
- For 33% this was Year 1
- For 17% this was Year 2
- Fewer than 10 children repeated Year 3 or 4

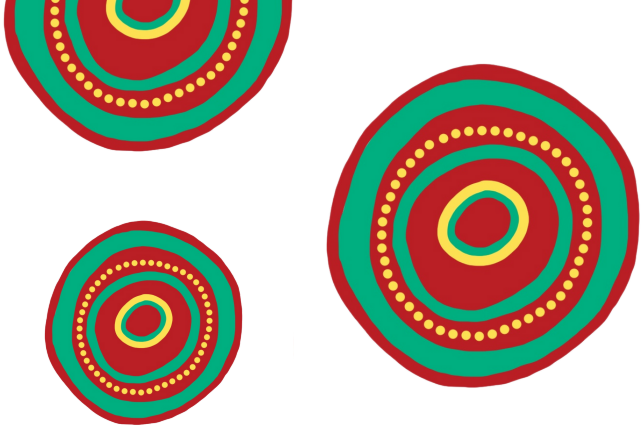
For those that provided a reason for the repeated school years, by far the most common (77%) was academic difficulties, followed by changing schools (e.g., moving interstate), health reasons, and social-emotional difficulties. For those that repeated a year level twice or more, or reported this information twice or more, the pattern of, and reasons for, repeating multiple years were similar to those provided for children who repeated a single year only.

Changing schools

At each wave of assessment, parents were asked if their child was attending the same school last year. A total of 505 LSIC children moved schools at least once during primary school (32% of the 1569 children for which data were available). Of these children, 69% moved once only, 24% moved twice, and 7% moved three times or more.

Across the year levels, the primary reason given for changing schools was moving house (on average 69% of school moves were due to this reason). The second most common reason for changing schools showed variation across the primary years. In the early years, convenience (e.g., closer to home or work) was a key reason for changing schools but by Year 4, academic reasons (e.g., better opportunities for the child) and child related concerns (e.g., child having problems with peers or teachers) were more common than convenience reasons.

This suggests that as children moved through primary school, families were making decisions about changing schools that they felt were in the interest of their child's education and wellbeing. It is important to note when reflecting on these data, that not all families will have access to school choice in their local area. Also, for the larger group who changed schools due to moving house, it may be that the change in residence was related to educational decisions for their child or related to a myriad of other reasons (which are not mutually exclusive) including parental employment, and broader family and community wellbeing and care considerations.



Individualised Education Plans

Teachers were asked whether students had an individual education plan, including a personalised learning plan, Indigenous learning plan, or any other individualised educational or learning plan. Proportions of children for whom teachers responded 'yes' to this item ranged from 25% in the early years of school to 62% in Year 6 (**Table 2.2**).

Although personalised learning plans/pathways are promoted as an effective tool for increasing Aboriginal student engagement (NSW Government, n.d.), they are not implemented consistently across Australian jurisdictions and, in some areas, alternate approaches are suggested. There is an important distinction to be made between such personalised plans based on self-determination in educational pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and other Individualised Education Plans, such as those developed to address specific disability support needs for students. It is not possible with the broad data presented in **Table 2.2** to determine the specific type(s) of learning plan LSIC children are experiencing, and this should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. In Chapter 4 we take a closer look at Personalised Learning Plans for LSIC children.

Table 2.2 Number (and percentage) of children for whom teachers report an Individualised Education Plan of any kind

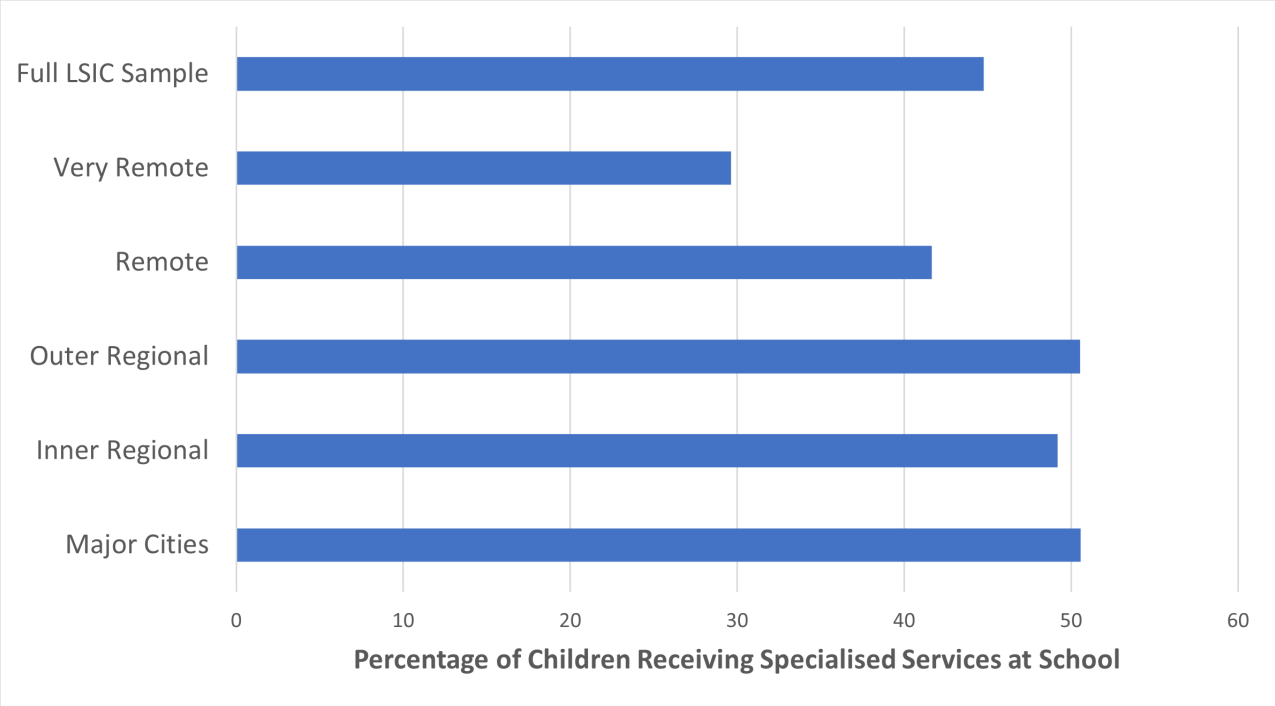
	Teachers report Individualised Education Plan - n (%) of children that have teacher-report data
Preparatory	120 (25%)
Year 1	124 (25%)
Year 2	171 (35%)
Year 3	217 (41%)
Year 4	201 (36%)
Year 5	327 (57%)
Year 6	368 (62%)

Specialised services in schools

In this section, we present data on the single item, which teachers responded to each year: “Does this study child receive specialised services in school due to disability or need” (yes / no). On average across the year levels from Preparatory to Year 6, 28% of LSIC children, for whom teacher data were available, were identified as receiving specialised services at school in any given year.

Looking at children’s participation in school-based specialised services across their primary years, 55% of LSIC children never received any specialised services, and 45% received services for one or more years of their primary school. Of these, 25% received services in one year level, 12% received services across two years, and 9% received services across four or more years of their primary schooling. Children in very remote areas were significantly less likely to have received specialised services across their primary years compared to other areas **(Figure 2.11)**.

Figure 2.11 Percentage of LSIC children receiving one or more years of specialised services at school due to disability or need (as reported by teachers) by remoteness area



Summary

This chapter has provided a range of descriptive data about LSIC children's primary school contexts and the characteristics of children, schools, classrooms, and teachers. Most data presented have been descriptive summaries, rather than analyses that address the relationships among different aspects of experiences. The following chapters of the report include more detailed analyses of a range of areas important for children's school experiences, learning and wellbeing. At the end of each chapter, a clear implications and recommendations section is provided with recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. In this chapter we conclude with a short summary and limited recommendations on what we consider the most notable presented.

In this chapter, findings documented an inequity of access for Indigenous students attending primary school in very remote areas in relation to the provision of specialised services at school. Further, there were inequities in opportunities for learning in Indigenous First languages and being supported as an English as a second language learner during the early years of school. Indigenous students have a right to education in their own language. Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people states that Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

As students in areas with the highest proportion of Indigenous language speaking students had the lowest access to teachers able to teach in these languages, and the lowest access to teachers able to provide specialist support in English language learning, there is a real risk of language loss and a lack of respect of Indigenous languages being spoken in the classroom. Target 16 of Closing the Gap - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing (Coalition of Peaks, 2020) - is a key driver that is unable to be met while students have little to no access to language teachers in these locations.

Our recommendations include:

- Urgent attention be given to equitable access to English as a Second Language teachers for children with an Indigenous language as their first language.
- Enhance access to specialised services in remote areas of Australia. This essential service may require technology-assisted and other innovative approaches.
- Conduct detailed and nuanced research seeking to understand the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disabilities during their school years.

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Chapter 3:

Teacher Cultural Competency Training and Racism in Schools

Indigenous students have the right to feel safe and respected in their school environment, and to have their educational needs, including their cultural safety needs, met by teachers. Accordingly, all Australian teachers must have sufficient pre-service training and professional development in cultural competency to prepare them to create culturally safe classrooms. Previous research, however, indicates that, though the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers require cultural competency and effective teaching strategies, pre-service cultural competency training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander initial teacher education (ITE) is limited (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012; Productivity Commission, 2016; Rogers, 2015).

Cultural Competency: for consistency with the AITSL standards for teachers, this report defines cultural competency as *"the ability to understand, communicate, and effectively and sensitively interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, communities, and staff"* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2021). We acknowledge that the teacher-reported items from LSIC, which we have used in this chapter related to teachers' professional development and their practices in the classroom, represent a limited indication of cultural competency. This should be kept in mind when interpreting results.

Teachers have a responsibility to address the racism that plagues Australian society in their teaching and learning environments, through the use of anti-racist strategies and by embedding Indigenous content throughout their classes, regardless of how many Indigenous students are in their classrooms or schools. These are the requirements of all Australian teachers, through the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) teaching standards 1.4 and 2.4, and the Australian Curriculum cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures (Rogers, 2018). Experiences of racism are associated with emotional, behavioural and conduct problems, risky behaviour, poor physical and mental health, and poorer academic performance (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010; 2017).

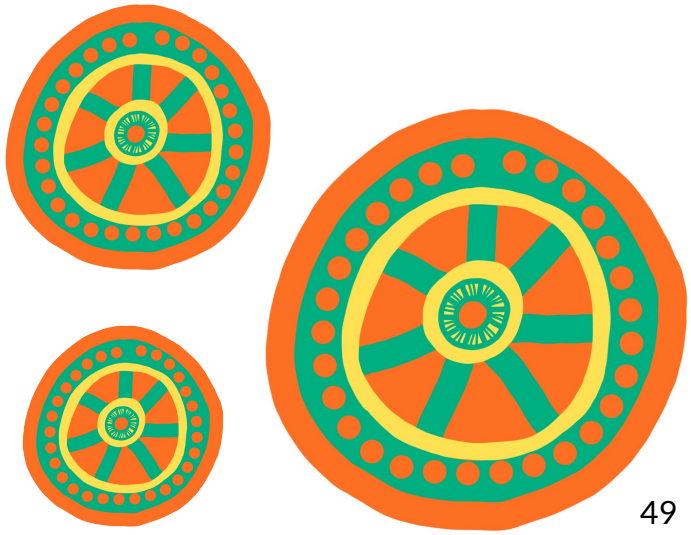
When schools and teachers do not address racism directly, students leave school carrying these messages, often internalised, into adult life, holding onto and acting on prejudices they have developed over time (Heaton, 2019).

Prior LSIC research has explored the prevalence of racist experiences for primary carers and children, and the associated health impacts. Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) explored parent/carer responses to questions in the LSIC study regarding racial discrimination (Waves 4 and 5 of LSIC) and their impact on adults and children in the family (Wave 6), thus investigating vicarious and transgenerational impacts of racism. Almost half (49%) of primary carers reported that they or their child had experienced some form of racism. Primary Carers were more likely to report their own experience of racism in areas of least isolation, while parents reported greater likelihood of study children experiencing racism in more remote communities. At any level of experience, racism experiences were associated with lower levels of global health and increased levels of worry, anger, and depression for the primary carer. Another LSIC study (Macedo et al., 2019) found that exposure to racism in Wave 6 and/or 7 (children aged 6.5 to 10 years) was a significant predictor of clinically significant mental health symptomology at Wave 8 (7.5 to 12 years), as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) total difficulties score and all four SDQ subdomains (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems). Exposure to racism (according to parent report) at ages 4-11 years has also been linked, in the LSIC study, with a substantially increased risk of negative mental health, behaviour issues at school, sleep difficulties, obesity, and trying cigarettes at 7 to 11 years (Cave et al., 2019).

These findings show the negative effect racism has on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people, and as such, racism must be addressed within schools to ensure the wellbeing of Indigenous students.

In this chapter, to identify areas for policy and practice improvements, we explore the cultural competency training of teachers who provided data as part of LSIC. We determine the prevalence of racism experienced by Indigenous students and families within the school environment and link these longitudinally with learning outcomes. We also analyse qualitative data provided by teachers to understand their approaches to addressing racism in their classroom. Specifically, we aim to determine:

- What cultural competency training and experiences do teachers of LSIC children have?
- What additional training do teachers feel they would benefit from?
- What are parents' and students' experiences of racism at school?
- Which outcomes are associated with early experiences of racism at school?
- How are teachers addressing/viewing racism in their classroom and school?



What are our key findings?

- Representation of Indigenous teachers in the LSIC dataset is higher than national levels and is highest in preschool (13%) and lowest in Year 3 (4%).
- Over half of the children in the LSIC sample, for whom we have teacher data, are being taught by teachers with insufficient cultural competency training.
- Most teachers (84%) report that they would benefit from additional cultural competency training.
- More than one in five parents (22%) report experiencing racism themselves at their child's primary school.
- Almost a quarter of parents (24%) report that their child has experienced racist bullying during their primary years.
- A higher proportion of Indigenous children at a school appears to provide some protection from racist bullying.
- Across all geographic regions, primary students experience racist bullying at school, but this is more prevalent in major cities and less prevalent in more remote areas.
- Children who did not report early (Preparatory to Year 2) experiences of racist-based bullying demonstrated better social-emotional and academic outcomes in their middle (Years 3 and 4) and later (Years 5 and 6) primary school years, and parents perceived them as managing school better, compared to children who had experienced racist bullying.
- Teachers rely heavily on school policies to address racist bullying.
- There is a sense in the teacher data of a prevailing 'colour blindness' and that 'multiculturalism is the answer to racism'.

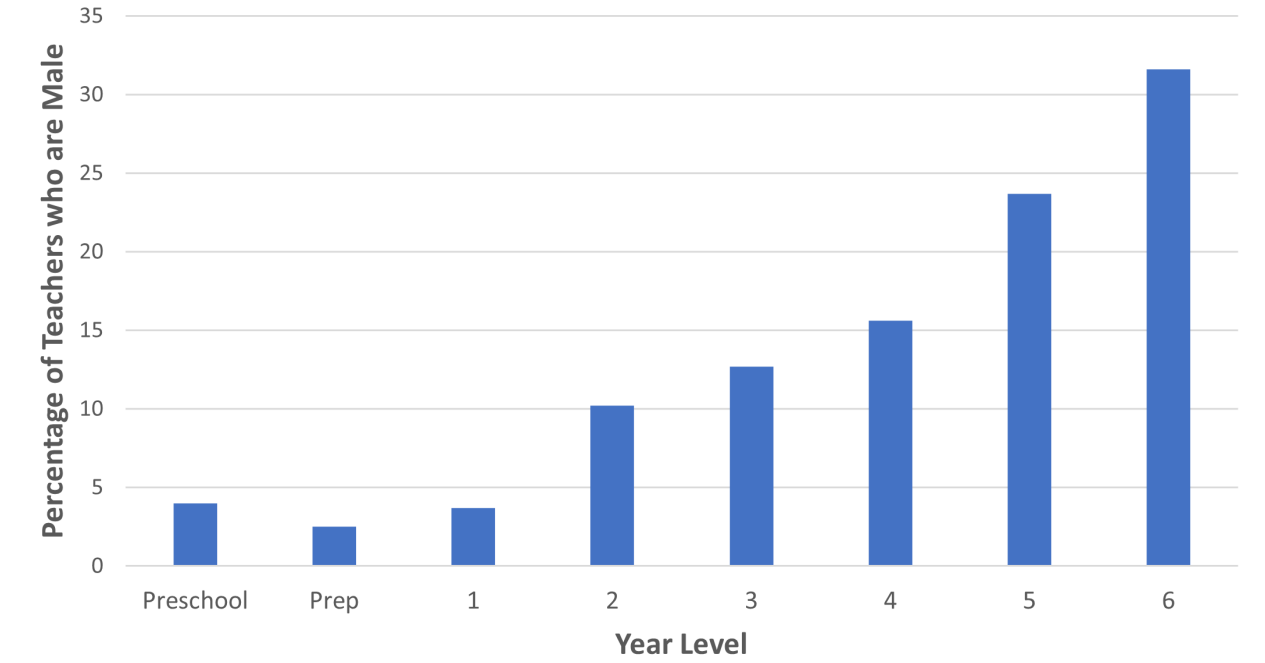
What needs to be done?

- Addressing racist bullying within ALL primary schools is critical and, in particular, in schools where there is lower representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- School policies must be explicit and informative in terms of responses to racist bullying.
- Extensive resourcing and careful design and implementation of both pre-service and in-service cultural competence training for teachers is required, including addressing 'colour blindness'.

Characteristics of primary school teachers in the LSIC dataset

Given the importance of teacher impact on Indigenous student outcomes, we were keen to understand the characteristics of LSIC children's teachers. Teacher data were available for 30% to 50% of LSIC children, depending on their year level of schooling. Of those teachers who responded, most were female, with increasing numbers of male teachers represented as the year levels progressed to Year 6 (see **Figure 3.1**).

Figure 3.1 Percentage of male teachers represented in the LSIC data across the primary years



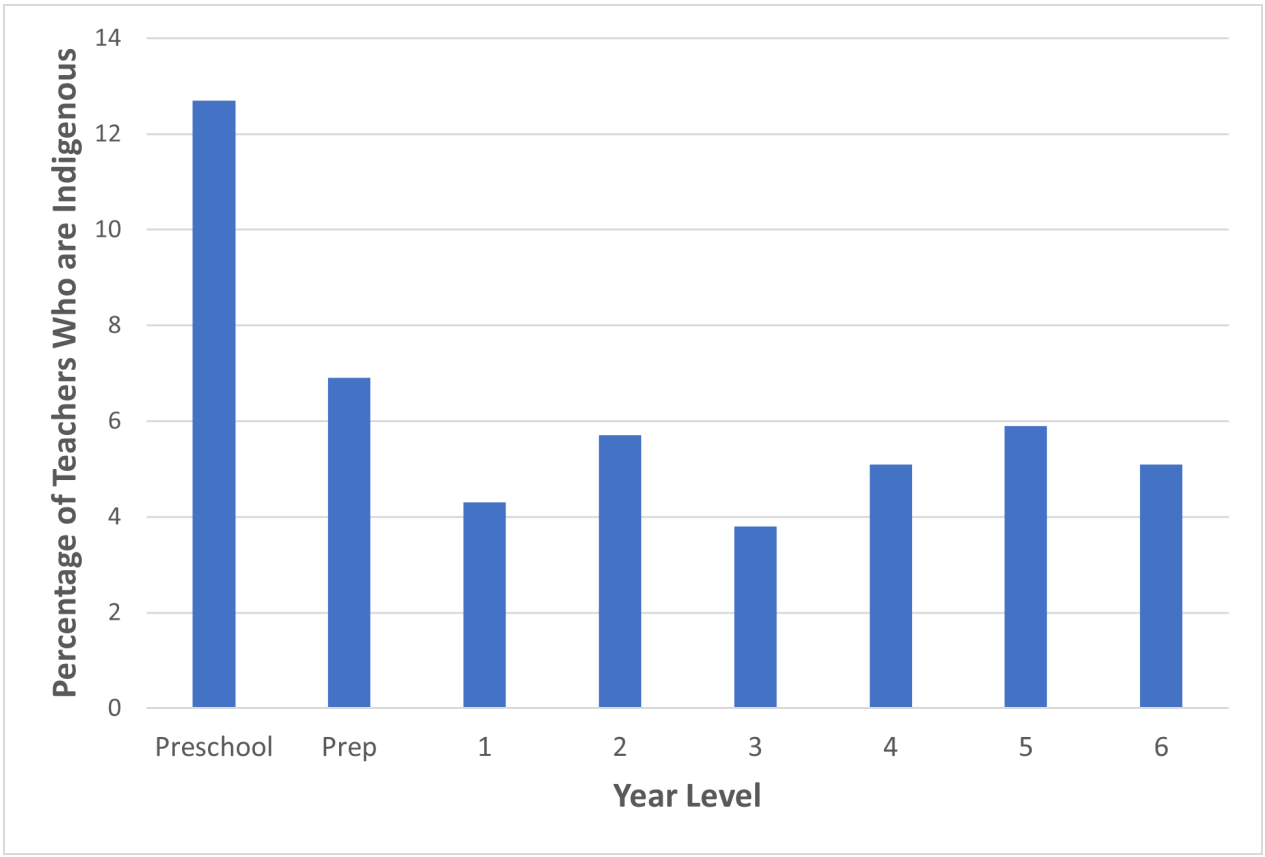
- Across Preschool to Year 6, 71% of teachers held a Bachelor degree and 26% held a postgraduate degree.

- Months of teaching experience ranged from two to 582 months (48 years). On average, teachers across Year 1 to Year 6 had 152 months (13 years) of experience each.

The proportion of teachers who responded and identified as Indigenous was highest in the year prior to school (when just over 12% of responding teachers identified as Indigenous), and lowest in Year 3 (when under 4% identified as Indigenous; **Figure 3.2**). We note that this is a higher representation of Indigenous teachers than would be expected across Australia (2% in 2016; AITSL, 2021) and likely reflects both the sampling nature of the LSIC study, which was restricted to particular geographic locations, and also the willingness of Indigenous teachers to complete data for the LSIC study (on average, fewer than half of LSIC children's teachers in any primary year level participated in data collection, and we suggest that Indigenous teachers may have been more likely to invest in the study and provide data).

Across Preschool to year 6, there were **10% of teachers who reported speaking, reading, or writing any Indigenous language**.

Figure 3.2 Percentage of Indigenous teachers represented in the LSIC data across the primary years



What cultural competency training and experiences do teachers of LSIC children have?

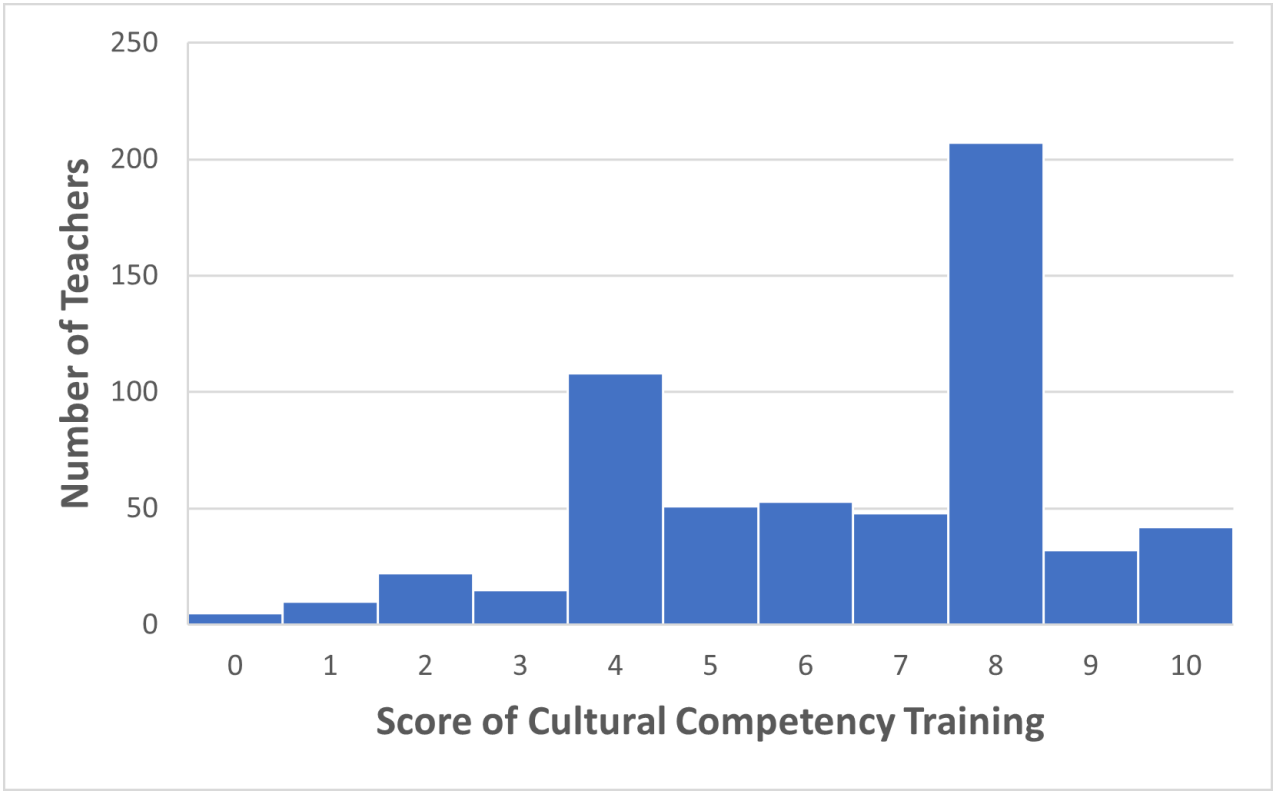
From all teacher data available in LSIC from Year 1 to Year 6, on average, children's primary school teachers had 108 months (approximately, 9 years) of experience as a teacher of Indigenous children, although this ranged from zero to 516 months (approximately, 43 years), with a positively skewed distribution in which the majority of teachers were at the lower end of this range (median = 69 months [approximately, 6 years]). Teachers were also asked about cultural competency training across five measures, revealing the following findings (averaged across teachers of Year 2 to Year 6):

- ***General cultural awareness*:** 73% of children's teachers reported receiving *professional training* (undergraduate studies, in-service training, or post-graduate studies), 25% reported learning *on the job* only, and 2% reported receiving *no training* at all.
- ***Indigenous cultural awareness*:** 65% of teachers reported receiving *professional training*, 30% reported learning *on the job* only, and 5% reported receiving *no training* at all.
- ***How to teach Indigenous knowledge*:** 52% of teachers had received *professional training*, 26% reported learning *on the job* only, and 22% reported receiving *no training* at all.
- ***How to teach Indigenous children*:** 59% of teachers reported receiving *professional training*, 32% reported learning *on the job*, and 8% reported receiving *no training* at all.
- ***Learned one or more Indigenous language*:** only 8% of teachers reported *professional training* and 13% reported learning *on the job* only, meaning 79% reported receiving *no training* at all.

When given a composite score of their level of training across the above five measures of cultural competencies (ranging from 0 being *no training*, to 10 being *professional training* across all five domains: see Technical Appendix), the picture is consistent across year levels. As a snapshot, teacher report data, from our Year 6 dataset, only are shown below in **Figure 3.3** (with most data available here, *n*=594).

These findings suggest that 47% of teachers had received professional training across at least four of the cultural competency training measures (receiving a score >8). Therefore, over half (53%) of Year 6 LSIC children (who have available teacher report data) were being taught by teachers who did not have sufficient professional cultural competency training and were instead learning *on the job* or were *not receiving any training* at all. Notably, this analysis reports teachers' responses per student, not per teacher. Nonetheless, these findings may overestimate the cultural competency training experiences of Australian teachers, with this data representing only those who were willing to participate in the LSIC data collection.

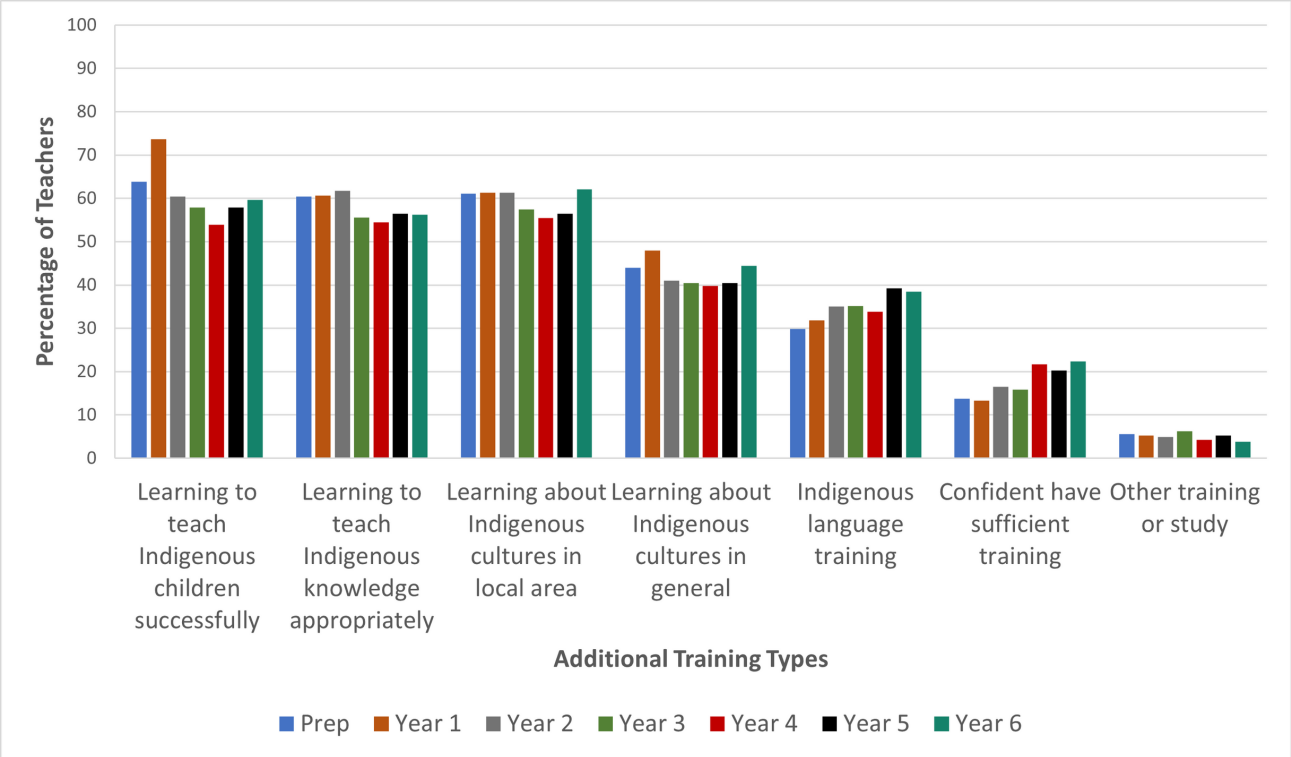
Figure 3.3. Composite cultural competency training scores of students' Year 6 teachers (range from 0 to 10)



What additional training do teachers feel they would benefit from?

Teachers were asked to report on what additional training they may benefit from, and we again looked at responses averaged across Preparatory to Year 6 teachers. Primary school teachers most frequently reported that they would benefit from *learning to teach Indigenous children successfully* (61%), followed by *learning about Indigenous culture in the local area* (59%), and then *learning to teach Indigenous knowledge appropriately* (58%). Approximately 18% of teachers were *confident that they had sufficient training* (**Figure 3.4**).

Figure 3.4 Proportion of teachers reporting that they would benefit from additional training and/or learning, by type



Overall, an average of 84% of teachers across Preparatory to Year 6 (ranging from 80% to 88%) reported that they feel they would benefit from some form of additional training. These findings indicate that a very large portion of teachers (larger than those without professional training) feel that they could benefit from additional training.

Teachers who reported being "c*onfident that they have sufficient training*" had significantly higher months of experience teaching Indigenous children (*Mean* = 158 months [13 years]) than those who did not (*Mean* = 97 months [8 years]). This indicates that only with many years of experience do teachers feel confident in their capacities.

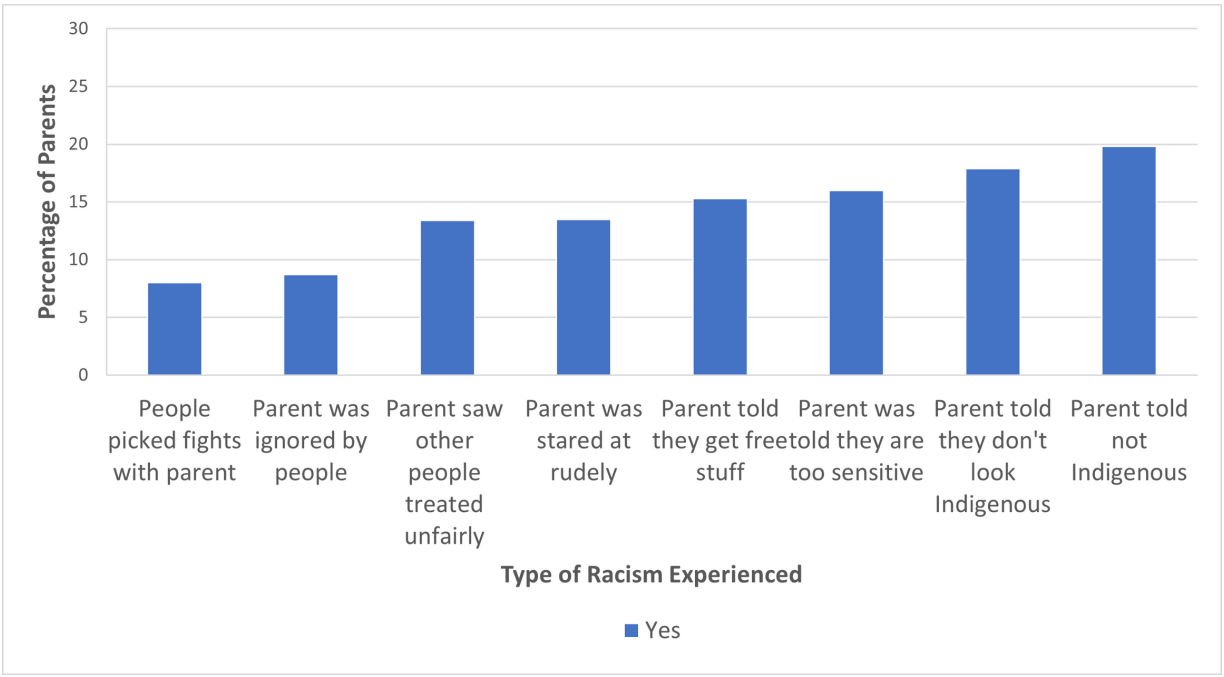
When looking at teachers' scores of professional cultural competency training alongside desires for additional training, these scores were not correlated. That is, even teachers who reported receiving professional cultural competency training still felt that there is more to learn.

These findings have clear implications for the structuring of pre-service teaching education and for continued professional development across all career stages, to improve the cultural competence of current and future teachers and to provide them with the resources and knowledge needed to teach Indigenous children effectively.

What were parents' and students' experiences of racism at school?

To explore the prevalence of parents' experiences of racism at their child's school, we used data from Wave 10 (mean B cohort age 10 years, ranging from 8 to 11 years; mean K cohort age 13 years, ranging from 11 to 14 years) as a snapshot. When asked to report the location of experiences of racism or discrimination, 22% of parents reported that they personally experienced and/or witnessed discrimination at their child's school. Parents were able to elaborate on the type of experience (see **Figure 3.5**). Parents most frequently reported *being told they are not Indigenous* (20%), *being told they don't look Indigenous* (18%), and *being told they are too sensitive* (16%).

Figure 3.5 Parent/carers experiences of racism/discrimination at their child's school



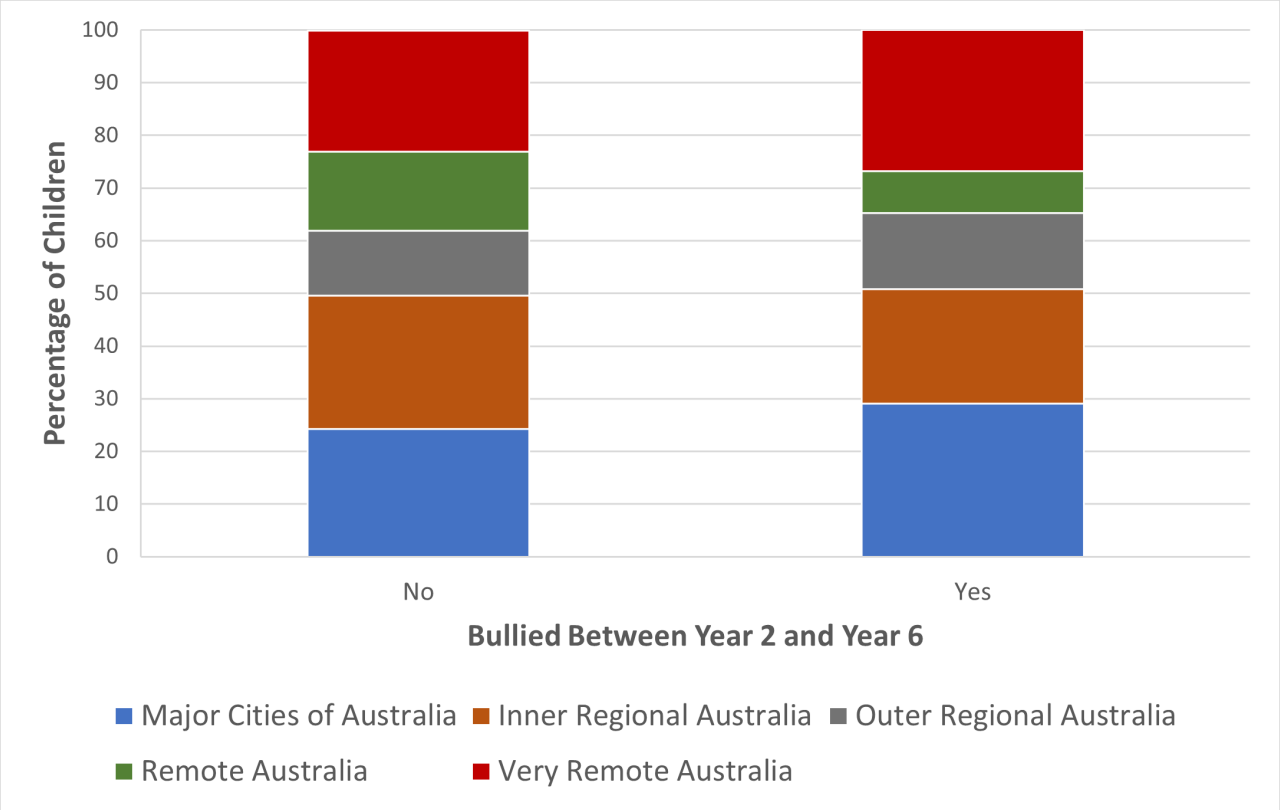
Across the primary school years, parents were also asked to report whether their child was bullied or treated unfairly at school because of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity, with an average at each year level of 7.4% of parents reporting Yes. Findings indicate that racist experiences are not substantially more prevalent at any particular stage of primary school. Overall, 24% of parents reported that their child had experienced racism at least once during their primary school years (see Technical Appendix).

Of students whose parents reported racist bullying across the primary school years, 74% (289 children) reported bullying at one year level, 21% (81) at two school year levels, and 5% (21) at 3 or more school year levels. Notably, we acknowledge the limitations of relying on parent-report for students' experiences and suspect the prevalence of bullying is underestimated in this sample.

In the later years of primary school (Years 5 and 6), students whose parents reported any experience of bullying (because of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity) were attending schools with a significantly lower proportion of Indigenous enrolments (enrolment percentage of 24%), than children who did not report bullying (enrolment percentage of 40%). Accordingly, a higher proportion of Indigenous enrolments appears to be a protective factor against the bullying of Indigenous students, possibly due to a more inclusive culture and environment than schools with a lower proportion of Indigenous students.

In **Figure 3.6**, Yes represents students with any experience of racist bullying at any time during the primary years (experienced by 24% of students). Remoteness, using the *Australian Statistics Geographical Standard* rating (ABS, 2006), was collected from Wave 1 (2008) and Wave 2 (2009). When remoteness was explored according to experiences of racism, significant proportionate differences were found, whereby bullying was least likely to occur in Remote Australia and most likely to occur in Major Cities. However, the overall pattern reveals that bullying experiences are distributed across all regions in Australia, indicating that racism experiences are not solely a function of region and should, therefore, be addressed universally.

Figure 3.6 Parent-report of child bullied because of being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander according to remoteness



Which outcomes are associated with early experiences of racism at school?

Using data from Preparatory year, Year 1, and Year 2, students were grouped into those whose parents reported any experience of bullying because of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity across these years (*bullied children* = 210) and those whose parents said they had not experienced racism (*not bullied* = 1,231). The longitudinal nature of the LSIC study affords exploration of later functioning for these children differentiated on their early experiences of racism. We explored the following outcomes:

- ***Peer relationship problems*:** Using the *Strengths and Difficulties* parent-report peer relationships problem scale, children were assigned scores for their middle years (averaged across Years 3 and 4) and their senior years (averaged across Years 5 and 6). Children who had not experienced racist-based bullying had significantly lower scores (indicating fewer peer relationship problems) in their middle (*Mean* = 2.09) and senior primary school (*Mean* = 2.11) years than children who had experienced racist bullying in their early primary school years (Preparatory to Year 2) (*Means* = 2.62 and 2.84, respectively).

- ***School managing*:** Using the *School Managing* parent-report scale, children were again given a score for their middle primary school years and their senior years. Children who had not experienced racist bullying in their early years had significantly higher school managing scores in the middle (*Mean* = 4.12) and senior years (*Mean* = 4.10) than children who had (*Means* = 3.95 and 3.80, respectively).

- ***Literacy and Numeracy attainment (NAPLAN standard scores)*:** children who had not experienced early racist bullying had significantly higher Year 5 numeracy scores (*Mean* = 426.60) than children who had (*Mean* = 414.12). NAPLAN reading scores at Years 3 and 5, and Year 3 numeracy scores, were not significantly different between groups.

Overall, these findings indicate that safe and supportive environments free of racism in the early years of development provide children with a better setting for social-emotional development, coping with the demands of school, and academic achievement.

How are teachers viewing and addressing racism in the classroom and school?

In Wave 7 of LSIC data collection, teachers were asked how they deal with racism, discrimination, or prejudice in their classroom. We use data provided from 467 teachers across both cohorts (B cohort children aged 5-8 years; K cohort children aged 8-11 years). This question seemed to be interpreted by participants in two different ways – how they r*espond* to racism, or how they attempt to *pre-empt* or *avoid* racism.

Table 3.1 organises teachers' responses by those that are i*nternal* to the classroom, and responses that are *external* to the classroom. While not a strict distinction, the first category refers to strategies teachers may use to respond independently, and the second category refers to responses that enlist support and resources that are external to their classroom. Overall, the three most common responses were to:

1. Discuss the incident directly with affected students.
2. Address the issue with reference to the school policy or rules.
3. Consistently discuss and promote cultural awareness, inclusion, and respect.

In addition, a 'zero tolerance' approach was frequently mentioned.

A total of 75 teachers commented that they would respond with reference to the school's policy or rules, including the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support framework and the Positive Behaviour for Learning framework. Given that there seems to be a reliance on these policies to support teachers' response to incidents, there is a need to ensure that relevant policies are appropriate and well-understood by teachers.

There was a notable contradiction in how some participants wrote about sameness and difference. Many teachers comment that their schools routinely celebrate difference and diversity in their communities. Many comments also emphasise that they 'treat everyone the same'. For example, here's one indicative quote: "*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.*"

Additionally, 105 teachers commented that racism was rarely or never an issue in their context, which is at odds with the data provided by parents. Some suggested that this was because their schools were very diverse (as in, we have students from a lot of different backgrounds here, so racism doesn't happen). There is a very real concern that teachers, while thinking they are addressing racism by 'treating everyone the same' are simply projecting their dominant views and norms onto Indigenous students. Hogarth (2020) states that teachers who claim 'colour-blindness' can excuse themselves with a rhetoric of equality, while dismissing students' racial identities and in turn, maintaining racial inequalities and inequities. Culturally responsive teachers counter such ideas by centring student identity in their classrooms, acknowledging and valuing each student's cultural difference (Hogarth, 2020).

Table 3.1 Teachers reports of how they deal with racism, discrimination or prejudice in their classrooms

Responses that are internal to the classroom	Responses that are external to the classroom
• Discuss incident directly with affected students • Consistently discuss and promote cultural awareness, inclusion and respect • Celebrate diversity and difference • Educate students about racism and implications for behaviour • Incident forms the basis of class discussion • Leverage opportunities to address racism through curriculum and teaching, including through stories and literature • Set/reiterate teacher's expectations for behaviour • Emphasise sameness and equality – that everyone should be treated the same way • Explicitly teach appropriate behaviour, language, social, interpersonal skills • Discuss using previous incidents as examples • Restorative justice • Circle time • Formally record the incident	• Address with reference to the school policy or rules • Discuss incident with affected families • Refer to school executive/leadership • Address through school-level programs aimed at values, character and behaviour • Refer to ARCO [Anti-Racism Contact Officer] or similar • Address with reference to religious beliefs • Seek support from Aboriginal staff • Seek support from school counsellor

Teachers responses to how they deal with racism, discrimination or prejudice in their classrooms

Celebrate Difference

"Circle Time discussions on what is important to us and why. Prevention of racism/prejudice by including a wide range of multicultural views in learning activities."

"Discussions activities to promote respect for others and self. Value individual differences in children, discussions and activities which allow children to spend time with others so they may know them better"

"We educate the students from the start that difference is what makes us all special."

"I build a strong feeling of a community in my classroom from day 1. I encourage students to be proud of their race and promote that we are all different in some way or another, just like we all need different things to learn"

"Teach diversity only happened once and was from an Aboriginal child to a white child. Used two different coloured eggs to show we are the same inside, powerful moment in the classroom. Did this with an Aboriginal teacher."

"I don't tolerate it. I explain all people are different and that it is a good thing"

Emphasise equality and sameness with students

We treat ALL students the same. Culturally our students don t know they are different/same; 5 out of 6 are Aboriginal students

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.

We have had discussions on how we can look different but still are the same

Zero tolerance. we are all the same and treat each other with respect.

Talk to the kids about it that we all look different but are the same inside. I have many different cultures in my class.

Teach my children to acknowledge that everyone is different, but we are all equal.

Multiculturalism is the answer

"I am lucky enough not to have been faced with this issue"

"Our school population is made up of many different cultures and we often celebrate multicultural so student differences are embraced not discriminated against. I've had no racist, discriminatory or prejudice issues to deal with for the last 3 years"

"Don't feel like it occurs in the classroom, but we have had discussions on how we can look different but still are the same"

"Being a culturally diverse school, these issues are not really present"

"As a multicultural school this is not an issue"

Implications and recommendations

Policy and practice

- One of the key findings in this chapter indicates that a quarter of LSIC children are affected by bullying due to their cultural identity. This is unacceptable and must be addressed by the Australian education system, at all levels, by actions in classrooms through to policymaking. We suggest that greater focus on the intersection between racism and bullying prevention be considered, including that mainstream anti-bullying programs might not be sufficient for addressing racism-based bullying that affects Indigenous children (e.g., Coffin et al., 2010).
- As teachers rely heavily on school-based policies and procedures to address racism, these must be explicit and meaningful in addressing race-based bullying and racism. This policy development should be used as an opportunity to engage with the school community to ensure policy is informed and reflects local needs.
- The LSIC data present very real concerns that teachers, while thinking that they are addressing racism by 'treating everyone the same', are simply projecting their dominant views and norms onto Indigenous students. Hogarth (2020) states that teachers who claim colour-blindness can excuse themselves with a rhetoric of equality, while dismissing students' racial identities. In turn, such teachers maintain racial inequalities and inequities. Culturally responsive teaching practices should be upheld in initial teacher education and professional development to counter colour blindness, and instead centre student identity in classrooms, acknowledging and valuing each student's cultural difference (Hogarth, 2020).

- The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers require that teachers demonstrate respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and engage in effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the cultural setting (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). AITSL teaching standards 1.4 and 2.4 address Indigenous students, and reconciliation, and are required knowledge for all teachers in Australia (Rogers, 2015). These are areas that need expansion, and the standards may need to be updated to fully address racism in Australian classrooms.
- Pre-service teacher preparation is known to be lacking in preparing teachers for the practicalities of supporting Indigenous students (Price, 2019; Productivity Commission, 2016; Rogers, 2015), and this appears to be reflected in the large portion of teachers in the LSIC study who have not had professional training in cultural competence, cultural awareness, and in teaching Indigenous knowledge. A large majority of teachers report wanting additional cultural competency training, indicating a need for additional pre-service and professional development training initiatives. Enhanced development of teachers' cultural competency skills aligns with the implementation plan for Closing the Gap, specifically Target 5 which seeks to "enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competency in the Australian teacher workforce" (Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

Future research directions

- It is important that future research focus on children's reports of their experiences of racism, available from when LSIC children reach approximately 14 years of age (K cohort Wave 10), including where it occurs and the ways in which it occurs. Self-reports of racism and racist bullying may better reflect student's own perceptions of racism and bullying than parent-reports.
- We note that current LSIC bullying questions (parent-report for child) might miss instances of microaggressions. It is recommended that future research explore the nuances of these experiences. Further, determining the frequency and/or severity of these experiences would increase the sensitivity of analyses for determining the impact of racism on students' outcomes.
- Future LSIC research may also seek to further explore the long-term impacts of primary school experiences of racism on students' outcomes, connectedness, and functioning as they transition to high school. Such research may provide insight into the optimal timing for interventions and supports, including of different types.
- Beyond determining the approach of schools and teachers to addressing racism, determining the success of these efforts would also be beneficial to informing intervention strategies and guiding policy and practice. Any policy or practice implemented to address racism should be accompanied with a thorough, rigorous, and longitudinal evaluation of its implementation and impacts.

Cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce

In response to the national need for greater teacher cultural competency in relation to teaching both Indigenous students, and Indigenous content, AITSL progressed a national dialogue on cultural competency. Guided by the AITSL Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, AITSL released a progress report in April 2021 outlining the preliminary findings. It states that Australian education systems were never designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and that the legacy of colonisation has undermined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' access to their cultures, identities, histories, and languages. "As a result, they have largely not had access to a complete, relevant, and responsive education. Australia's education system must respectfully embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities" (AITSL 2021, p. 4). AITSL determine that a culturally competent Australian education system would have the following markers:

- systems and teachers promote reconciliation
- systems and teachers actively and respectfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, parents, and students
- systems and teachers know their students and actively value their students' cultural backgrounds
- systems and teachers reject racial inequalities
- systems and teachers acknowledge change occurs through cultural understanding
- systems and teachers know critical self-reflection is necessary (2021, p. 13-15).

The AITSL progress report also determines the following as core to transforming Australian education systems toward being culturally competent:

- Strengths-based approach – teaching to and through students' strengths.
- Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, school leaders and ancillary staff.
- Importance of building cultural competence in *all* classrooms.
- Implementation of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum in all schools.
- Greater development of cultural competency within Initial Teacher Education.
- Teachers and school leaders to have a deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, including an understanding that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or cultures are the same.
- Cultural competency is supported by strong and committed school leadership, and the culture of schools is very much situated within the remit of school leaders.
- Genuine relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Educators feel they lack access to quality, authentic and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources and/or, where resources are available, feel they often struggle to discern which are culturally appropriate, legitimate and sensitive.
- Schools must invest in appropriate funding to support evidence-based professional learning for all teaching staff. Anti-racism, cultural awareness and racial tolerance were identified as essential topics for professional learning for the Australian teaching workforce.

Cultural competency, from this understanding, covers Indigenous aspects of the curriculum, pedagogy/teaching practice, as well as the relational aspects of education (building relationships with communities, families and students). It covers the intention and reflection of teachers. It addresses the practicalities of creating culturally competent schools and systems (leadership, teaching workforce, resources and ideological frameworks).

When LSIC data are viewed through this lens, there are several key challenges facing LSIC families, where teachers still do not see that cultural competency requires a move from colour-blindness ("I see everyone the same, I treat all students equally") and passive support ("my door is always open") to *active* engagement in relationship building with local communities and Indigenous students, and professional development to account for lack of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, and histories.

We call for greater investment in school leadership development that supports cultural competency and culturally responsive education, at a systemic level.

"All staff should take ownership of developing their cultural competency; this should be ingrained into the operating model of every Australian school and be holistically and sustainably shared by school leadership, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff. School improvement plans should have cultural competency at their core and include practical ways to implement this on a day-to-day basis." (AITSL 2021, p. 23)

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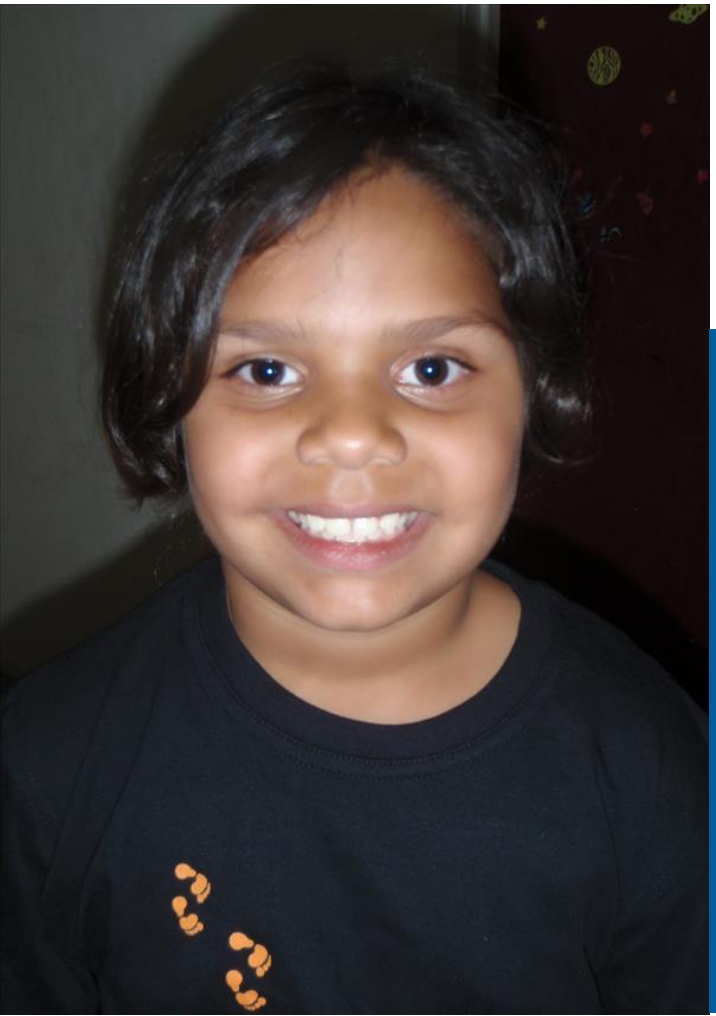
Chapter 4:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Focus

Schools have an important responsibility to be “ready” for Indigenous students, in terms of meeting both their needs and aspirations (Dockett et al., 2010). Unfortunately, many schools are not prepared for Indigenous students. Anderson et al. (2022) found, in their review, that schools demonstrate a lack of readiness in terms of Indigenous teacher employment, teacher development and training, curriculum readiness, and school culture and climate. Lowe et al. (2021) found that access to school programs that facilitate the immersion of local language and culture are related to improved student engagement and sense of “being”. A positive school climate and a culturally relevant curriculum establishes a strong base for learning and engagement and can improve self-identity and attachment to school (Ockenden, 2014; Rahman, 2013) and these are essential preconditions for Indigenous students in any Australian school. Indeed, LSIC children attending schools implementing the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures have higher average literacy skills compared to peers in school not implementing this priority (Skelton, 2016).



Note: Primary school teachers of LSIC Study Children are asked about a range of activities both at their classroom level and at the school level. In the future, LSIC will be requesting school-level information from primary school Principals. However, in this report we rely on teacher reports to understand the nature of activities at the school level. That is, when teachers are asked “does this school have a Reconciliation Action Plan” we treat this as school level information, although reported by a single teacher.

Martin's (2017) work on LSIC data determined that the aspects of Indigenous culture that parents believed would help Indigenous children to grow up strong were family, culture, personal traits, identity, heritage, relationships, history, and land/country. These aspects of education are core to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and are essential to framing our understandings of how a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education can assist Indigenous young people to grow up strong and healthy in Australian schools.

This chapter seeks to explore how the key aspects of culture are being included in schools that Indigenous young people attend, where the schools that are most likely to include these aspects in education for all students are located, and what is working well in delivering these concepts through schools. Specifically, we are interested in:

- What elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are primary schools delivering to students?
- What are schools doing effectively for Indigenous students and what could be done better?
- Deserts and Oases: What trends underpin a school's commitment to a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Initiatives: Within this report, we refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives as activities that schools engage in to incorporate Indigenous knowledges, practices, and cultures into education. For example, these initiatives include having Elders visit the school, recognising days of significance, and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. The initiatives analysed within this report are not an exhaustive list of all the practices in which schools can engage, but reflect key initiatives that should be universally delivered in all Australian schools.

What are our key findings?

- Many schools celebrate Indigenous days of significance and are perceived by parents as knowing their Indigenous students well.
- Far fewer schools teach about Indigenous culture or have Elders visit and teach.
- Over a quarter of LSIC students do not have Personalised Learning Plans (as reported by their parents).
- Two in five (38%) teachers reported that their school did not have a Reconciliation Action Plan.
- Approximately half of LSIC parents report no or little representation of Indigenous staff at their child's school.
- More than half of LSIC children do not have access to an Indigenous language program.
- Most LSIC parents desire for their child to have access to an Indigenous language program at school.
- Delivery of many aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are stronger in schools where there are higher proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, reflecting a problematic proportionate-dose approach.
- One in four parents report that their child's school is not supporting Indigenous children well.
- Hundreds of LSIC children are attending schools we term 'deserts' in terms of their distinct lack of implementation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with these children at greater risk of racism.

What needs to be done?

- The inequitable proportionate-dosage approach to cultural awareness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education delivery noted across this and the prior chapter, when schools with higher proportions of Indigenous students engage significantly more in these activities than in other schools, must be addressed.
- The overall lack of provision of Indigenous language programs is of significant concern and a strategic plan to address this should be a top priority.
- A national approach to Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is required, which should be informed by a critical evaluation of current PLP implementation processes and effectiveness, drawing on the voices and educational goals of Indigenous communities.
- Addressing the Indigenous education workforce is a priority, including Indigenous teachers and Education Workers, their professional experiences, and developing a research-informed workforce strategy.

Which elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education are primary schools delivering to students?

In this section, we seek to evaluate the extent to which primary schools in the LSIC dataset are meeting the needs of students with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, staff and representation, language programs, cross-curriculum delivery and classroom activities, and teacher engagement with the community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Services

Across the early (Years 1 and 2) and mid-to-late years (Years 4 and 5) of primary school, parents were asked to report on the extent to which their child's school delivers important and culturally necessary services to students. Parents reported for each items whether their school engaged in this practice on a scale ranging from 'never' to 'all of the time'. Teachers were also asked similar questions to parents. However, with limited teacher data, we elect to report the parent-report versions of these survey items. It should be noted that there was consistency between both teacher and parent reports to affirm the relevance of parent report.

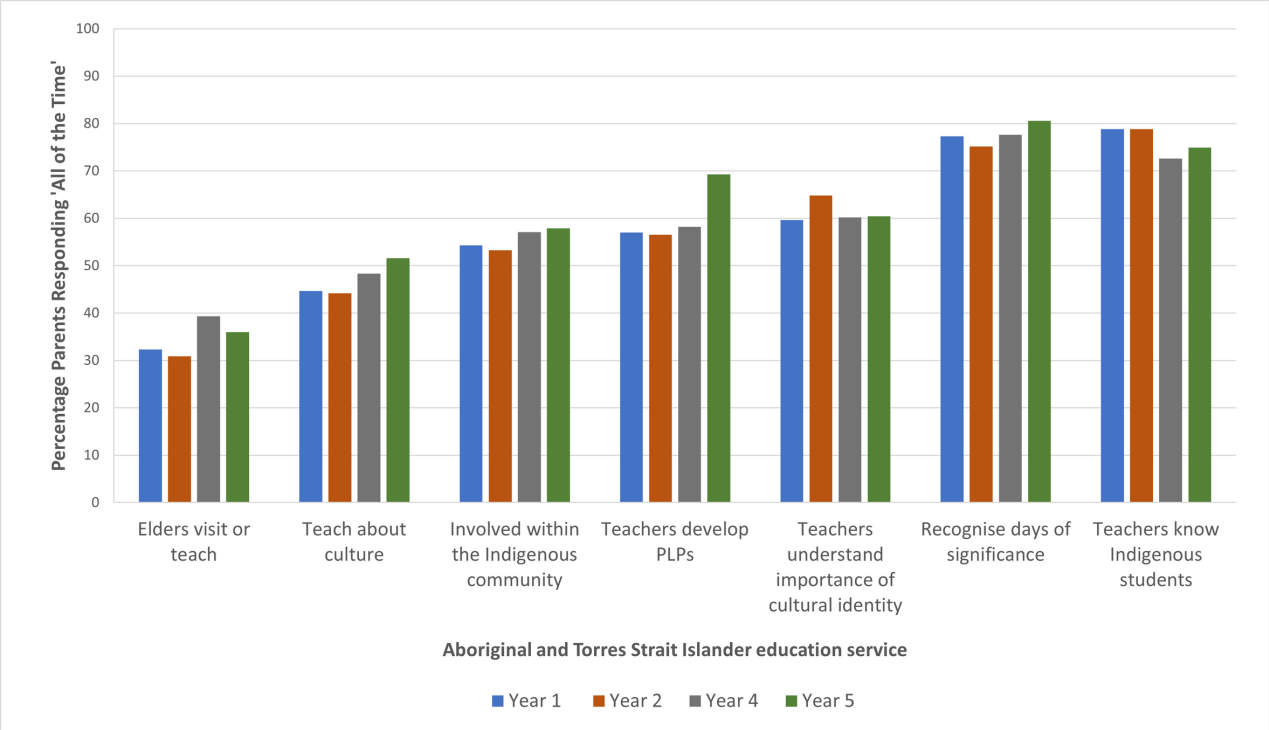
According to parents, a high proportion of schools within the study (**Figure 4.1**):

- ***Recognise days of significance:*** an average of 78% of parents report *All of the time*.
- Have ***teachers who know their Indigenous students:*** an average of 76% of parents report *All of the time*.
- Have ***teachers who understand the importance of cultural identity***: an average of 61% of parents report *All of the time*.

Comparatively, fewer parents reported that their child's school (**Figure 4.1**):

- Has ***Elders visit or teach***: an average of 35% of parents report *All of the time*, whereas an average of 20% report *Never*.
- ***Teach about Indigenous culture***: an average of 47% of parents report *All of the time*, whereas an average of 19% report *Never*.

Figure 4.1 Average proportion of parents who report All of the time to school-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education services



Although many schools are delivering these services, the proportion of parents reporting *Never* or not reporting *All of the time* is concerning and indicates a gap in the commitment of schools to delivering these important services to students. Approximately a quarter (27%) of parents reported that their child's school *Never* developed **Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs)**, which are mandated for Indigenous students in multiple Australian states. The PLP process is predominantly designed to involve the community and families in school assessment and learning practices (Klenowski, 2016). PLPs are noted by NSW Department of Education (n.d) to have "the potential to support improved learning outcomes and educational aspirations when they are developed in genuine partnership with Aboriginal students, their parents or carers and teachers."

These plans are an "active" process, constantly monitored in partnership between families and schools. It should be noted that, within the LSIC data, we cannot ascertain the state in which children are attending school and, therefore, which state-based policy regarding PLPs is relevant. It is also acknowledged that, in practice, the PLP process is not always engaged with and implemented in line with the intentions of policy.

There is also current debate about the extent to which PLPs are an appropriate tool to address the educational needs of Indigenous students. Many teachers are unfamiliar or have little experience in crafting PLPs that involve students, their families, and communities in the creation of strengths-based learning plans for regular use, or that can guide and assist in ensuring student learning goals also include families and parents as key stakeholders and partners. This collaborative model requires community connection and dedication on behalf of the educator, as well as the family, and is an ongoing relationship.

According to teacher report at Wave 8 (2015), 39% of teachers report that their school had a **Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)**; however, 38% reported that they do not, and 23% report that their school was "*working on it*". Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) assist organisations to embed the principles and purpose of reconciliation, based around the core pillars of relationships, respect, and opportunities (Reconciliation Australia, 2022).

Staff and representation

Both parents and teachers report limited presence of Indigenous staff, teachers, and education workers in primary schools. With respect to the presence of **Indigenous education workers,** an average of 64% of parents reported *All of the time* while 21% reported *Never*. Similarly, when asked about the presence of **Indigenous teachers/staff**, 59% of parents reported *All of the time* whereas 28% reported *Never*.

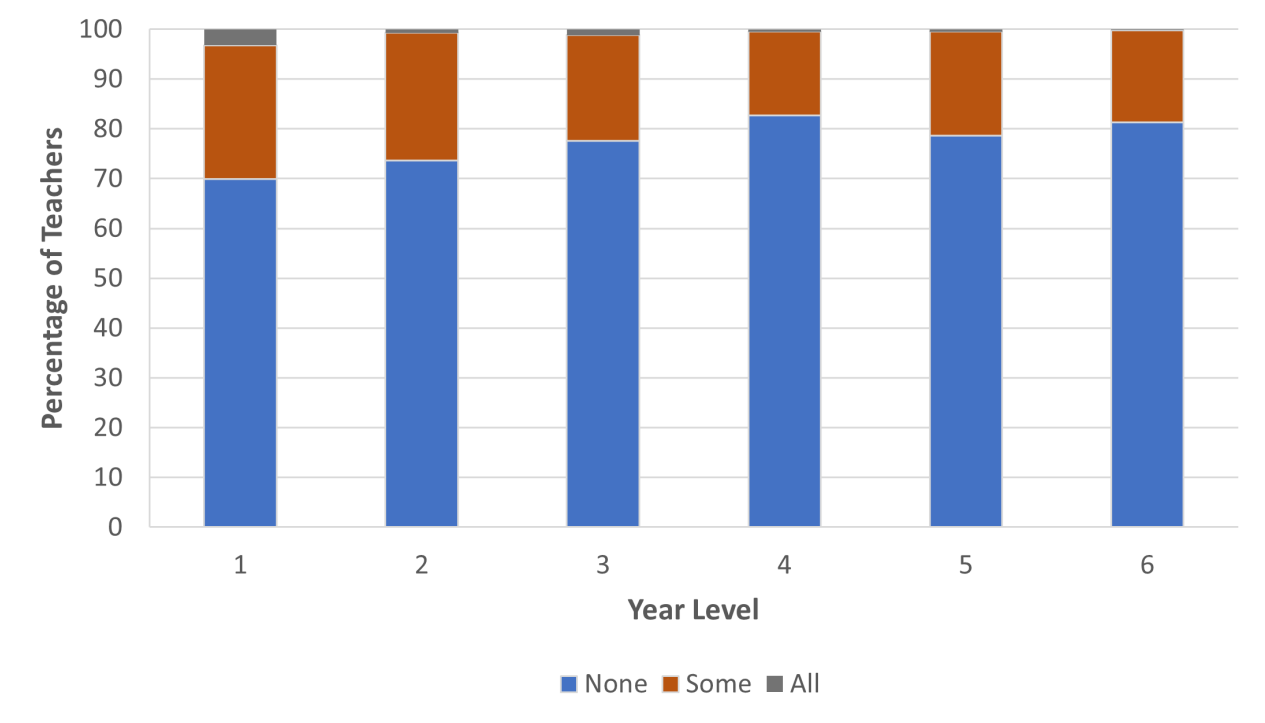
While LSIC collects information from primary school teachers, there are no data directly collected from Indigenous education workers or others involved in children's school life until Wave 14 (data not included in this report as LSIC children are largely no longer in primary school at Wave 14). We recommend a future study specifically aimed to address questions of workforce composition and capability in order to understand the impact the lack of access to Indigenous staff and teachers is having on Indigenous young people. Findings from the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) tell us that increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is key to fostering student engagement and improving educational outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (MATSITI, 2016). The impact of representation and culturally safe educators and education support staff is one aspect of Indigenous children's schooling that we recommend be a question of focus in future studies.

Indigenous language programs

LSIC data suggest that few schools are delivering Indigenous language programs to students. Across Years 1, 2, 4, and 5, approximately 59% of parents (on average) reported that their child's school *Never* had **an Indigenous Language Program**. Similarly, in Wave 8, 57% of teachers reported that their school was *not doing* an Indigenous language program, and 51% of teachers said that their school was *not* **encouraging the use of Indigenous languages** in the classroom. Only 30% of teachers reported that they were *currently* implementing an Indigenous language program and 28% reported using Indigenous languages in the classes within their school.

In the classroom context, across Years 1 to 6, approximately 78% (range from 70% to 83%) of teachers reported that they did not **conduct activities in Indigenous languages**, with this percentage generally increasing from the early to senior primary school years, indicating a drop-off as children progress through primary school (**Figure 4.2**). In Year 1, as a snapshot, classrooms where activities were conducted in an Indigenous language *all* or *some of the time*, had significantly higher proportions of Indigenous students (*Means* = 93% and 60%, respectively) than classrooms where no activities were conducted in Indigenous languages (*Mean* = 28%).

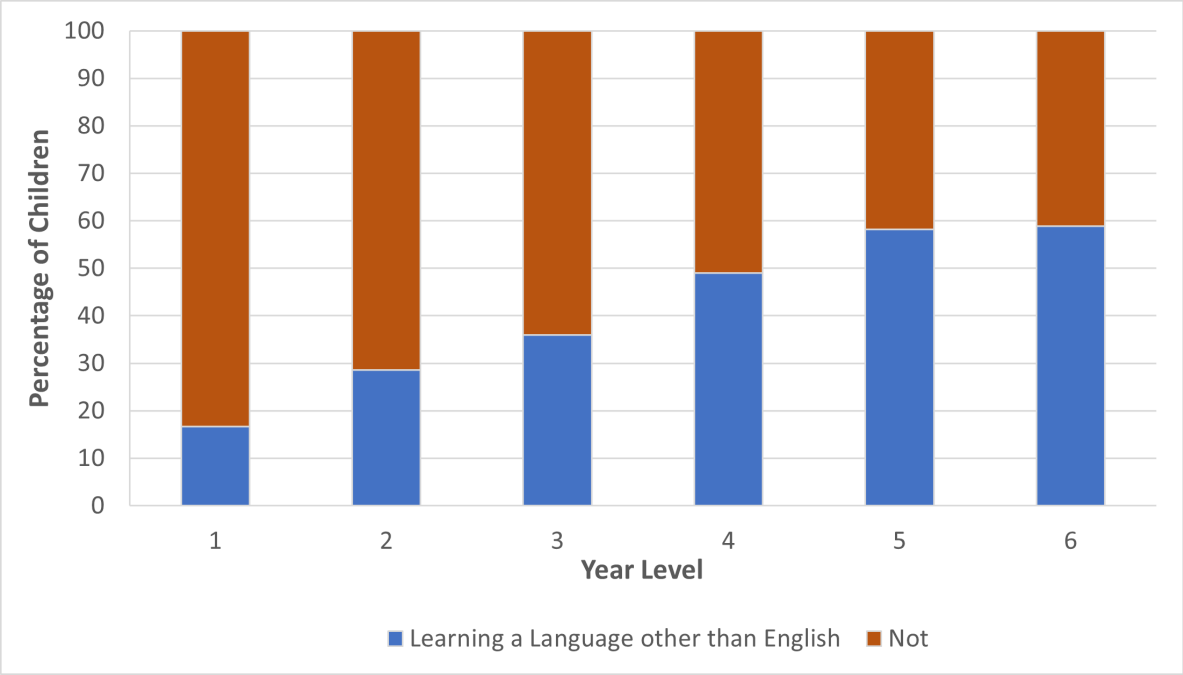
Figure 4.2 Teacher report on extent to which they conduct classroom activities in Indigenous languages



Language programs: Child report

In the later years of data collection, children were asked to report on their receipt of language programs in primary school. We explored these responses in Wave 8 (mean B cohort age of 8 years [range 6 to 9]; mean K cohort age of 11 years [range 9 to 12]), for which the most data were available, finding that the proportion of students learning a language other than English (LOTE) increased across the primary school years (**Figure 4.3**).

Figure 4.3 Child-report of learning a language other than English (LOTE) by grade



With respect to the effects of remoteness, learning a language other than English was similarly distributed across Major Cities (39.6%), Inner Regional (39.9%), and Outer Regional Australia (39.4%), but was more frequent in Remote Australia (47.4%) and Very Remote Australia (52.7%).

Of children learning a LOTE, 48% (*n* = 252) were learning an Indigenous language. Of all LSIC children, 21% (*n* = 252) of children were learning an Indigenous language; 11% (*n* = 28) of these 252 children were also learning another foreign language.
In Wave 8, no child was learning two Indigenous languages at their school. Most children (95%) learning an Indigenous language learnt it in school lessons. For the remainder (5%), the Indigenous language was a main language at the school and part of a *bilingual program*. Most children (73%) had their language lessons once or twice a week, and 22% had these lessons daily.

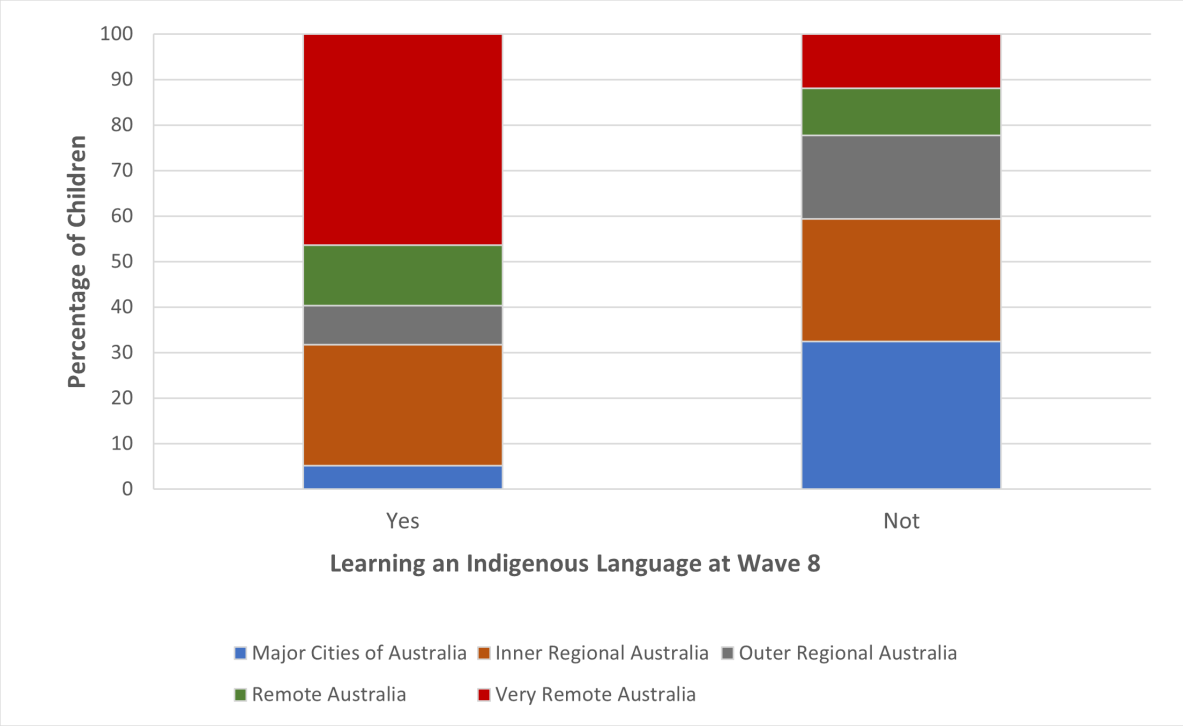
To understand the characteristics and outcomes for children who receive Indigenous language programs in primary school, we compared children learning an Indigenous language to children learning a LOTE that was not an Indigenous language. The latter form a reasonable comparison group of children whose schools had the resources, want, and capacity for teaching a LOTE to students, yet elected to teach a non-Indigenous (foreign) language.

Of the two comparison groups, children learning an Indigenous language were less likely to have experienced race-based bullying. Of children who were learning a LOTE that was not an Indigenous language, 6.9% experienced racist-bullying, compared to 2.5% of students who were learning an Indigenous language. These findings indicate that **children not learning an Indigenous language (but learning a LOTE) were 2.76 times more likely to experience racism than children who were.** While these findings may be the result of other covariates (including remoteness or proportion of Indigenous student enrolment), these findings, nonetheless, indicate that Indigenous language programs may be a core feature of schools that provide a culturally safe and supportive environment for students, and are associated with a reduced prevalence of racism.

We next sought to determine the other characteristics of schools that are teaching an Indigenous language and of the students receiving these languages, with results described below:

- By ***year level***, patterns of Indigenous language learning were similar to those learning a non-Indigenous LOTE, with language programs being more frequent in the upper years (Years 4 to 6: an average of 26% of students) and less frequent in the lower grades (Years 1 to 3: an average of 16% of students).
- With respect to ***remoteness***, almost half (46%) of the children learning an Indigenous language were living in Very Remote Australia (**Figure 4.4**). Children learning an Indigenous language at school were least likely to be living in Major Cities, where only 4% of children were learning an Indigenous language. This pattern signals a broader issue of inequitable access, whereby very few students residing in Major Cities (the most populous region in the full LSIC sample) have access to Indigenous language programs, relative to those living in remote regions.
- Schools teaching an Indigenous language had a significantly higher ***percentage of Indigenous enrolments*** (*Mean* = 70.66%) than schools that were delivering a non-Indigenous LOTE (*Mean* = 17.53%). This information provides further evidence of inequitable access, whereby students attending schools with relatively low proportions of Indigenous students have limited access to Indigenous-focused school programs, activities, and learning, which are central to establishing a culturally safe and responsive school environment and fostering a strong sense of cultural identity among Indigenous students.

Figure 4.4 Child-reported learning of an Indigenous language by levels of remoteness



We also explored the relationship between Indigenous language and the commitment of the child's school to delivering Indigenous initiatives using scores on the following nine teacher-reported items regarding practices at their school:

- Elders visit or teach
- Involved within the Indigenous community
- Use cross-curriculum priority of Indigenous culture
- Indigenous education workers
- Indigenous teachers/staff
- Teachers know their Indigenous students
- Teachers develop Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs)
- Recognise days of significance
- School has Reconciliation Action Plan

Using an average of these survey items, children were given a composite score of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus of their school (with scores ranging from 0 to 2, with 2 being *currently implementing all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives*). **Schools teaching an Indigenous language demonstrated significantly higher Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus scores (*Mean* = 1.79) compared to schools teaching a LOTE that was not an Indigenous language (*Mean* = 1.44).**

Cross-curriculum and classroom activities

In Wave 8 (2015), when children were aged 8 to 12 years, approximately 69% of teachers reported *currently doing* **cross-curriculum priorities for Indigenous learning**.

Teachers were also asked from Preschool to Year 6, whether they teach **Indigenous arts or practices** (**Figure 4.5**) and whether they engage in **Indigenous singing or storytelling** (**Figure 4.6**) in the classroom. Over time (Years 1 to 6), the proportion of teachers reporting *never* increased, again indicating a reduction in Indigenous classroom-based activities as children progress through their primary school years. Taking a snapshot of Year 1, classes that were engaging in arts practices *often* or *very often* had a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous children in the classroom (*Mean* = 50%) compared to schools that *never* (*Mean* = 18%) and only *occasionally* (*Mean* = 27%) engaged in these practices. Similarly, classrooms that *often* or *very often* incorporated singing or storytelling had a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous students (*Mean* = 40%) compared to schools that *never* engaged in these activities (*Mean* = 16%). These findings indicate a proportionate approach whereby classrooms with a higher proportion of Indigenous students were more likely to engage in these practices. However, including Indigenous culture in the classroom should be a universal practice across Australian schools, regardless of the proportion of Indigenous students.

Figure 4.5 Teacher report on the extent to which they teach Indigenous arts or practices in the classroom

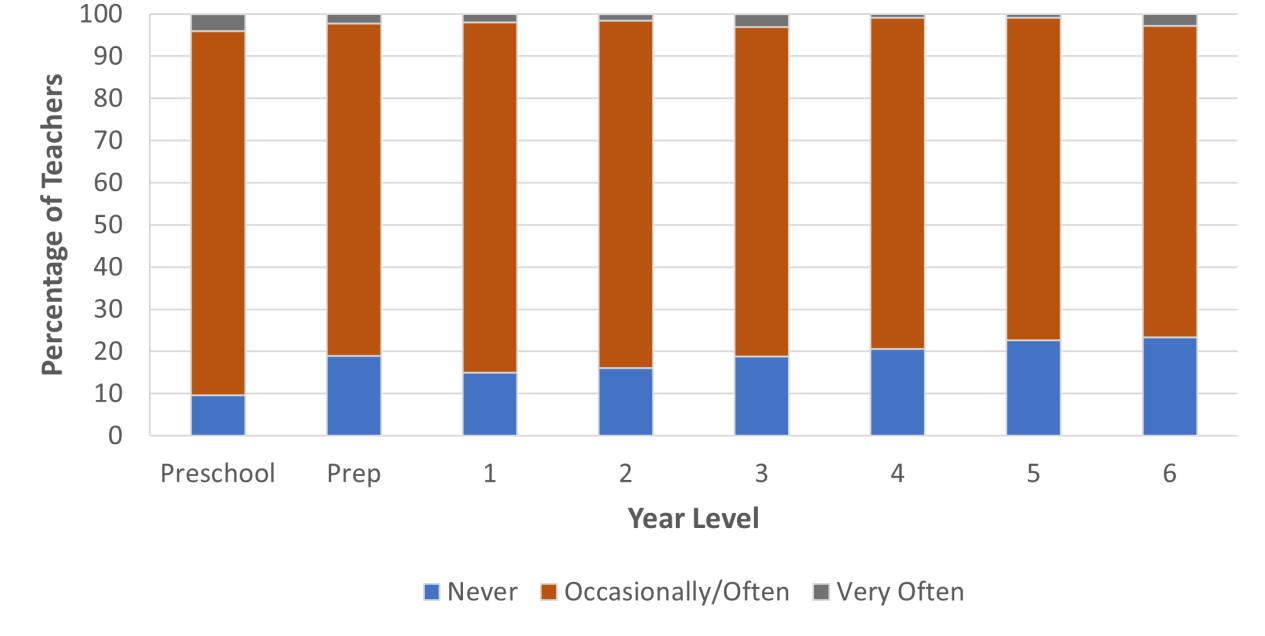
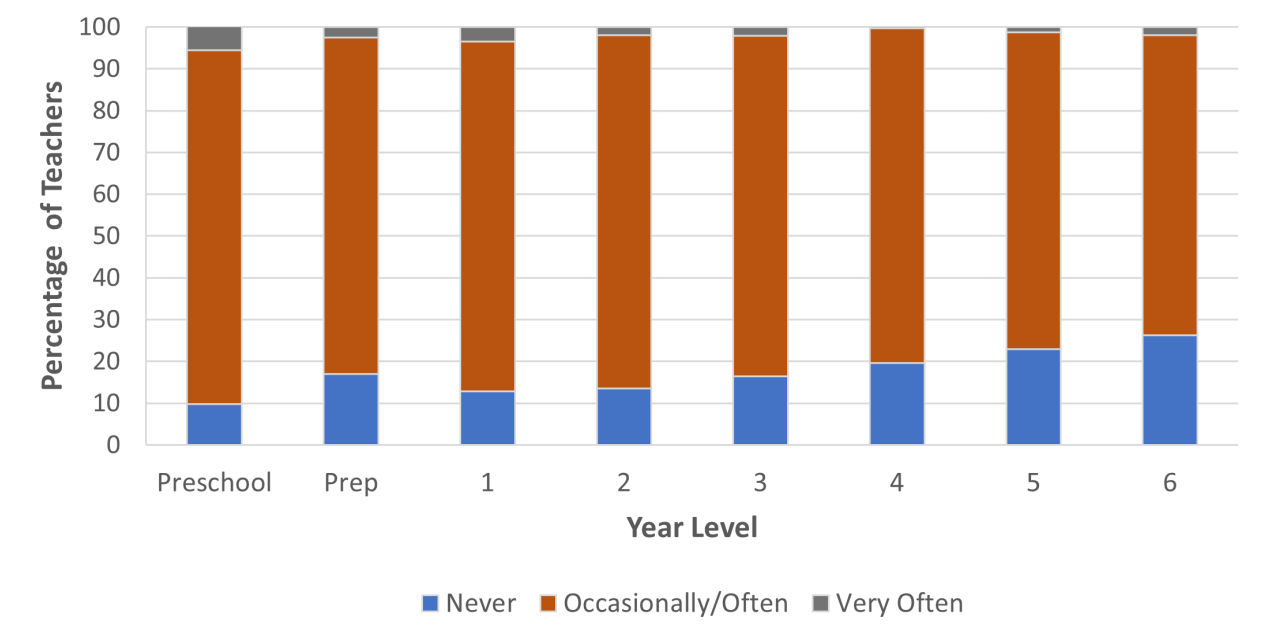


Figure 4.6 Teacher report on the extent to which they engage in Indigenous singing and/or storytelling in the classroom

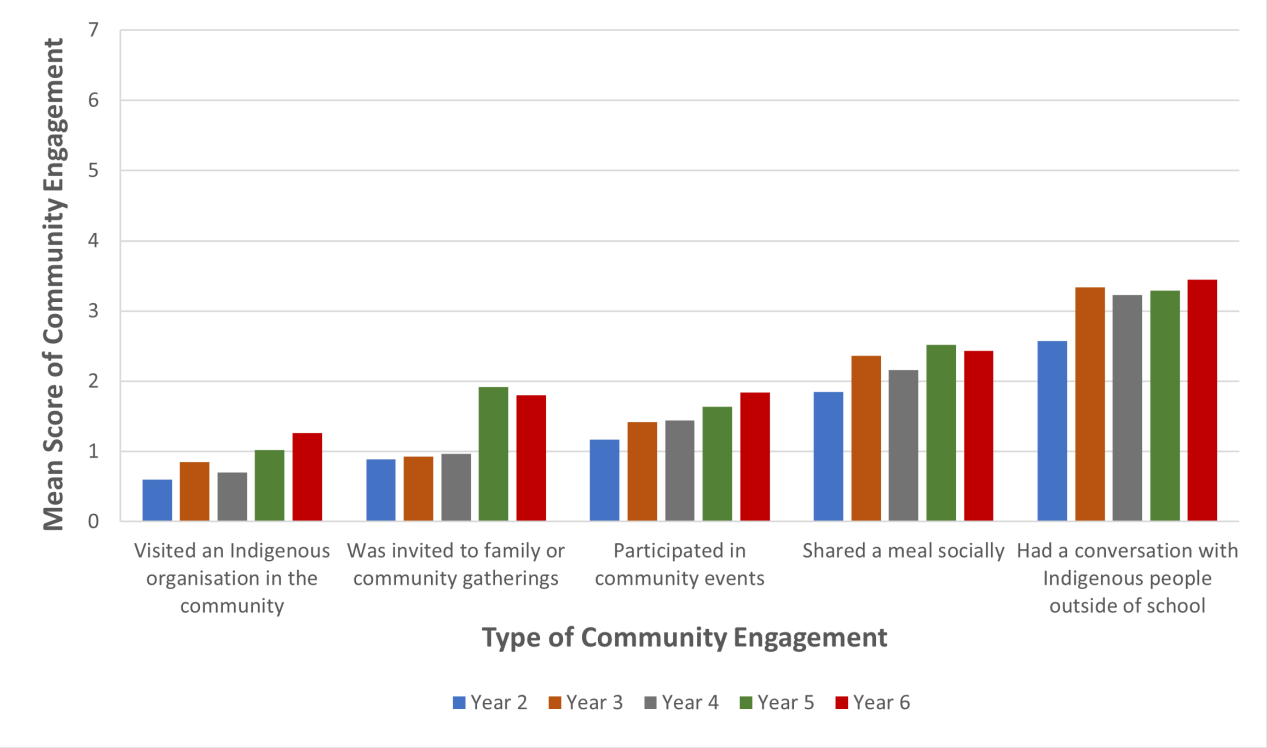


Teacher engagement with the community

It has been previously reported that most non-Indigenous teachers (which far outweigh the proportion of Indigenous educators) have limited contact with local Indigenous communities and have a limited knowledge of Indigenous culture (Ockenden, 2014). To explore this concept in the LSIC dataset, teachers were asked to report on how often (maximum 7 times) they engaged with the community in the last 6 months. On average teachers more frequently *had conversations with Indigenous persons* (*Mean* = 68% scored above 0); *participated in community events* (*Mean* = 59% scored above 0); and *shared a meal socially* (*Mean* = 57% scored above 0). Teachers, on average, less frequently reported *visiting an Indigenous organisation in the community* (*Mean* = 29% scored above 0) or *being invited to family or community gatherings* (*Mean* = 39% scored above 0).

Across the five activities listed in **Figure 4.7**, mean teacher engagement scores (range from 0 to 7: see Technical Appendix) were calculated for each student across Years 2 to 6. Although mean engagement scores did appear to increase (from 1.45 at Year 2 to 2.15 at Year 6), many teachers were still reporting zero occurrences of these activities. When students were categorised by *their teachers never engaging* across all five activities (mean of 0) or *their teachers sometimes engaging* (with a mean score >0), between 13% and 26% of students (across the five grade levels with available data) had teachers who consistently reported *never* doing any of these activities. These findings speak to the lack of engagement between community and school cultural environments, further perpetuating the cultural disconnect within the Australian education system.

Figure 4.7 Mean scores of teachers' self-reported engagement with the local Indigenous community (scale from 0 to 7)



To determine a snapshot of the relationship between level of remoteness and teacher engagement with the Indigenous community, Year 6 (with most data available: *n* = 589) teacher scores (range from 0 to 7) were explored by level of remoteness. Teachers from Major Cities of Australia had significantly lower engagement scores (*Mean* = 0.93) compared to all other regions. Comparatively, teachers from Very Remote Australia had significantly higher engagement scores (*Mean* = 4.70) than all other regions. Scores across other regions were relatively similar: Inner Regional at 2.1, Outer Regional at 2.7, and Remote Australia at 2.3.

Cultural competency training experiences of teachers was also explored, finding that teachers who were not engaged (engagement score of 0) had significantly lower cultural competency training scores (range from 0 to 10: see Chapter 3) across Years 2, 4, 5, and 6 than teachers who were engaged with the community. That is, on average, teachers who were not engaged had a mean cultural competency score of 5.5 (out of 10), whereas teachers who were engaged at least some of the time had a mean cultural competency score of 6.5.

What are schools doing effectively for Indigenous students and what could be done better?

Language programs

When parents were asked about whether they would like their child to learn an Indigenous language at school, between 89% (Year 5) to 93% (Year 1) of parents reported that they wanted a language program, with the most frequently endorsed response being *available as a second language* in Preparatory year and Year 1; however, the most frequently endorsed response became *in a bilingual program* in Years 5 and 6. We note that the term *multilingual program* may better reflect language patterns in some instances and should be a consideration for future data collection.

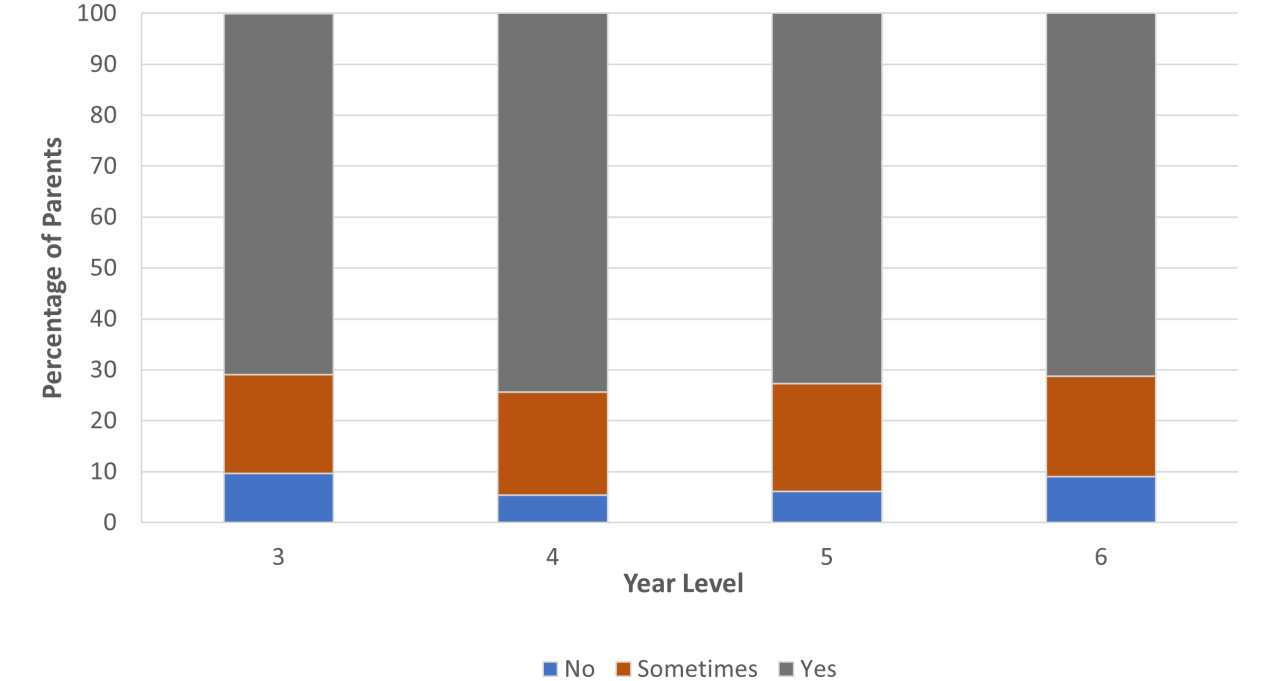
Regardless of what form of delivery is desired, parents consistently report wanting some type of language program at school. However, as mentioned previously, teacher and parent reports indicate that this need is not being met, with few schools engaging in these Indigenous language programs, despite this clear need and the well-evidenced positive benefits for students' engagement and academic achievement (Chandler et al., 2008; Griffiths, 2011).

How is the school for students?

Across Preparatory to Year 4, students' teachers were asked to rate their agreement with the statement "*this school supports Indigenous children well*" on a 5-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. On average, across these grade levels, 86% of teachers reported *strongly agree/agree*.

Comparatively, parents were asked to rate whether they think the school is good for Indigenous children at Years 3 to 6, with only an average of 72% of parents reporting *yes* (ranging from 71% to 74%), with relatively consistent patterns across time (**Figure 4.8**). While this is a generally positive story, there was still a relatively large proportion of teachers (almost 1 in every 7) and parents (1 in every 4) who did not agree that the child's school was consistently good for Indigenous children, which indicates room for improvement in the Australian education system.

Figure 4.8 Parent report of whether study child's school is good for Indigenous children



What do parents think schools could do better?

In LSIC Wave 7 (children aged 5 to 11 years depending on cohort), parents were asked whether they were happy with how their child's school teaches about Indigenous culture. The 956 responses suggest that while there were aspects of cultural teaching that they were happy with, many parents were looking for culture to be addressed in a more substantial way.

Around half of the responses indicated that 'yes', the parent was happy. Where more detail was given, parents indicated that they were particularly happy with special events run by the school, such as celebrating NAIDOC Week and involving Elders in teaching culture.

Aspects of cultural teaching parents were happy with

Elders visiting the school to teach culture

Special events such as Naidoc week

"I'm very happy with the way the school recognises sorry day, harmony day. The school has its own NAIDOC week and the National Apology Day. They also do the NAPCAN week, (Child protection Week)."

"Yes; they have an Elder who takes the children out bush and teaches them about culture"

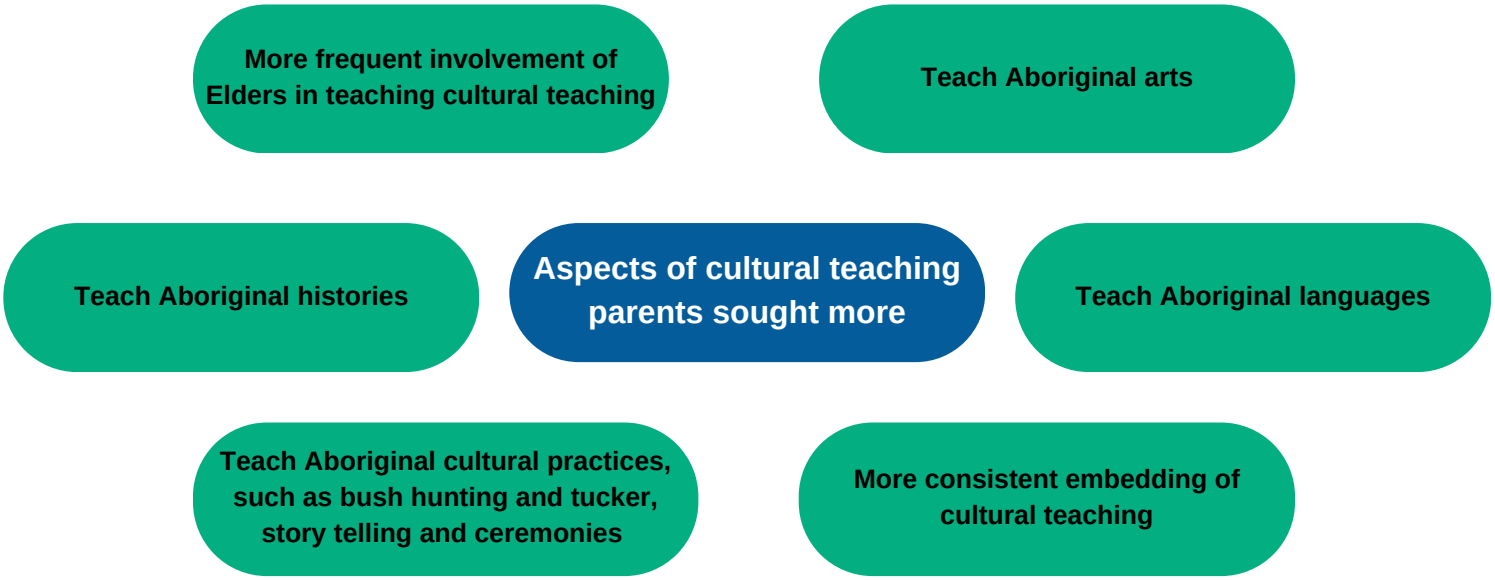
"Yes! Elders from the community visit to school and teach them about culture"

"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"

While a small number of parents suggested that Aboriginal culture should be taught at home rather than in school, around half of participants described aspects of the school's cultural teaching that they were unhappy with or would like to see more of. A dominant request in this group was for the teaching of Aboriginal culture to be more consistently embedded in school, rather than only delivered on special occasions such as NAIDOC week.

There were over 400 responses that identified ways that parents were seeking more specific cultural teaching. Around 150 responses made a general indication that they wanted more cultural activities (e.g., “Teaching more Aboriginal Culture” and “Have more cultural activities and programs”). Where more specific practices were identified, the most common were the teaching of language, history, arts, and cultural practices. Many parents wanted Elders to be more actively involved in cultural teaching.



“Would like to see Indigenous Languages taught in the school cause most of the Elders are passing away and growing up with no Elders to teach them language”

“There should be Elders and people teaching culture, bush tucker, dancing, teach them different seasons, wet and dry, what types of animals lets us know what time of season it is. Not just Indigenous also non Indigenous.”

“There could be more History lessons in relation to Indigenous History. Children to be more aware of Dreamtime stories, bush hunting/food gathering etc.”

“I would like to see Cultural days and Aboriginal Elders as guest speakers. Elders coming into the school to teach about bush tucker and hunting, also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History and ways of life.”

“I think that there should be more programs taught in the school regarding Aboriginal cultur[e], such [as] language and dancing and the history of Australia and of your local area.”

“Would like to see more Indigenous History and Culture for the purpose for Indigenous and non Indigenous students at the school.”

Deserts and Oases: What trends underpin a school's commitment to a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus?

This report also sought to explore the characteristics of schools that systematically neglect to include Indigenous initiatives within the education system, and schools that systematically deliver inclusive practices and initiatives. To do so, using parent report at Years 1, 2, 4, and 5, each child was given a composite score of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Focus of their school at each grade, by computing the mean of 10 survey items, provided parents responded to at least one item. This mean composite score ranged from 0 to 2, with 0 = *schools never deliver Indigenous initiatives*, 1 = *schools rarely/sometimes deliver Indigenous initiatives*, and 2 = *schools deliver Indigenous initiatives all of the time*. The 10 items contributing to this score are as follows:

- Elders visit or teach
- Involved within the Indigenous community
- Indigenous education workers
- Indigenous teachers/staff
- Indigenous language program
- Teachers know their Indigenous students
- Teachers understand the importance of cultural identity
- Teachers develop personalised learning plans (PLPs)
- Recognise days of significance
- Teach about culture

Using this composite measure (ranging from 0 = schools never deliver Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives to 2 =schools deliver Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives all of the time: see Technical Appendix), children whose school had a score less than 1 were allocated as a Desert (schools that are systematically not engaging in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education priorities), whereas children attending schools with a mean of 2 were allocated as an Oasis (schools that are systematically engaging in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education priorities all of the time). These terms (deserts and oases) have previously been used to denote the availability of childcare across Australia (Hurley et al., 2022), but are repurposed in this report to describe schools according to their commitment to delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives.

Deserts: schools that are systematically not delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives

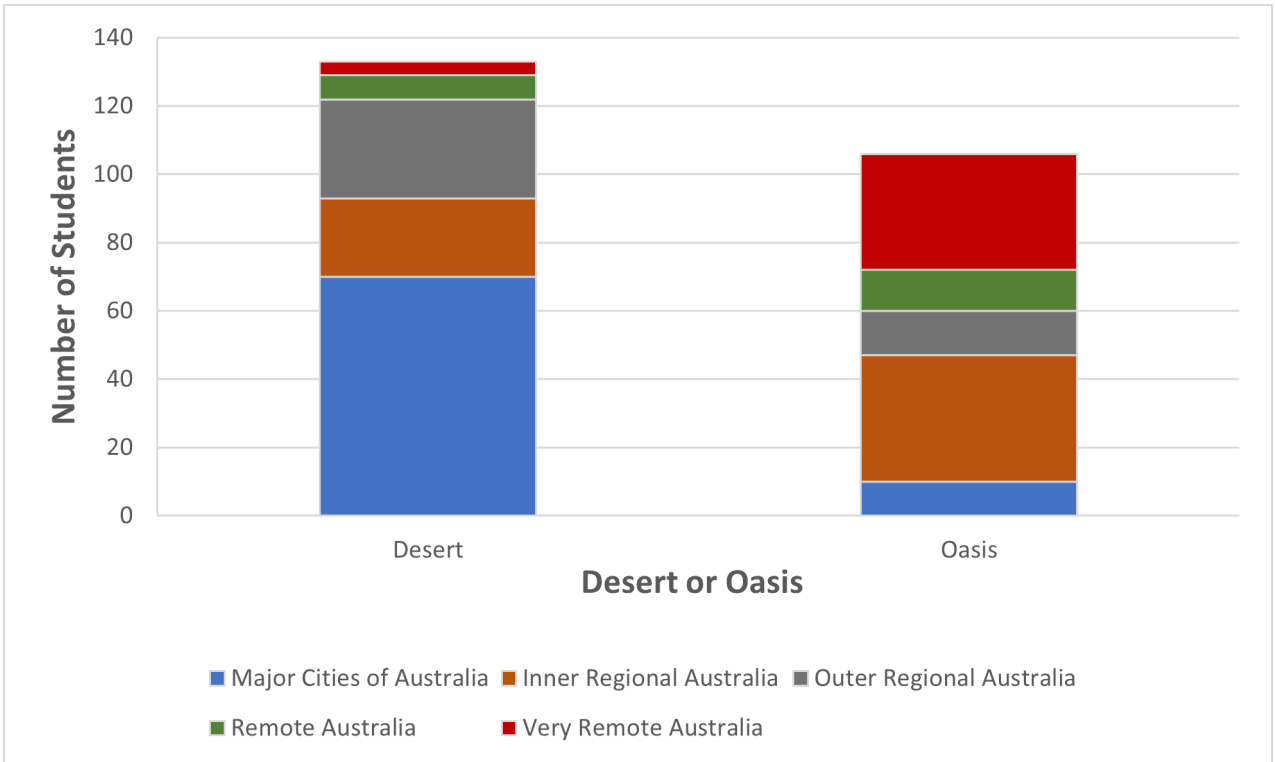
Oases: schools that are systematically delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives all of the time

The number of Deserts ranged from 67 parent-reports in Year 2 to 133 in Year 3, whereas Oases ranged from 37 in Year 1 to 106 in Year 4. Notably, with no information pertaining to school identification, we are unable to determine the true number of schools reflected in these Deserts and Oases, as there may be some overlap between students. Nonetheless, we feel these analyses provide important insights into the characteristics of schools that provide opportunities for cultural engagement, and those that do not.

What are the demographic characteristics of these Deserts and Oases?

In Year 4, where the number of collective Deserts and Oases was highest (*n* = 239), we see that Deserts tended to originate from Major Cities and Outer Regional Australia, whereas Oases were predominantly located in Inner Regional Australia and Very Remote Australia (**Figure 4.9)**.

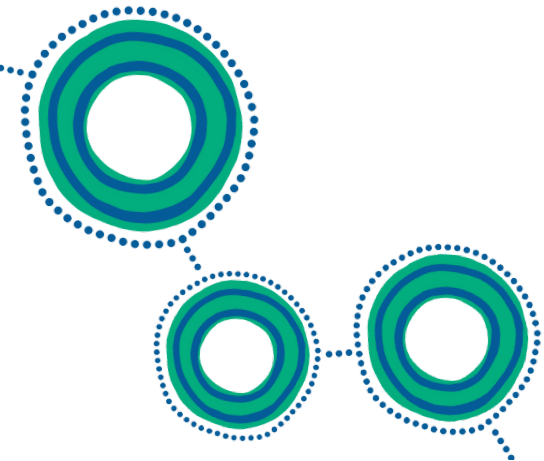
Figure 4.9 Remoteness region for Deserts and Oases



With respect to socio-educational advantage, Deserts represented schools with significantly higher ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) ratings (*Mean* = 971.4) than Oases (*Mean* = 804.3), indicating that even with a greater budget and socio-economic standing, more advantaged schools are not necessarily delivering the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education focus needed.

Furthermore, Oases had a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous student enrolments (*Mean* = 58%) than Deserts (*Mean* = 16%). These findings indicate that schools, in general, are engaging in these activities systematically only when there is a higher proportion of Indigenous children in the school.

In Years 4 and 5, for which the most data were available, **children who reported racism in the form of bullying were more likely to be attending a Desert than an Oasis.** Of children attending a Desert, 15% reported racist bullying across Year 4 or 5 (1 in every 7 children), whereas in an Oasis 7% reported racist bullying (1 in every 14 children). This means that children attending schools with limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus are **2.12 times more likely** to experience racist bullying than a child attending a school with a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus.



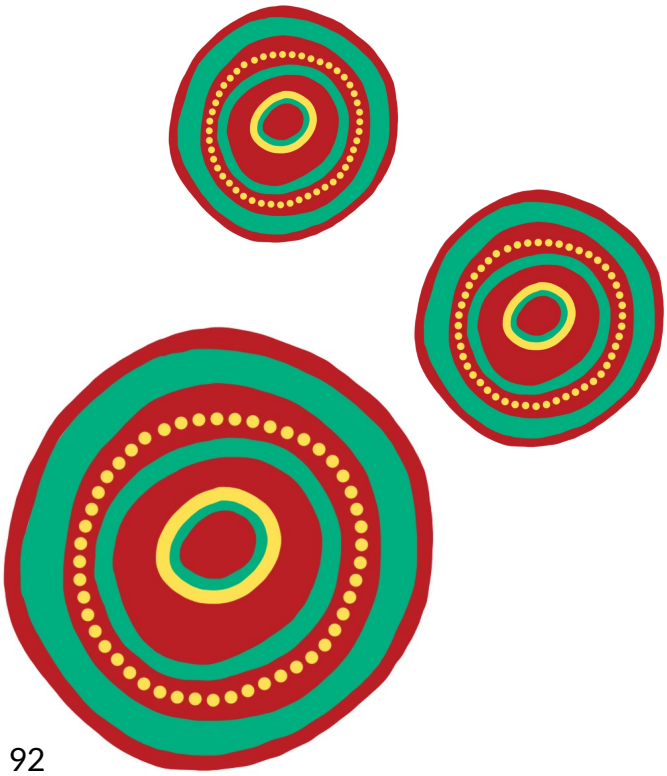
Furthermore, using the composite measure of school's level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus described earlier in this section (range from 0 to 2), it was found that children who had experienced bullying were attending schools with significantly lower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focus score (*Mean* = 1.2) than children who had not (*Mean* = 1.4). Collectively, these findings suggest that the extent to which schools provide opportunities for cultural engagement and incorporate Indigenous culture into the curriculum is a protective factor against student discrimination and bullying, albeit along with other covarying protective factors, including proportion of Indigenous students.

This proportionate-dosage approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education reflects a broken system whereby initiatives and engagement activities, which should be universal and are essential for meeting the needs of Indigenous students and enhancing their sense of belonging and engagement, are more readily delivered according to proportion of Indigenous students. Overall, these findings indicate an inequitable access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, disproportionate to the relative proportion of Indigenous children in the population. That is, a majority of Indigenous children, in Australia and in the LSIC sample, reside in Major Cities; however, these regions are more likely than Very Remote and Remote regions to contain Deserts. This inequitable access therefore has implications for the school culture and, relatedly, students' sense of belonging, their sense of heritage, and sense of identity.

Implications and recommendations

Policy and practice

Although many schools are delivering a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education elements, the proportion of parents reporting never, or not reporting all of the time, is concerning, and indicates a gap in the commitment of schools to delivering these important services to students. Promoting and valuing Indigenous culture supports the sense of belonging and connectedness students feel to their school (Rahman, 2013). Research shows that when schools engage with community, including via partnerships and engagement with Elders, students perform better (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). Engagement with Elders is especially important for ensuring continuity of cultural knowledge transmission, and a powerful mechanism for advocating for the needs of Indigenous students (Lowe et al., 2021).



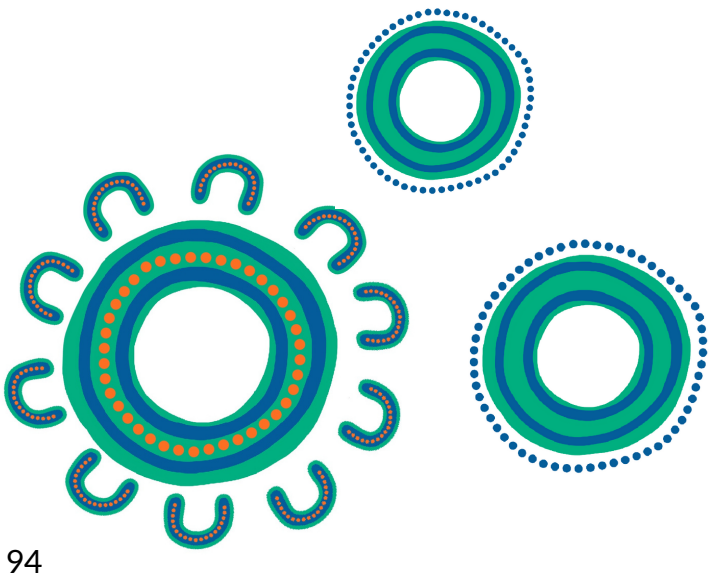
For years it has been acknowledged that there is a lack of Indigenous educators within Australian schools, with the last census indicating only 2.02% of the teacher workforce are Indigenous (ACDE, 2018). Programs such as the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) have had success; however, long-term, ongoing commitment and action in this space is needed to increase number of Indigenous teachers, and, to improve the teaching conditions under which Indigenous teachers work. The presence and contributions of Indigenous staff play an important role in representation and visibility within a teaching workforce in a school and having Indigenous teachers can enhance student engagement and sense of belonging (Biddle, 2007; Buckskin, 2016; Tracey et al., 2016). The presence of Indigenous education workers has been reported by both parents and teachers as key to improving Indigenous children's outcomes and is significantly associated with increased cultural involvement from school (Martin, 2017; Peacock & Prehn, 2021). **Distinct policy and initiatives that build this workforce and properly remunerate and support Indigenous education career paths are required. Notably, many LSIC children themselves aspire to be teachers (see Epilogue) and this should be nurtured.**

Indigenous language programs can have positive impacts on students' English literacy outcomes (Chandler et al., 2008), increase retention, and increase a sense of connection and identity. This indicates that **First Nations Language-English programs should be a priority of the Australian education system** (Griffiths, 2011). The United Nations Declaration of Right of Indigenous Peoples (2007) supports the rights of Indigenous people to learn their language. Language programs also play an important role in cultural revival and building a strong sense of community, yet, in reality, schools are not meeting the needs of Indigenous students, with few schools engaging in Indigenous language programs (Lowe et al., 2021). Many Indigenous parents have expressed that they want these programs for their children. While the local language of a school may not be the First Language of Indigenous students learning off-Country, an Indigenous language program, even if it is not in the home language for these children, is an important step for the Australian education system to consider. Delivering Indigenous language programs within schools aligns with the Closing the Gap Targets to "*boost Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages*" (Target 5) and support a "*sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken*" (Target 16) (Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

The findings across this chapter suggest a **proportionate-dosage approach** appears to underpin the cultural awareness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives within Australian primary schools. That is, where there are higher rates of Indigenous children, more elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are delivered, despite fewer Indigenous children in total being represented in these communities. This is counter to the concept of reconciliation that underpins the AITSL teaching standards, and to the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories mandated within the Australian Curriculum. This situation is entirely inequitable for all Australian students. This proportionate dosage response will only perpetuate a lack of cultural competence and knowledge in our future generations of teachers, and racism across society. **Establishing a school climate that actively celebrates Indigenous culture is something all schools should strive towards regardless of the degree of representation of Indigenous families within their school community.**

Future Research Directions

- Parent report of school Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education focus indicates that approximately half of LSIC children do not receive teaching about culture *all of time*, and qualitative data indicate that parents feel this is an area of schooling that needs to be improved. As such, we recommend future research seeks to explore the extent to which schools are including Indigenous culture within curriculum, and, how that it is being taught.
- LSIC parents were asked to report if they wanted their child to learn *an* Indigenous language at their school. However, the large number of Indigenous languages warrants further research to understand the appetite of communities to establish programs in one language, or, whether it is important to have multiple Indigenous languages taught in any given school.
- Evidencing the impact of Indigenous teachers and educators on students' schooling and outcomes and the importance of representation in schools is a recommended avenue for future research.
- Future research should seek to centre the voices of Indigenous teachers and Indigenous support staff. Understanding their career paths and experiences may provide insights into how best to support and retain staff and increase the presence of Indigenous educators within the education workforce. Discussions with Indigenous education staff may be central to determining their perspective on the needs of students and their recommendations for school Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education focused initiatives. We recommend a longitudinal mixed method Indigenous Education workforce study that includes participants from across the developmental pipeline (high school students, current pre-service teachers and Indigenous Education workers, current professionals, and those who have left the profession) to fully understand workforce contexts and inform a strategic 10-year Indigenous Education workforce plan.
- Determining the perspective of students regarding their desires/wants for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives, language programs, and classroom activities is suggested as an area of inquiry for future studies.
- A major priority for future research should be to determine specific practices that foster a culturally safe school environment and culturally responsive classrooms. We recommend a mixed method study that engages with communities, schools, Indigenous educators, and students.



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Chapter 5:

Family-School Connections across Primary School, Parent and Teacher Perspectives

Parent involvement in their children's education is defined broadly as activities in which parents participate, at home and school, to support children's learning (Walker & Berthelsen, 2010). Parental involvement conveys to children, explicitly and implicitly, the value of school learning and importance of education. Positive family-school connections support children to achieve their learning potential.

In prior cross-sectional analyses, LSIC research has documented high rates of parental involvement with children's teachers and schools (Sartbayeva, 2016; Trudgett et al., 2017). Higher levels of parent involvement in children's education have been linked to better learning outcomes for LSIC children, regardless of sociodemographic characteristics of families (Sartbayeva, 2016). When teachers understand the perspectives and values of Indigenous families, parents are more likely to engage with schools and children will benefit through this engagement (Trudgett et al., 2017).

Involvement of Indigenous families is facilitated when teachers and schools work together to support children's learning. Parent involvement requires rejection of historically deficit discourses about Indigenous families and their children's education (Trudgett et al., 2017). The establishment of family-school connections is not the sole responsibility of parents, who have often experienced both contemporary and historical marginalisation in education systems. Rather, responsibility lies with schools and teachers to reduce barriers to parent involvement through the cultural competence of teachers and understanding of the expectations of Indigenous families (see Chapter 3), and to provide safe, supportive, and flexible pathways to build family-school connections. Developing the confidence and trust of Indigenous parents will facilitate positive family-school connections and advance children's learning opportunities and engagement with school.

The longitudinal analyses of LSIC data presented in this chapter focus on parent involvement in schools and teachers' practices to support parent participation. Data are drawn from LSIC parent interviews and teacher questionnaires to address the following research questions, across four sections.

Parent report of their participation in school activities, across the primary school years

- Does the level of parent participation change over time?
- Do parent and teacher reports of parental participation in school-related activities align?
- From parental report, which practices are used most frequently by teachers to enable parent participation in their child's education?

Teacher report of strategies and practices to involve parents, across the primary school years

- What practices do teachers most commonly use to engage parents?
- How do teachers build relationships with families?
- What teaching strategies are used to encourage parents to engage with children's school learning at home?
- Do teachers engage with families in their local community?

Parental trust in schools and their reflections on their own school experiences

- What level of trust do Indigenous parents have in their child's school?
- Are children's current experiences of primary school similar or different from parents' own schooling experiences?

Impact of parent involvement and school influences on children's academic achievement in primary school

- Does parent involvement influence children's learning outcomes in primary school, after taking account of child, school and family factors?
- Is parent involvement associated with NAPLAN assessments of reading and numeracy at Year 5 of school?

What are key findings?

- LSIC parent participation in school-based activities remained relatively high and stable across the primary-school years and was, largely, unrelated to family sociodemographic factors.
- Parent evaluations of teachers' outreach activities to promote parent participation were mixed, although 62% of parents indicated that teachers understood the needs of Indigenous families.
- For this sample of parents of Indigenous children, parental trust in their child's school was high and stable across the primary school years.
- Parents' qualitative comments suggested that their children's school experiences were more positive than their own primary school experiences. They noted positive changes in school policies and practices, including increased recognition of Indigenous heritage and culture, and less racism in schools. Some parents, however, noted continued evidence of racism and other issues in schools that could be addressed.
- Longitudinal analyses showed that parent involvement in the middle primary school years made a significant contribution to children's academic achievement at Year 5. This contribution was over and above the influences of sociodemographic factors and children's developmental skills at school entry on children's academic achievement.

What needs to be done?

- The high level of family involvement in schools illustrated in this data should be celebrated, extensively profiled, and communicated widely. This could help to reduce prevailing stereotypes and discourses that do not recognise how Indigenous families provide support for children's learning and positively engage with schools.
- Some parents will need additional support to feel comfortable and be involved with schools, given their own school experiences may have been largely negative. Teachers and schools can acknowledge that an 'open door policy' will not be enough to engage all families. Responsibility for strong school-family connections should not rest with parents. Schooling systems have historically and culturally marginalised Indigenous families. Exemplary school leadership is needed to empower Indigenous families to support their children's learning at home and at school.
- As families use of time changes (e.g., increasing number of households in which two parents work full-time), it is critical that schools broaden the mechanisms through which parents have opportunities to engage in their school community beyond on-site school activities during typical working hours.
- Keys to family involvement are teachers' understanding of Indigenous ways of being and knowing, as well as understanding of the family priorities for children's learning and education. As in the recommendations in Chapters 3 and 4, there is a need to enhance the cultural competency of teachers and school leaders. Greater emphasis on Indigenous perspectives is needed, in line with the Australian Curriculum Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority, across all subjects and in ALL schools.

Parent participation in school-based activities across primary school

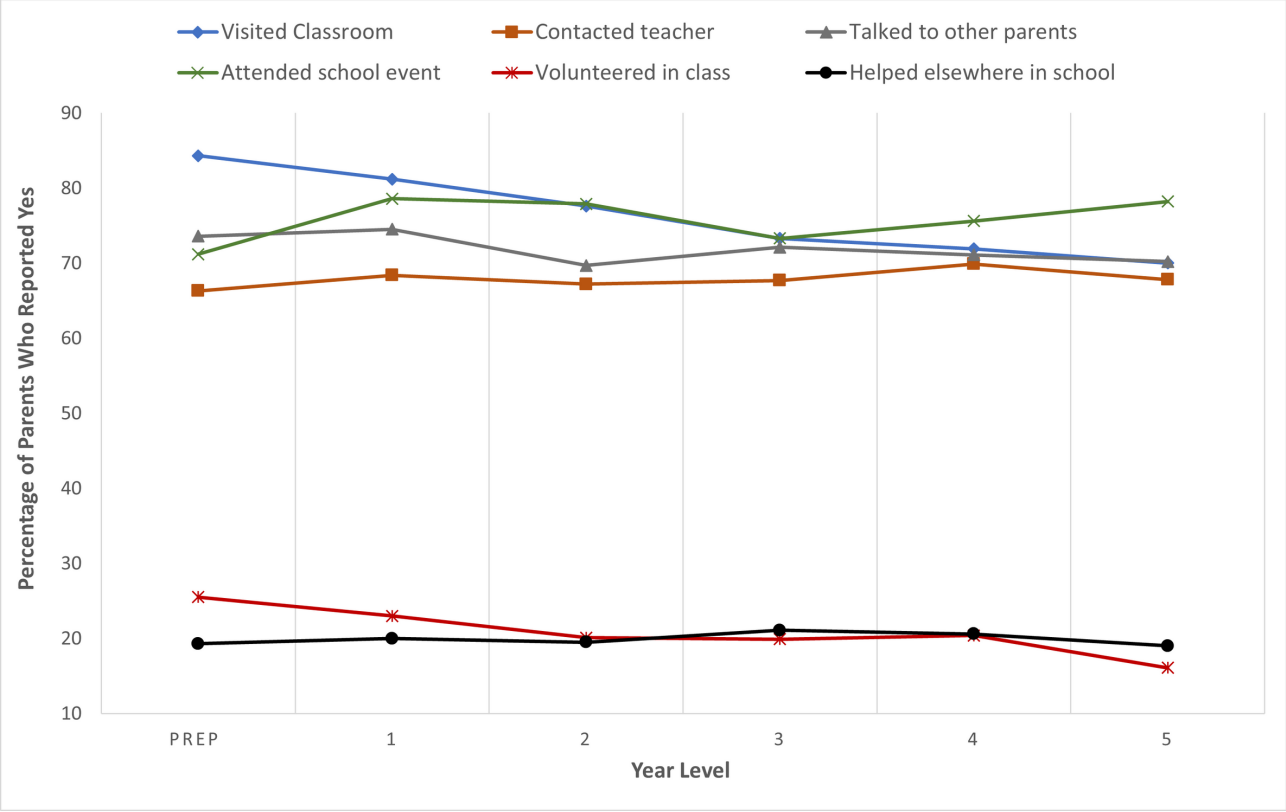
Parent reports of their involvement with schools

Parents were asked about their participation in any of six specific school-based activities (see below), in the current school term or previous school term. A simple binary response (yes/no) was required. We report the percentage of parents indicating 'yes' for each activity, in each year of primary year school. Average participation rates, by type of involvement activity, across the primary school years were as follows:

- Visited child's classroom (76%).
- Attended a school event (76%).
- Talked to other parents (72%).
- Contacted child's teacher (68%).
- Volunteered in their child's class (21%).
- Volunteering elsewhere (e.g., library) in the school (20%).

There are relatively stable participation rates over time for the various activities (**Figure 5.1**). This is also somewhat contrary to 'conventional wisdom' that parent participation declines across the school years. While variation was evident across different types of activity, involvement for each type of activity across primary school remained quite consistent. Volunteering to assist in children's classrooms or other volunteer tasks within the school had the lowest participation rates .

Figure 5.1 Parent-reported participation in school-based activities across primary school



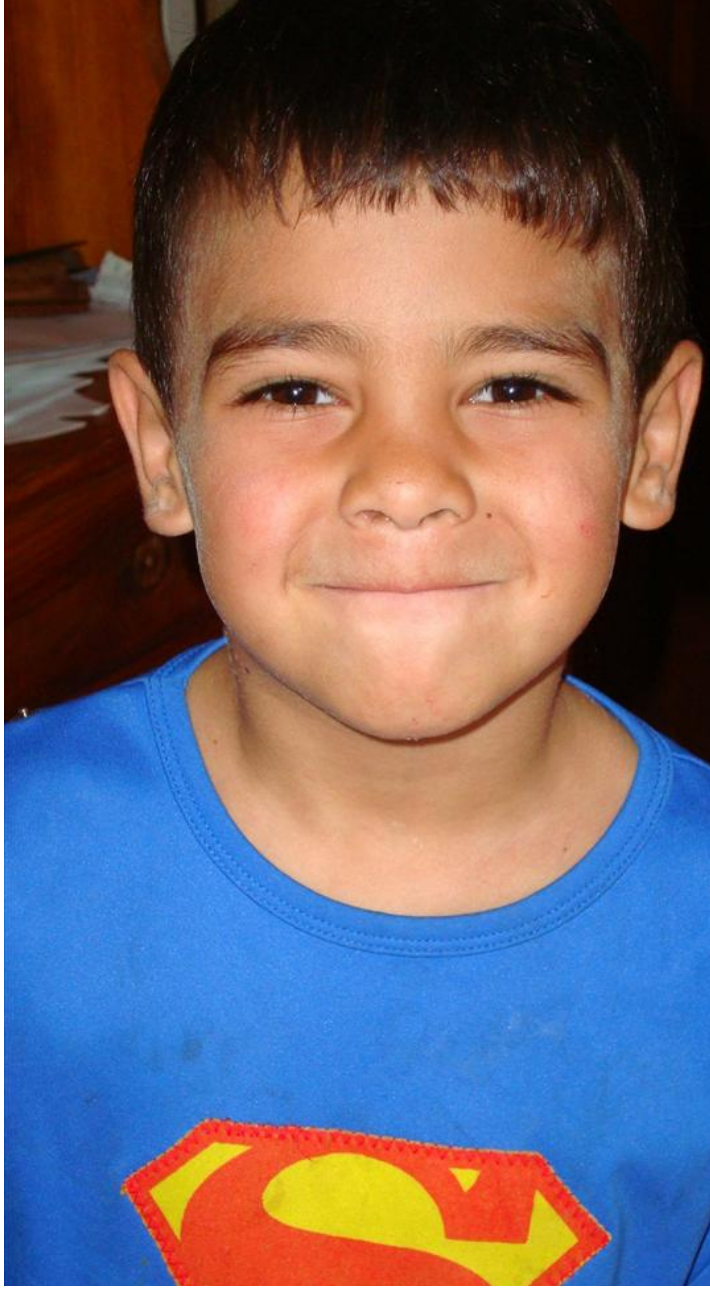
Influence of sociodemographic factors on parent involvement

The influence of sociodemographic factors on parent participation rates in school-based activities was also investigated. These are reported for remoteness of family residence, parent education, and family socioeconomic circumstances.

- ***Remoteness area:*** Parent participation rates are reported across five areas of remoteness: major city, inner regional, outer regional, remote area, and very remote area. Families living in remote areas had significantly lower levels of participation in classroom and school activities across the primary school years, compared to families living in major city, inner regional, outer regional areas, and very remote areas. Families living in major cities also had significantly higher participation in school-based activities compared to inner regional areas.

- ***Parental education:*** In the early school years (Preparatory to Year 2), parents who had not completed high school had significantly lower participation in school-based activities compared to parents who had completed high school or who held post-school or university qualifications.

- ***IRISEO (Index of Relative Indigenous Socioeconomic Outcomes):*** There were no significant differences in parental overall participation in school-based activities relative to socioeconomic circumstances, suggesting that families at all socioeconomic levels were equally likely to participate in school-based activities.

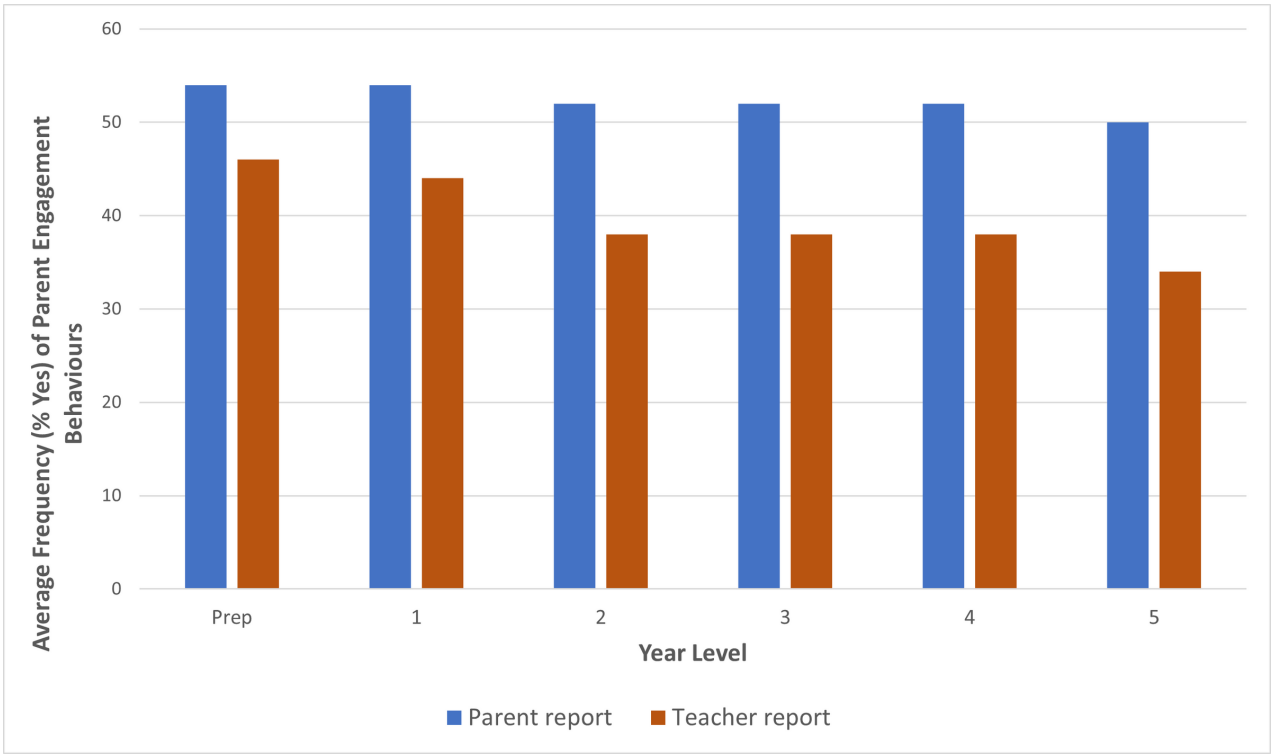


Aligning parent and teacher reports of parental involvement across primary school

Teachers were also asked to report on parent involvement in school activities, using similar items as were used in the parental reports of participation (e.g., parent visited child's classroom; attended school events; contacted child's teacher; volunteered in child's class; volunteered elsewhere in the school). The only involvement item on which parents reported that was not also asked of teachers was "talked to other parents".

In **Figure 5.2,** parent and teacher reports about parent involvement are compared. Teachers reported somewhat lower participation rates than indicated by parents. The relative stability of these differences in participation rates is maintained over time. Higher levels of missing data on teacher questionnaires, across year levels, may have contributed to these differences. Overall, parent reporting, with more complete data across year levels available, provide more reliable findings.

Figure 5.2 Alignment between five items of parent-reported involvement in school-based activities and equivalent items reported by teachers



Parent evaluations of teachers' practices to promote parent-school involvement

Parents also reported how often teachers used specific strategies to promote parent involvement. These items were:

- Teacher makes you aware of chances to be involved and take part in school activities.
- Teacher understands the needs of families from an Indigenous background.
- Teacher gives you advice on how to help your child at home.
- Teacher provides you with information on community services to help your child.

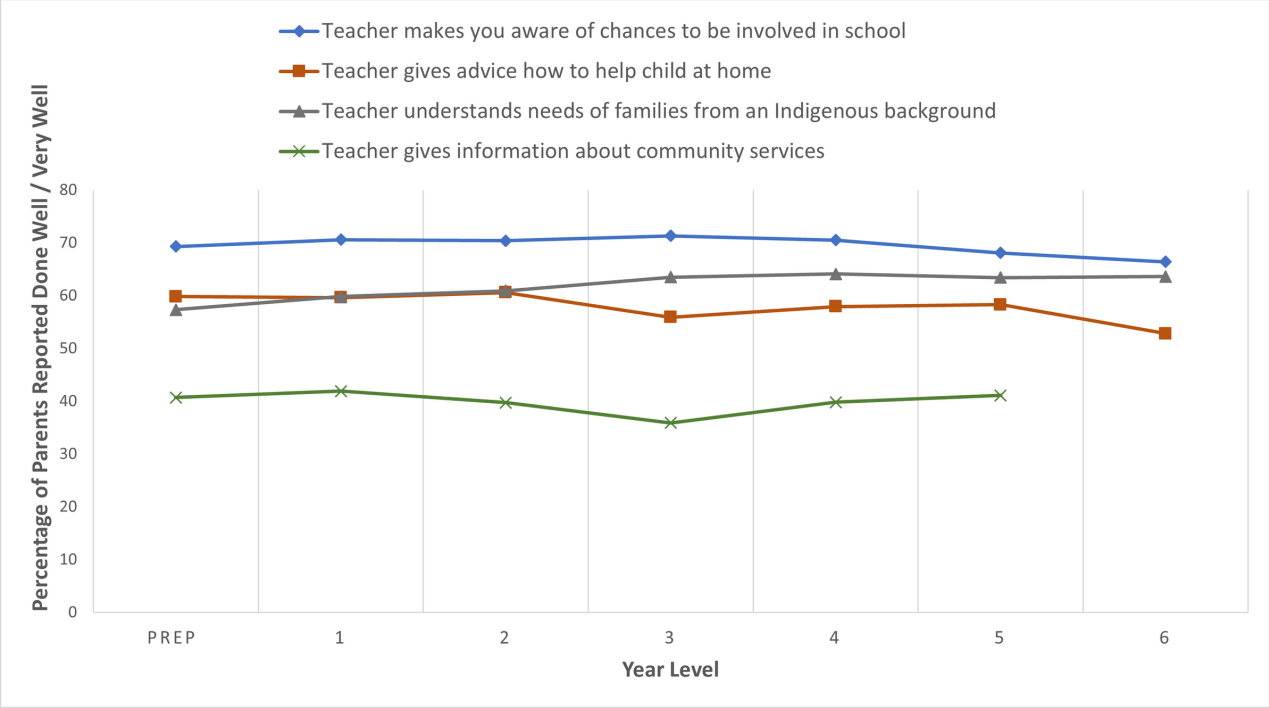
Parents reported on a four-point scale (not done at all; just okay; done well; done very well). Responses were grouped into two categories, by aggregating positive responses into one category ('done well' / 'very well') and other responses into a second category ('just okay' / 'not done at all').

The percentage of parents who rated items as: 'done well or very well' is shown in **Figure 5.3**. This graph presents quite a positive view of teachers' outreach to parents, with responses across items and school years ranging from 40% to 70%. However, a sizable proportion of parents also rated each item as 'just okay'/ 'not done at all'.

On average, across the primary school years:

- Most parents (70%) indicated that teachers made them aware of opportunities to be involved and take part in school activities.
- A total of 62% of parents indicated that teachers understood the needs of families from Indigenous backgrounds.
- More than half (58%) of parents indicated that teachers provided advice on how to help their child at home.
- Two fifths (40%) of parents indicated that teachers provided them with information about community services to help their child at home (with data only available from Preparatory to Year 5).

Figure 5.3 Parent evaluation of teachers' practices to promote parent involvement



Teachers' perspectives on practices to promote parent involvement

Teachers' practices to involve families

Teachers reported on a list of six common activities to involve parents and whether they had used these activities in the current school year by 'yes/no' responses. Findings are reported in **Figure 5.4.**

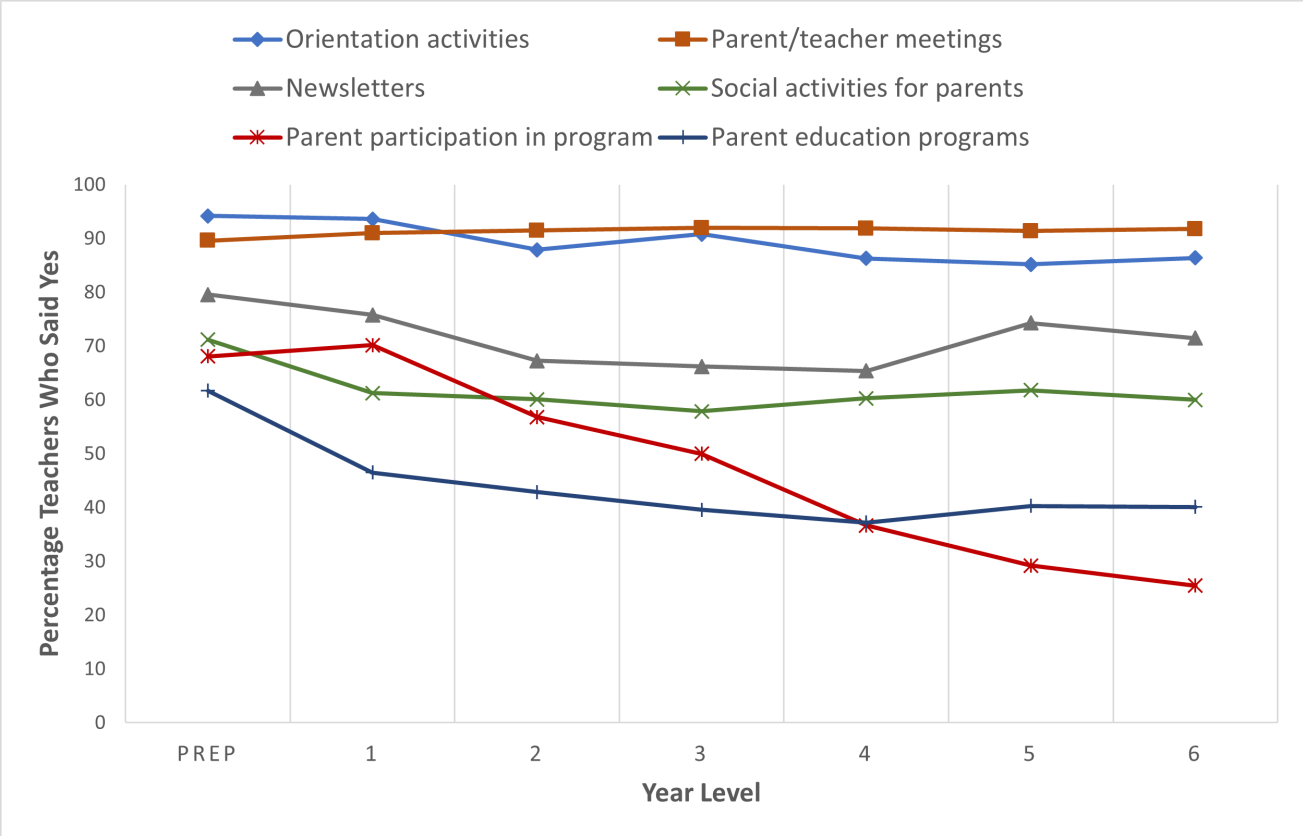
The identified activities to support parent involvement were:

- Orientation activities (e.g., meeting with parents, written information sent to family).
- Parent participation in the classroom program.
- Formal parent/teacher meetings about children's progress.
- Parent education programs or information sessions.
- Social activities for parents to promote contact and support.
- Regular newsletters about the classroom program and school events.

The most frequent practices implemented were orientation activities held early in the school year and formal parent/teacher meetings. Formal parent/teacher meetings to discuss children's progress remained very high across primary school years (on average, 91% of teachers said they used this practice). Similarly, parent orientation activities including meetings with parents and/or written information sent to families, were used by 89% of teachers across the primary school years. Other teaching practices that remained relative stable across primary school years were sending newsletters (71% of teachers, on average), and organising social activities for parents (62% of teachers, on average).

The remaining two teaching practices reported by teachers declined in usage across the primary school years. Parent participation in the classroom, including volunteer roles or participation in a parent roster, occurred more commonly in the early years (Preparatory and Year 1) with 70% of teachers reporting that this activity occurred in those initial two years. However, over time this decreased. Only 26% of teachers used this practice in Year 6. Similarly, conducting parent education programs or information sessions, was more commonly used by teachers in Preparatory (62%), with fewer than half of teachers using this strategy in subsequent years, and only 40% of teachers reporting use of this practice in Year 6.

Figure 5.4 Teacher report of practices to involve families



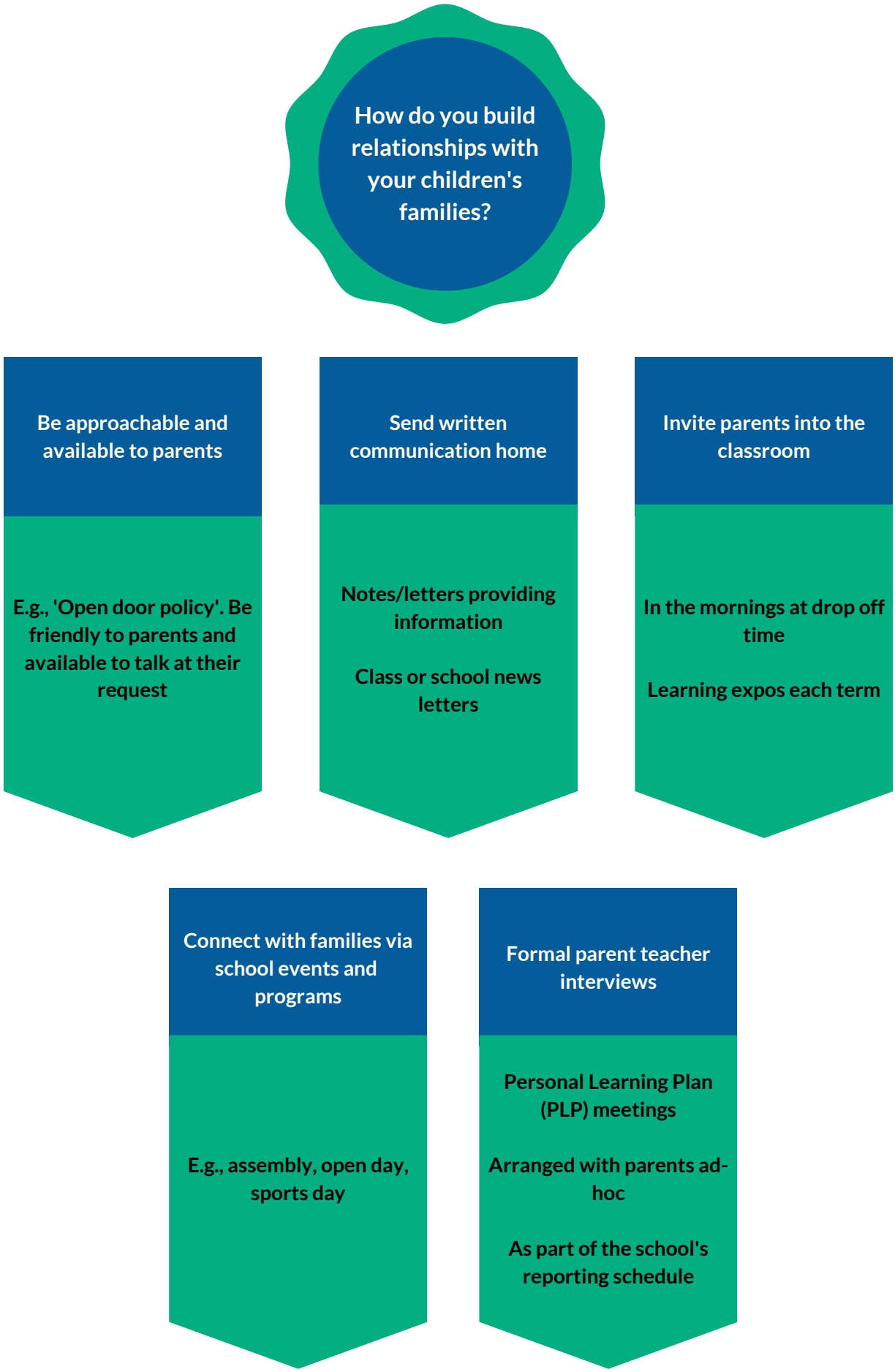
Teachers' practices to build relationships with families: A qualitative analysis

Teachers responded to an open-ended question about how they build relationships with children's families. We analysed qualitative data from Wave 6 (B cohort approximately 6 years of age; K cohort approximately 10 years of age). There were 484 teacher responses analysed. Responses suggested that, overall, the primary strategy described by teachers for building relationships was to provide parents with information about children's progress and about school events. **Figure 5.5** presents the five more commonly reported strategies.

In addition to the practices indicated in **Figure 5.5**, teachers commonly noted that they held impromptu and informal conversations with parents (most often at drop off and pick up times); sent information to parents; and had informal encounters in the wider community (e.g., at shops and community events). Teachers also indicated that they tried to ensure that positive achievements of children at school were always shared with children's parents.

Some comments alluded to the power relationships and dynamics that operate between teachers and parents. It was implied by some teachers' responses that they assumed the role of expert. Some teachers' comments also indicated limited capacity for families to genuinely participate in children's education. Responsibility for meaningful involvement through parent-teacher interactions was also devolved to parents. This was indicated by comments that teachers operated an 'open door policy' in their classrooms, implying that parents could take the initiative to contact teachers.

Figure 5.5 Qualitative report of teachers' comments on practices used to build relationships with children's families



“Letters, emails, phone calls, and informal/formal conversations.”

“Encourage them to contact me at school at any time via phone call, visit, letter, or note.”

“Regular phone calls, emails, updating positive aspects the child has participated in.”

“Being available for meetings - before/after school, regular emails, volunteers, special events/days.”

“By engaging in conversation if I see them in the yard or at school events.”

“Inviting parents to school for formal and informal events which foster community spirit.”

“Discuss children with their family once or twice a term.”

“2-parent interview opportunities.”

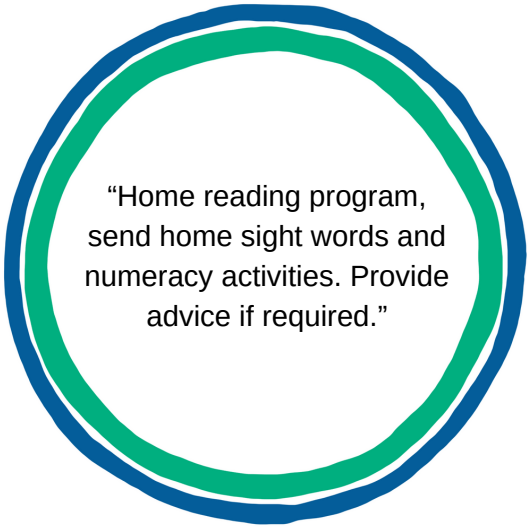
“Mostly through parent teacher interviews both in formal and informal situations.”

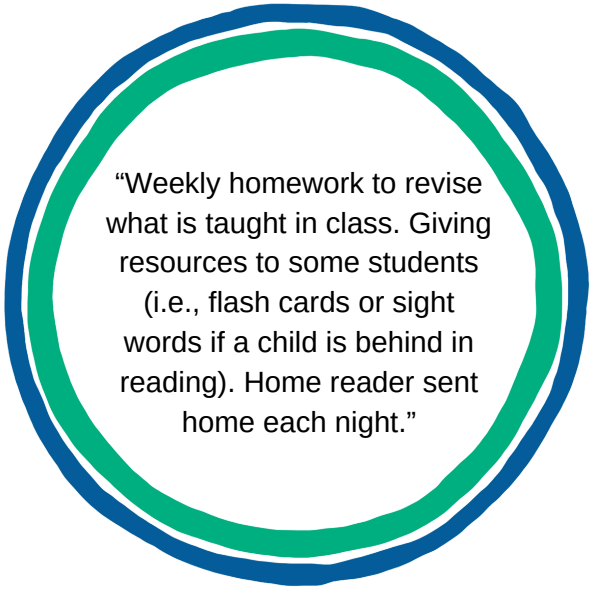
Teachers' practices to engage families in children's learning: A qualitative analysis

There were 404 responses from teachers to a question about strategies used to encourage parents to support children's learning at home (Wave 6, both LSIC cohorts, collected in 2013). Three main categories were evident in teachers' responses. Most teachers reported that they used a combination of strategies including:

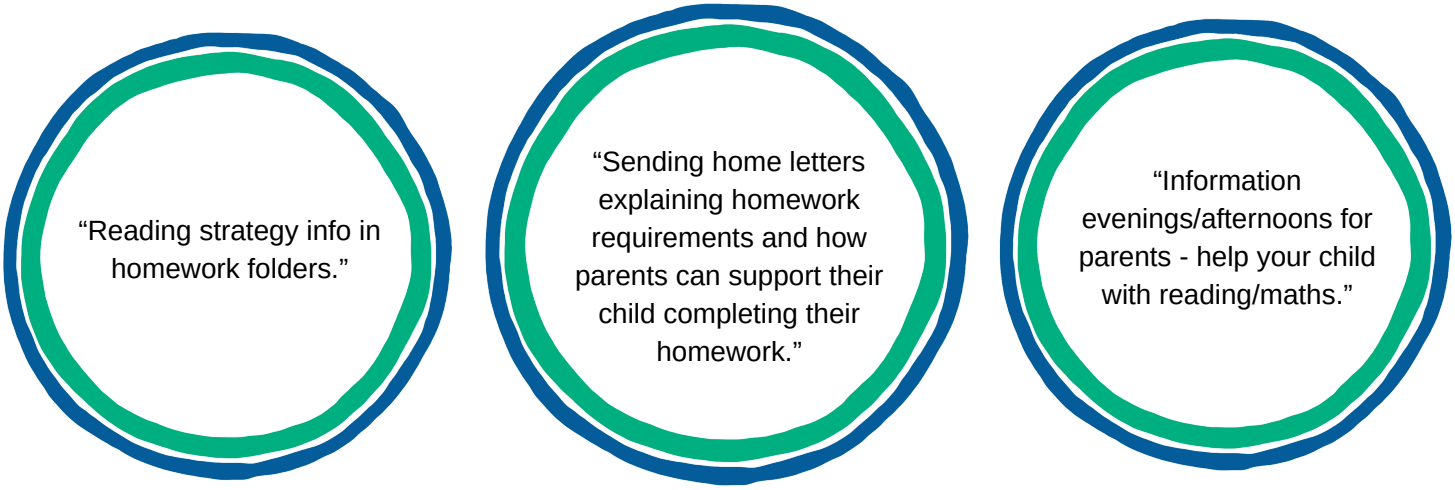
- Set homework.
- Provide supporting information to parents to assist with homework completion.
- Direct communication between teachers and parents.

Most teachers said that they used homework as the primary strategy to encourage parents to help their children at home. Homework was focused, most commonly, on practice of literacy and numeracy skills, which were being taught in the classroom. Homework tasks most frequently required parents to use provided resources to listen to their child read or to practice word recognition of high frequency reading words. Some teachers also set homework focused on practising numeracy skills. Sometimes homework tasks were tailored to students' individual learning needs but more often were generic tasks which all children were expected to complete. Later in this report, in Chapter 6 (*Children's Engagement with School*), we report data in which children suggest that homework is something children would like to change about school to make it better.

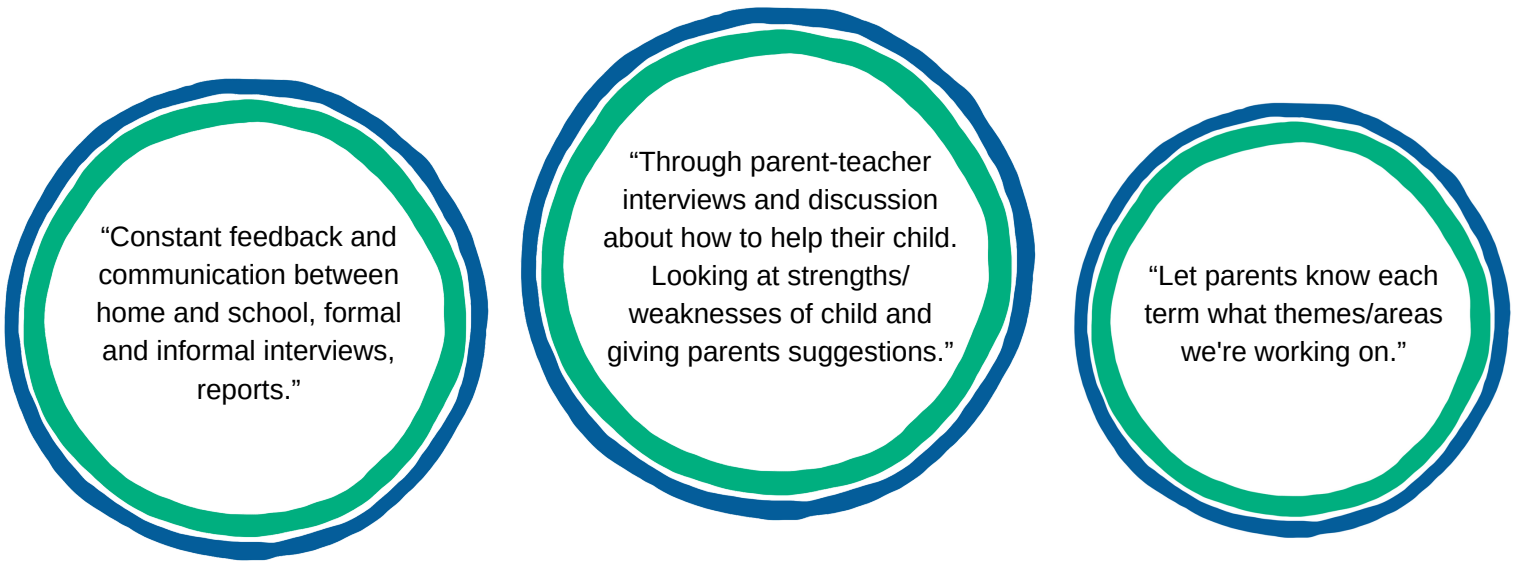




Some responses from teachers seem to assume that parents had the necessary knowledge and skills to help their children. Other teachers indicated that they provided information with suggestions about how parents could engage in these activities with their children. For example, some teachers said that they sent explanations on how homework tasks could be completed or tips for effective reading strategies for parents to use with their child. Other teachers said that information sessions were offered to parents who would be taught how to engage in reading tasks and how to practice numeracy skills with their children.



Another common strategy reported was direct communication between teachers and parents. Communication was reported to occur at a whole-class level. This might involve teachers sending a newsletter to parents to update them on specific topics which were being addressed in the child's classroom. It was also described as occurring in more personalised ways, when teachers would discuss a child's progress with a parent and specific ways in which a child might benefit from additional support provided by the parent at home. Such teacher-parent conversations were described as informal and incidental conversations with a parent, as well as more formal conversations through scheduled parent-teacher meetings.



Some teachers indicated that they were flexible in their expectations of parents in consideration of families' circumstances and the available resources for families:

- *"There has to be a careful balance though as families are very busy and overload can mean that parents just feel swamped."*
- *"I am flexible with my homework program and am prepared to look at alternatives to using technology in the home, where this is not available."*

These findings indicate that a proportion of teachers were aware of the potential stress that homework might cause some families and considered flexible implementation of homework policies.

Teachers' practices for involvement with the local community

Teachers were asked a series of questions about how often they engaged in specific community involvement activities. Teachers indicated on a scale, ranging from 0 to 7, the number of times over the last 6 months that they had engaged in each of these activities.

Three of the most frequently reported were:

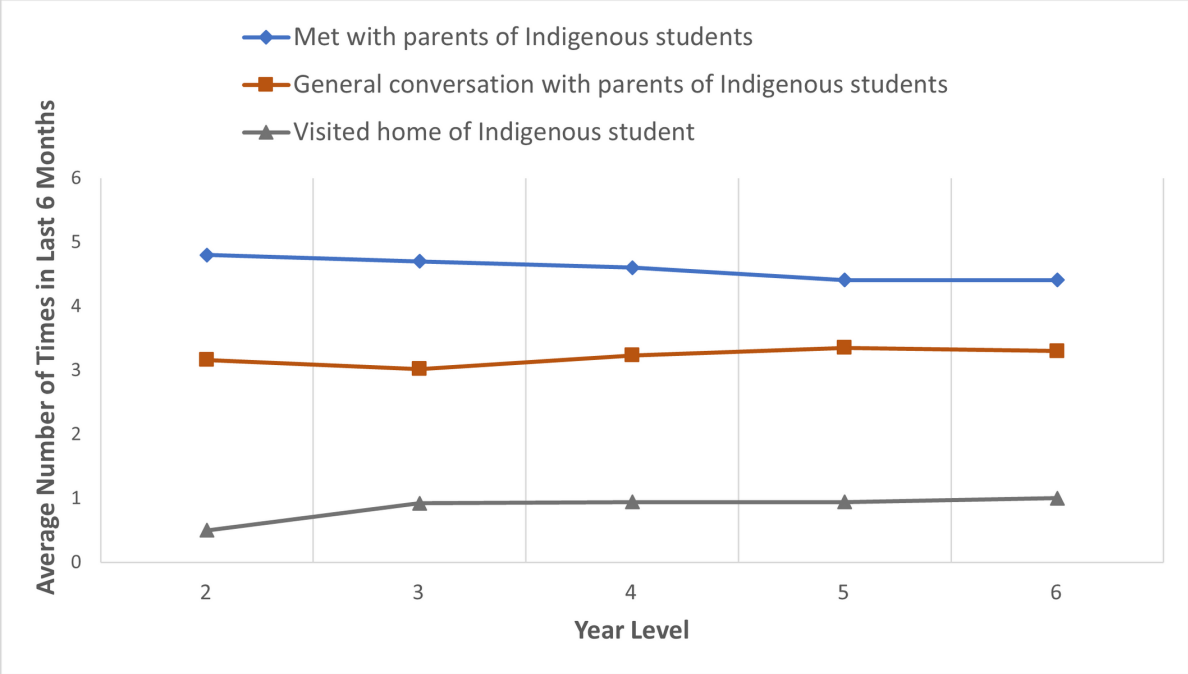
- Met with parents of Indigenous students.
- Had a general conversation with parents of Indigenous students.
- Visited home of Indigenous student.

The number of times in which these outreach activities occurred in the last 6 months were summed and averaged for each school-year level to create a community outreach score across primary school years (from Years 2 through 6, when most data were available). Higher scores represent higher frequencies of community involvement by teachers in these activities (**Figure 5.6**).

Highest community involvement was reported for meetings with parents of Indigenous students, which occurred 4.5 times, on average, in the previous six months. This remained relatively stable across the primary school years. General conversations with parents of Indigenous students occurred, on average, 3 times in the previous six months, with slight increases from Years 4 to 6. Less frequently, teachers visited the homes of Indigenous students, on average, on one occasion in the previous six months.

The influence of the sociodemographic variable for remoteness of family residence (major city, inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote) on community outreach activities was also examined. Teachers in very remote Australia had significantly higher community outreach scores compared to all other remoteness areas. Teachers in major cities had significantly lower community involvement compared to all other remoteness areas.

Figure 5.6 Teacher report on frequency of community outreach activities



Parents' trust in schools and parent reflections on school experiences

Parental level of trust in schools

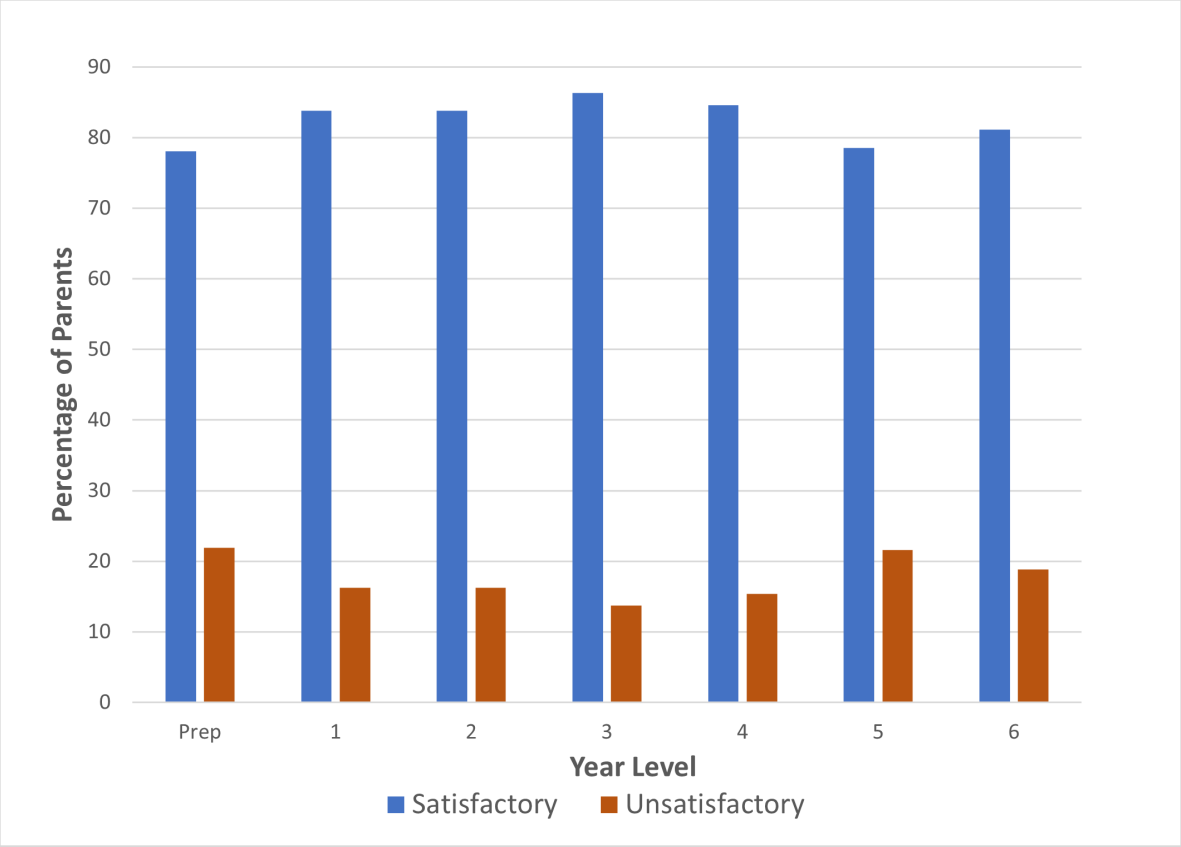
Many factors influence imbalance in power dynamics between schools and parents. As a result of power imbalance, breakdowns in communications between schools and parents can often occur, affecting levels of parent involvement. Parent trust in their child's school is an important indicator of parental confidence in teachers and other school personnel to provide quality education for their child (Lowe et al., 2019). Trust is built through quantity and quality of contact which parents have with schools and is also influenced by the strength of the communication channels built by schools to keep parents informed about their child's educational experiences.

Parent responses to the statement, "Your local school can be trusted", are reported for each school year level.

Five response categories were presented to parents (i.e., strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree). Responses were grouped into two categories to summarise the data: satisfactory level of parental trust in their local school (strongly agree / agree) and unsatisfactory levels of trust (neutral / disagree / strongly disagree).

As reported in **Figure 5.7**, satisfactory levels of trust were stable and high across the primary school years, with an average of 82% of parents reporting that they had high levels of trust in their local school, over time. Unsatisfactory levels of parental trust in the local school also remained relatively stable, across the school years, with slightly higher levels of 'distrust' at Preparatory, Year 5, and Year 6 of primary school. On average, almost one in five parents (18%) indicated lower levels of trust in their local school.

Figure 5.7 Parent reported level of trust in their local school



Parent reflections on their own school experiences and their children 's school experiences

In Wave 6 of LSIC, parents of children in the K cohort (aged approximately 10 years and in upper primary school) were asked to comment on two questions:

- *What was it like being Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander when you were at primary school?*
- *How does your child's school experience differ to yours?*

Both questions were framed to elicit the specific experiences of parents about primary school settings. The qualitative responses to both questions were coded using a constant comparative process to identify broad categories in responses.

Parent experiences of primary school

There were 441 responses to this question. As shown in **Table 5.1**, the strongest category of parental responses indicated positive school experiences as an Indigenous student (37%). The next strongest category is described as neutral responses (26%), with less expression of enthusiasm for school, although indicating that school was 'okay', 'alright', or 'no problems'. Negative school experiences were reported by 16% of parents. Racism was commonly noted. A proportion of responses (10%) was described as mixed, identifying both positive and negative elements of being an Indigenous student. A proportion of responses could not be classified (11%), because the responses did not align with the question asked. Examples include: 'did not attend school'; 'did not know that I was Indigenous'.

Table 5.1 Parent reflection on school experiences as an Indigenous person

Categories	Illustrative responses	Features of category
Positive experiences 37%	• *Great experiences, a lot of fun getting involved with NAIDOC day and Indigenous activities. Involved with [Indigenous] dance group.* • *Good, because it was a high percentage of [Indigenous] children in the school and I felt comfortable going to school.* • *We were proud to be [Indigenous] when we went to school*	Responses were positive in their tone and different levels of enthusiasm were evident. Common descriptive terms used included 'good' and 'proud': • Pride in being Indigenous. • Activities focused on culture. • Presence of other Indigenous students.
Neutral reactions 26%	• *It was alright in [place] but we were the odd ones out.* • *It was good. A little bit of racism here and there but it was OK.* • *Ok, no problems, big [Indigenous] community*	Responses had less enthusiasm than in first category, without expression of strong feelings. Common descriptive terms included: 'okay', 'alright', 'no problems'.
Negative experiences 16%	• *I was the only [Indigenous] person at the school and I didn't like it.* • *Hard. Racism. We were the only [Indigenous] kids in our school.* • *I didn't talk about it; everybody used to look down on me.*	Reponses conveyed unhappiness with school experiences. Racism was commonly mentioned and the sense of isolation in being the only Indigenous student.
Mixed experiences 10%	• *I was pretty lucky. …. I felt I wasn't treated any differently, but I would witness my brother and sister getting bullied.* • *It was alright but we did put up with racism at the time and handled it in our own way.* • *I always was proud to be black, but we didn't learn any [Indigenous] history.*	Mixed emotions were expressed, with both positive and negative experiences identified in responses.

How does your child's school experience differ from your experience?

Categories are listed in **Table 5.2**. There were 441 responses, among which 7% of responses could not be classified in relation to the focus of the question. The strongest response category (34%) focused on positive changes to school policies and practices; followed by another category of positive responses (26%) focused on the increased multicultural nature of schools and increased social acceptance of Indigenous children at school, including mention of less racism; 22% of parents indicated that schooling and children's experiences were similar to their own experiences; 12% noted negative experiences.

Table 5.2 Parent reflections on how child's school experiences differ compared to parent

Categories	Illustrative responses	Features of category
Positive changes in school policies and practice **34%**	• *… they're learning about [Indigenous] heritage now, and they do this in all classes whether the children are Indigenous or not.* • *… they have an [Indigenous] person working with the children one day per week, telling them dreamtime stories and about [Indigenous] culture.* • *… they acknowledge [Indigenous] culture, they do welcome to country at school and fly the [Indigenous] flag at school.*	School level positive changes, including increased recognition of Indigenous heritage and culture in school programs; greater supports for Indigenous students; presence of Indigenous teachers and teaching assistants.
Positive changes in social environments and greater social acceptance **26%**	• *[Indigenous children] are more accepted now* • *People like having Indigenous friends now; the culture of the school is friendly* • *She is at a very good school and if there were any racial issues the school acts appropriately.*	Schools have become more multicultural, and attention given to minimising racism; more Indigenous children at school with greater acceptance.
Similar experiences to parent, although positive and negative elements **22%**	• *They spend their day indoors but have more advanced lessons.* • *The same, no problems.* • *… The people that I grew up with children … they are growing up with my children.*	Similar experiences to parents. Parent may be still living in same community. Racism noted but indicated that it may be different or hidden.
Negative changes in school and social environments **12%**	• *When you look at the school today there are very few male teachers and most of the teachers are white* • *No stability with teaching staff* • *Racism is done under the radar*	Focused on school practices and teaching environments; continued evidence for racism.

The views of parents in relation to what it is like to be an Indigenous primary school student, then and now, are diverse. This reflects the very diverse geographic locations in which LSIC families live and the diversity inherent in schools and the qualities of teaching staff. Parents have identified some of the features that contribute to positive experiences that are well aligned with other quantitative and qualitative findings across this report, including in Chapter 3 (Teacher Cultural Competency Training and Racism) and in Chapter 4 (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education).

Specifically, some parents noted the increased representation of Indigenous children and staff in their schools. Indigenous knowledges embedded within schools was a positive element. Contributing to negative school experiences were teachers' low expectations for their children; high staff turnover rates; and continued racism (at times, covertly). In Chapter 6, we report children's views on what would make school better, and children also pointed to the high turnover rate of staff as a key issue. In Chapter 3, we made strong recommendations on an Indigenous Education Workforce study and strategic plan on staffing. The data in this chapter provide further support of the need for such an initiative.

Parental involvement and children's academic achievement: Longitudinal models

In the final section of this chapter, longitudinal analytic models explore the influence of parent involvement and parental expectations for their children's academic achievement in primary school. In these hierarchical regression analyses, two predictive models investigate if parental involvement in mid-primary school (Years 3 and 4) influences academic achievement in reading and numeracy (NAPLAN) at Year 5, after taking account of the family demographics, child factors, and school factors on academic achievement.

The influence of parental involvement on children's academic outcomes has been extensively studied in the international research literature across the last three decades with different populations of families. Few studies have examined parent-school involvement and academic outcomes for Australian Indigenous children.

We explore if parent-school involvement and parental educational expectations for their children's future education have an impact on academic outcomes, over and above, the contributions of the following variables included in the analytic models.

- ***Socio-demographic influences****:* These variables were identified, earlier in this chapter, as linked with parent involvement (i.e., remoteness of family residence, parent education, and family socio-economic circumstances).
- ***Children's developmental readiness for school:*** Preschool to Year 1 (*Who am I?*).
- ***School-related influences:***
  - Percentage of Indigenous enrolments at the child's school.
  - Parent evaluation of teachers' practices to engage parents across Years 3 and 4 using a composite measure derived from the data, as presented in **Figure 5.3**.

Finally, two key variables of interest in the models to predict academic achievement were added:

- ***Parent involvement in school-based activities****,* across Years 3 and 4, using a composite measure from data presented in **Figure 5.1**.
- ***Parent educational expectations for their child***, with measured options, ranging from leaving school before completion of secondary school to completion of postgraduate education.

Outcome variables in the analytic models were scores for reading comprehension and numeracy, taken from the NAPLAN assessment data gathered during Year 5 of school.

See **Table 5.3** for the variables included and the results of the analytic models. Findings indicate that in predicting academic achievement (**reading comprehension** and **numeracy at Year 5)**:

- Socio-economic variables and school-related variables did not make significant contributions.
- Strong school readiness skills in early primary school (*Who Am I?*) made significant contributions to academic outcomes (reading and numeracy).
- Parent involvement in school-based activities, measured at Years 3 and 4 of school, significantly contributed to academic outcomes (reading and numeracy).

Table 5.3 Parental involvement and children's academic achievement for NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy at Year 5

Variables included in the analyses (N= 552)	**NAPLAN Reading Year 5**	**NAPLAN Numeracy Year 5**
Variance accounted (R^2)	10%	10%
	β	**β**
Socio-demographic factors		
Family socio-economic status	0.06	0.08
Gender (female)	0.07	0.04
Parent education	- 0.03	0.01
Remoteness	- 0.07	- 0.03
Child skills		
School readiness: *Who Am I?* (Preschool – Year 1)	**0.14*** **	**0.13*** **
School-related factors		
Indigenous enrolments	-0.07	-0.01
Parent evaluation of teachers' involvement (Years 3 & 4)	0.04	0.05
Parent-related factors		
Parent involvement in school activities (Years 3 & 4)	**0.12****	**0.10***
Parent educational expectations	0.06	0.07

Note: β coefficients rounded to 2 decimal places: * p = .05; ** p = .01; *** p ≤ .001

Implications and recommendations

Policy and practice

School participation and involvement by Indigenous families have been impacted by past educational policies and practices. Schools actively excluded Indigenous peoples and were not welcoming places for Indigenous children. There have been low expectations for learning and achievement and such views were strongly held by teachers (Higgins & Morley, 2014). While Indigenous children bring rich cultural competence to school settings, this has not always been valued by teachers within educational systems (Fogarty et al., 2018). The consequences of this schism have contributed to children's disengagement from school and from education.

Support in schools to engage parents and build stronger parental involvement in children's learning at home and school addresses current national policy goals for education, specifically, Closing the Gap Targets (Coalition of Peaks, 2020). Parent involvement contributes to stronger school achievement for children in primary school and beyond. The longitudinal modelling, in this chapter, identified that parent-school involvement was associated with stronger academic outcomes at Year 5, together with the level of children's school readiness skills. These associations are relevant to **Closing the Gap - Targets 4 and 5**, as predictors in the models evaluating the contribution of parental involvement to stronger academic outcomes in reading and numeracy at Year 5 of primary school.

Evidence from LSIC data presented in this chapter indicated **high and consistent levels of parental involvement in children's schooling across primary school. Additionally, high levels of student engagement in learning are also identified in the next chapter, Chapter 6. These findings should be communicated widely and celebrated**. This evidence addresses and refutes prevailing stereotypes that Indigenous families are not supportive of children's learning and school engagement.

Lowe et al. (2019) identifies some critical challenges in the concept of parent involvement for Indigenous families, as well as identifying the barriers that work against building authentic partnerships with families by school systems. Parental involvement can be successful in lifting children's learning outcomes if schools establish genuine collaboration with Indigenous families. **Schools need exemplary leadership to build school policies and practices to prevent the marginalisation of Indigenous families.** Meaningful relational strategies are needed to ensure trust and respect between all stakeholders in educational contexts (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008) and to empower Indigenous families and communities.

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, **teacher preparation in terms of cultural competence, along with more consistent and equitable embedding of Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies** within ALL schools can make a difference to children's learning and enhance family-school connections.

Future research directions

In this chapter, and in prior research, parent involvement in children's primary school education has been associated with children's later academic achievement. Further research is required to identify how parental involvement can be built across educational systems by policies and practices developed across schools and by teachers that build and maintain parental involvement in children's learning at home and at school.

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Chapter 6:

Engagement and Attendance Across Primary School

The way that children feel engaged in their learning, and in their school environment, is important for both their wellbeing and academic achievement. While much policy attention has focussed on attendance levels of Indigenous Australian children (Australian Government, 2020), attendance is only one potential indicator of engagement, and is not particularly sensitive to the family and cultural contexts of children. Further, the assumed link between attendance and positive academic outcomes for children does not apply universally for all students (Baxter & Meyers, 2019).

We argue that *engagement while at school*, as shown across behavioural (doing), cognitive (thinking), and emotional (feeling) domains will be the best indicator of children's learning and wellbeing and will indeed drive attendance. That is, children with strong engagement will be more likely to also have higher attendance levels. A focus on engagement is also important because schools and teachers have the capacity to influence engagement through the ways they interact with children and families (see Chapter 5), and the ways they provide culturally appropriate educational programming (See Chapters 4 and 5).

Past, largely cross-sectional, LSIC research has reported relatively high levels of school engagement for primary school students, with higher engagement on some indices in more isolated areas (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2006; Dunstan et al., 2017).

Children's positive feelings about school (affective engagement) have been linked with good relationships with peers and teachers (Dunstan et al., 2017), and girls have generally reported higher levels of engagement than boys (Biddle et al., 2019; Dunstan et al., 2017). There have been few consistent links between family socio-demographic and children's school engagement in LSIC studies.

In this chapter we explore ideas of children's engagement **across** the primary school years (longitudinally) in the LSIC data for the first time. Specifically, we address:

- What are the patterns of engagement for LSIC children across time?
- Are there children who are more or less likely to show strong engagement in school across time?
- How is engagement related to academic achievement and wellbeing?
- Are there any school, teacher, and classroom factors that help to support engagement?
- What can children tell us about how school could be more engaging?

We also report data related to attendance but do not include attendance as part of our understanding of school engagement for the reasons discussed above. Our section on attendance below explores questions related to:

- What is children's level of attendance?
- What are the reasons for non-attendance?
- How is attendance related to engagement?
- What strategies do teachers use to promote attendance?
- What strategies do teachers use to help children catch up if they have not been attending?

What are our key findings?

How engaged were children in school?

- Around half of the children in the study showed very high and consistent levels of engagement across the primary school years.
- Girls were more likely to show strong engagement than boys.
- Engagement was unrelated to remoteness or to levels of Indigenous children in the local community.
- Weak engagement was associated with higher experiences of financial and life stress and lower socioeconomic status.

What outcomes were associated with strong school engagement?

- Children with strong engagement across primary school had better academic achievement and wellbeing.
- Stronger engagement by children was linked with increased parental involvement in school-based activities, high and increasing rates of teacher outreach to families, positive school climate, and caring teacher styles as perceived by children.
- Children in the strongly engaged group tended to have fewer experiences of racist bullying.

What supports school engagement?

- Strong engagement across primary school was supported by strong early developmental competencies, children's social skills, positive school climate and cultural safety, positive teacher-student relationships, and teacher-parent engagement.
- Lower levels of teacher-student conflict in the middle years of primary were the most important single predictor for cognitive engagement, over and above any socio-demographic factors, or children's skills at school entry.
- Also important was a high reading self-concept, fewer peer problems, higher levels of teacher outreach to parents (as reported by parents), and stronger prosocial skills.
- Children's own perceptions about what should change at school are well aligned with the quantitative models and include staffing issues, addressing bullying, and reducing homework.

What needs to be done?

- A focus on building early skills of attention and fine motor skills, both prior to school and also in the early school years, will support engagement.
- Particular attention to educational and engagement approaches that would benefit boys is needed.
- A focus on positive student-teacher relationships is essential and, in particular, a reduction in teacher-student conflict across the primary school years will support student engagement.
- Support for early positive peer relationships will enhance engagement.
- An evidence-based review of homework policies and their potential negative impacts on parent and child school engagement is warranted.
- As parents' perceptions on how children were managing school were a very useful indicator of children's overall level of engagement, teachers can draw on parents' knowledge in this area – if parents are concerned about how children are managing, teachers and parents can work together to support engagement.

Defining and measuring engagement in LSIC

We used the student engagement literature to help conceptualise engagement in the LSIC data. Specifically, we looked for measures that could represent the three types of engagement that are generally agreed upon: emotional, behavioural, and cognitive. In **Table 6.1** we provide general definitions of these and note the LSIC measures that we selected to represent them. To maximise available data, we created scores for each measure that represented early, mid, or later primary school. That is, we combined Preparatory to Year 2 measures (**early**), Year 3 and Year 4 measures (**mid**), and Year 5 and Year 6 measures (**senior**). Measure selection was based on availability in LSIC for at least two of the early, mid, or late points in time, and where the measures and structural nature of composite scores worked similarly across the B and K cohort.

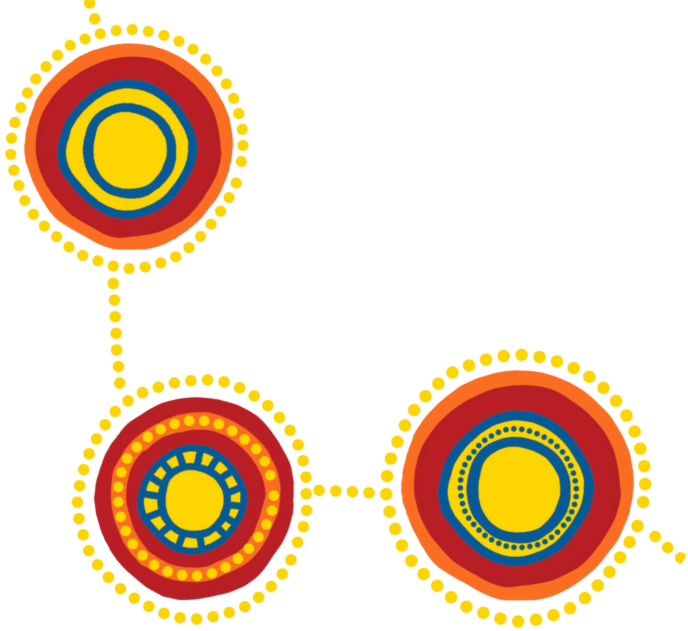
For a different approach to understanding school engagement and measures that can be used in LSIC to explore this area, please see Biddle et al. (2019). While we considered school liking and avoidance as per the Biddle LSIC education report (2019), they recommend different measure structures across the cohort variously representing liking or avoidance, so we do not use this construct here. Instead, we selected three different components of engagement to allow for a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of engagement across time.

Table 6.1 Measures used to create longitudinal profiles of student engagement in LSIC

Engagement dimension	General definition	LSIC measures used	Example items
Emotional	Students' social and emotional attachment to school. Students' levels of interest, feelings of belonging, connectedness, identification and relatedness to their peers, teachers and the school overall.	Parent report (single item) on how much child likes teacher (4-point scale ranging from 'not at all' to 'a lot'). Teacher report on closeness to the child – composite of 8 items each rated on a 5-point scale from 'definitely does not apply' to 'definitely applies' (Student Teacher Relationship Scale; Pianta, 1992) as per Biddle et al., 2019.	I share an affectionate, warm relationship with child
Behavioural	Student conduct. Behavioural engagement is indicated by prosocial conduct, such as spending time on homework or participating in extracurricular activities. Behavioural disengagement is frequently in focus with indicators such as absenteeism, suspensions, disruptive classroom behaviour.	Parent report on how well child is managing school - composite of 5 items each rated on a 5-point scale from 'not very well at all' to 'extremely well'. Number of times school has contacted parents about child's behaviour (parent report) – totalled during period and reversed so that score represented lower contacts about behaviour and thus greater positive behavioural engagement.	How well do you think [child's name] is managing in school with: a) school work; b) making friends; c) being good; d) feeling strong; e) knowing where to be and when.
Cognitive	Students' investments in academic tasks, their dispositions towards schoolwork, or persistence in the face of academic difficulty.	Approaches to learning (composite of teacher report on 6 items, each rated on a 4-point scale from 'never' to 'often') Child report on academic self-concept – one scale for each of maths and reading. Composite of 3 items, each rated on a 6-point scale from 'never' to 'always'.	Keeps belongings organised; works independently; persists in completing tasks. I am good at reading; I learn fast in reading. I like maths; I learn fast in maths.

What are the patterns of engagement for LSIC children across time?

We used the data described above to conduct a latent profile analysis which found three groups of children within the dataset. Each group had different profiles of engagement across time (see **Figure 6.1** for a simplified graphic, and **Figure 6.2** for further details).



Latent profile analysis is a person-centred approach that allows for statistically significant different sub-groups within a larger group to be found. These sub-groups (classes or profiles) are more like each other than they are like the other sub-groups. This approach can be particularly useful in longitudinal analyses where measures change across time, as it does not require the same measures at each time point. Further details on this analysis are provided in the Technical Appendix.

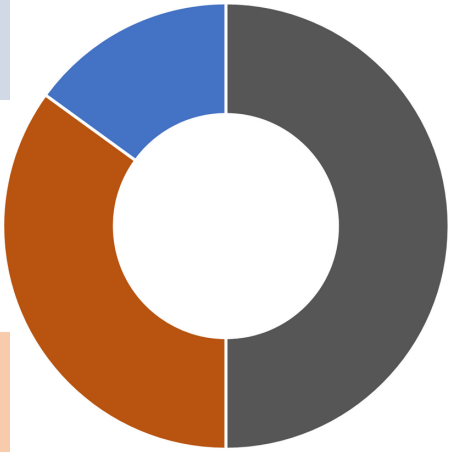
Strongly engaged group: 50% of children showed high and stable levels of engagement across emotional, behavioural, and cognitive domains across primary school (grey line in **Figure 6.2**)

Strong self-concept/ weakly engaged group: 35% of children were in a group characterised by strong academic self-concept, but weak engagement in other areas (orange line in **Figure 6.2**).

Low self-concept/ weakly engaged group: 15% of children were in a group characterised by the lowest levels of academic self-concept in this analysis, and low levels in other areas of engagement (blue line in **Figure 6.2**).

Figure 6.1 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.

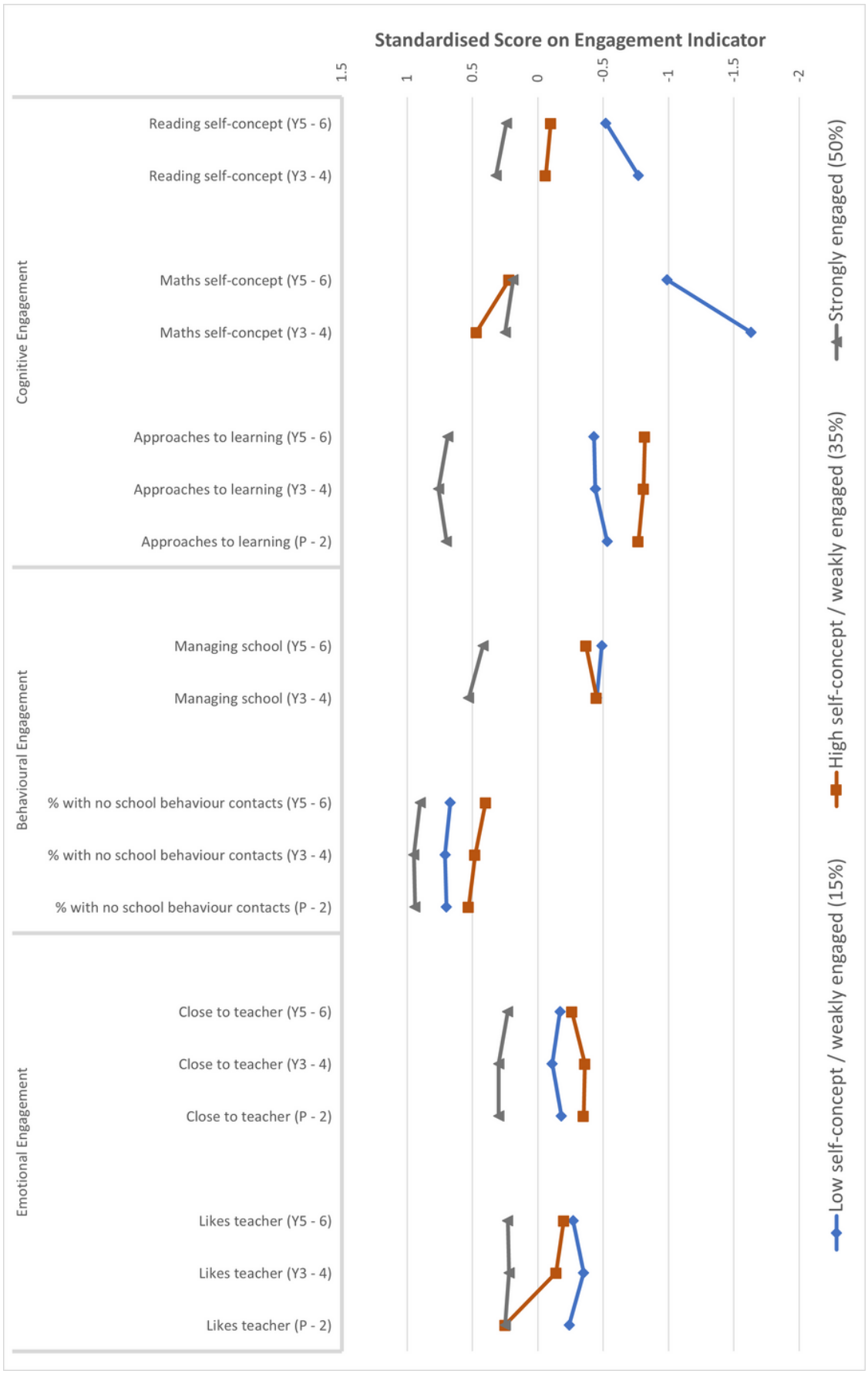


Strongly engaged group (50%)
High and stable emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement across primary school.

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.

Overall, this tells us that **most children in LSIC are highly and consistently engaged with school across the primary school years**. For both weakly engaged groups, there appears to be some change over time in some aspects of engagement. For example, the high self-concept / weakly engaged group began with similar levels of liking their teacher in the early years as the strongly engaged group but showed a decline over time. For the low self-concept / weakly engaged group, both maths and reading self-concept showed an increase across the middle to later years of primary school.

Figure 6.2 Three profiles of student primary school engagement and their standardised scores on the items used to indicate engagement



Were there children who were more or less likely to show strong engagement in school across time?

We explored the characteristics of the children who made up each of the three engagement profiles described above and found the following.

Child and family factors

- **Boys** were much more likely to be in the high self-concept / weakly engaged group (69% of this group were boys).
- **Girls** were more likely to be in the strongly engaged group (64% of this group were girls).
- Children in the **strongly engaged group lived across various areas of remoteness** from major cities through to very remote.
- In terms of **socio-economic status** (as measured by the IRISEO), the strongly engaged and low self-concept / weakly engaged groups had similar levels of IRISEO that were slightly but significantly higher than the high self-concept / weakly engaged group.
- In terms of **family experience** of financial stress and **significant life events**, children in the high self-concept / weakly engaged group experienced higher levels of these consistently across early, mid, and senior primary school compared to the other engagement groups.
- In relation to **parent education**, the high self-concept / weakly engaged group had significantly lower levels of parent education compared to the other two groups.
- Factors that were not related to engagement profile membership were: child age at school entry and number of people living in the household.

Community factors

- Children in the high self-concept / weakly engaged group were slightly more likely to be in **communities with higher levels of child developmental vulnerability at school entry** (AEDC; 23% vulnerable on 2 or more domains) compared to children in the strongly engaged (19%) and low self-concept / weakly engaged groups (21%).
- **Community socio-economic levels** across the three engagement groups did not differ in early primary school, but by mid and senior primary school, the high self-concept / weakly engaged group had slightly but significantly lower SEIFA scores than the other two engagement groups.
- There were no systematic differences between the three engagement groups in relation to the percentage of Indigenous children in their community.

Early child development

- Children in the strongly engaged group had significantly higher **attentional regulation** across the transition to school (Preschool to Year 1) than children in the other engagement profiles.
- Both the strongly engaged and low self-concept / weak engagement groups had significantly **higher emotional regulation** scores than the strong self-concept / weak engagement group.
- Children in the strongly engaged group had significantly higher scores on the *Who Am I?* **school readiness** assessment.
- There were no differences across the engagement groups on the Renfrew word finding test, a measure of expressive vocabulary in English, or how many words children know when they are asked to name some pictures.

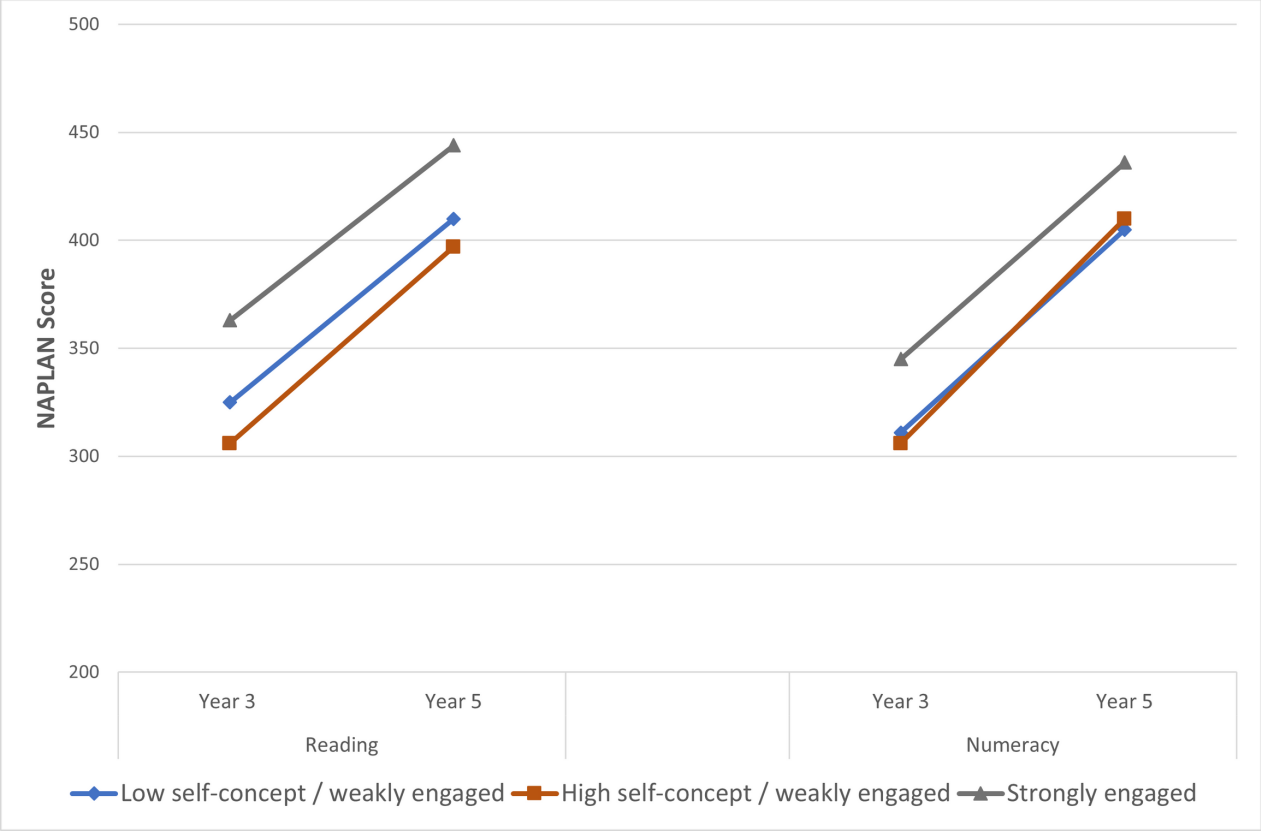
Summary: Overall, this suggests that the strongly engaged and low self-concept /weakly engaged groups were quite similar socio-demographically, despite their different profiles in terms of student engagement. The 35% of students in the high self-concept / weakly engaged group experienced more socio-demographic challenges in relation to financial stress and significant life events and were also more likely to be boys. In terms of children's early skills, attentional regulation, emotional regulation, and early pen and paper and fine motor skills (as measured through the *Who Am I?* school readiness assessment) were linked with greater primary school engagement for children.

How is engagement related to academic achievement and wellbeing?

We examined academic achievement and wellbeing measures for the children across the three different engagement profiles and found:

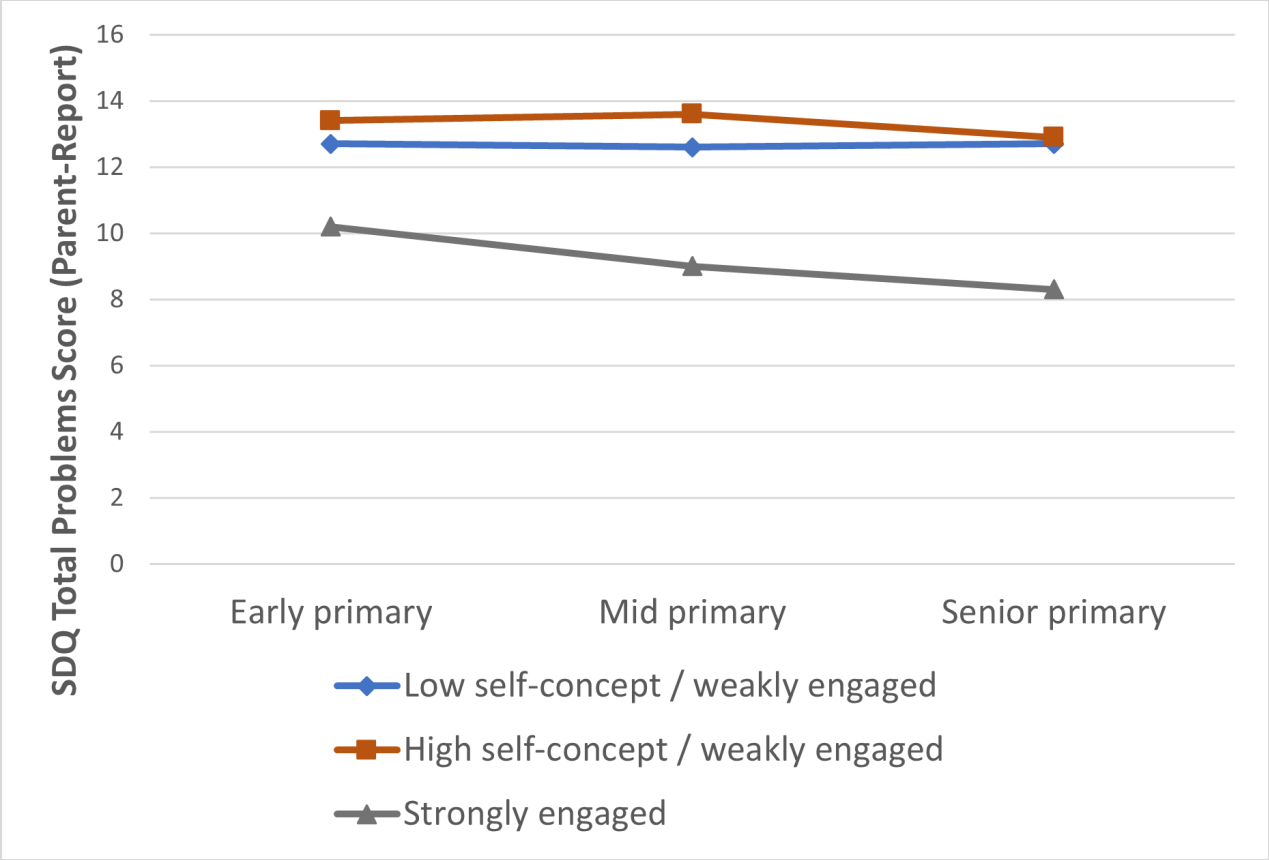
- For **academic achievement, the strongly engaged group had significantly higher Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN scores on both reading and numeracy** while both weakly engaged groups had similar achievement scores as each other, which were significantly lower than the strongly engaged group. As shown in **Figure 6.3**, all groups showed academic growth over time (as measured by NAPLAN reading and numeracy); however, the strongly engaged group had higher achievement scores at both Year 3 and Year 5. This difference in academic achievement across the groups was also present earlier in primary school. In Year 1, children in the strongly engaged group had significantly higher scores on the Progressive Achievement Test for Reading, and the teacher-reported Academic Rating Scales for mathematics than the other engagement groups. It should be noted that here we used raw NAPLAN scale scores rather than years of progress and so the actual progress gaps between the engagement groups over time may indeed have been wider in Year 5 than is shown here (Goss et al., 2016).

Figure 6.3 Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN reading and numeracy results for each of the three school engagement groups



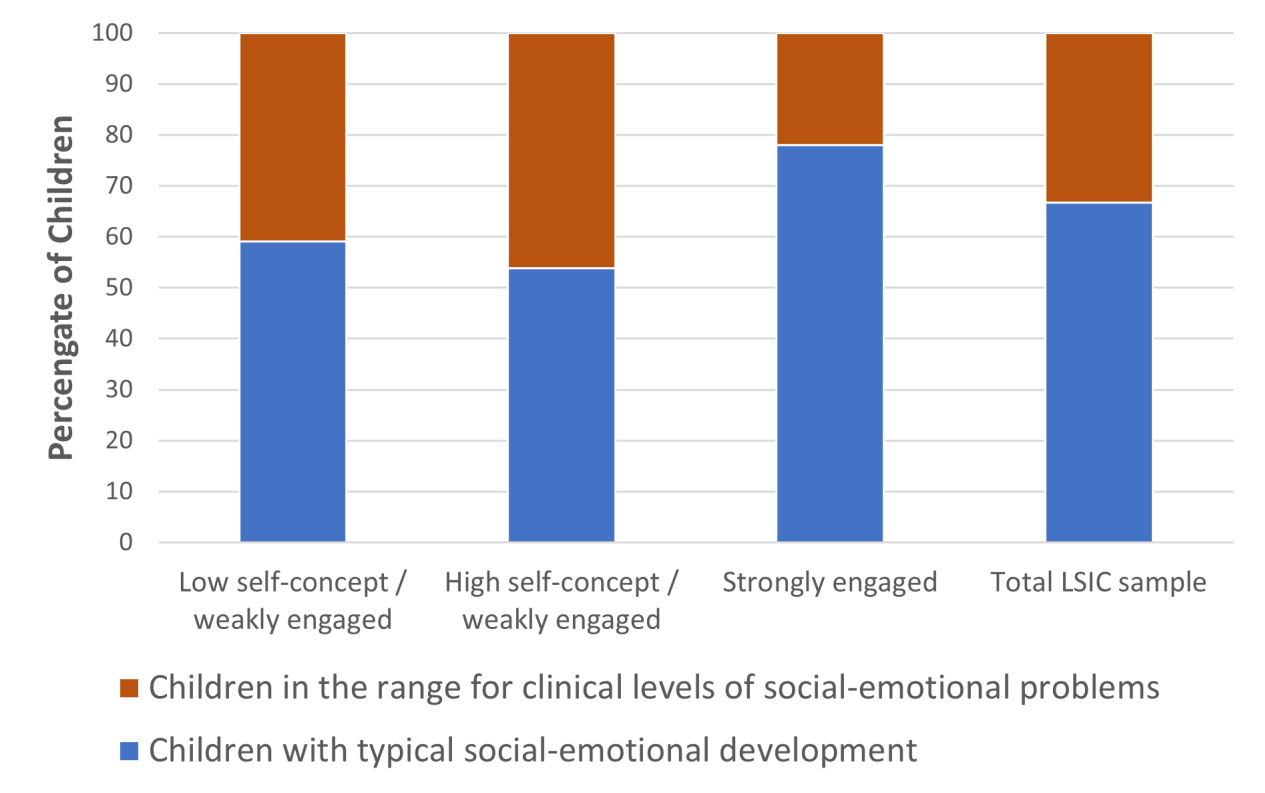
- In relation to **social emotional wellbeing** as measured by parent report on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), children in the strongly engaged group showed significantly fewer total problems across primary school than both weakly engaged groups. As shown in **Figure 6.4**, these differences were evident in early primary school, but wellbeing gaps across the engagement groups widened over time, with **the strongly engaged group showing a reduction in problems while levels of parent-reported problems remained relatively high and stable for the weakly engaged groups.**

Figure 6.4 Parent-reported total social-emotional-behavioural problems across engagement groups and primary school



We also examined for mid primary school (Years 3 and 4), whether children's total problems scores on the SDQ would place them in the range for clinical concern. As shown in **Figure 6.5, levels of parent-reported social-emotional-behavioural problems that met the criteria for concern were less prevalent, though still present, in the strongly engaged group, and were highest in weakly engaged groups.**

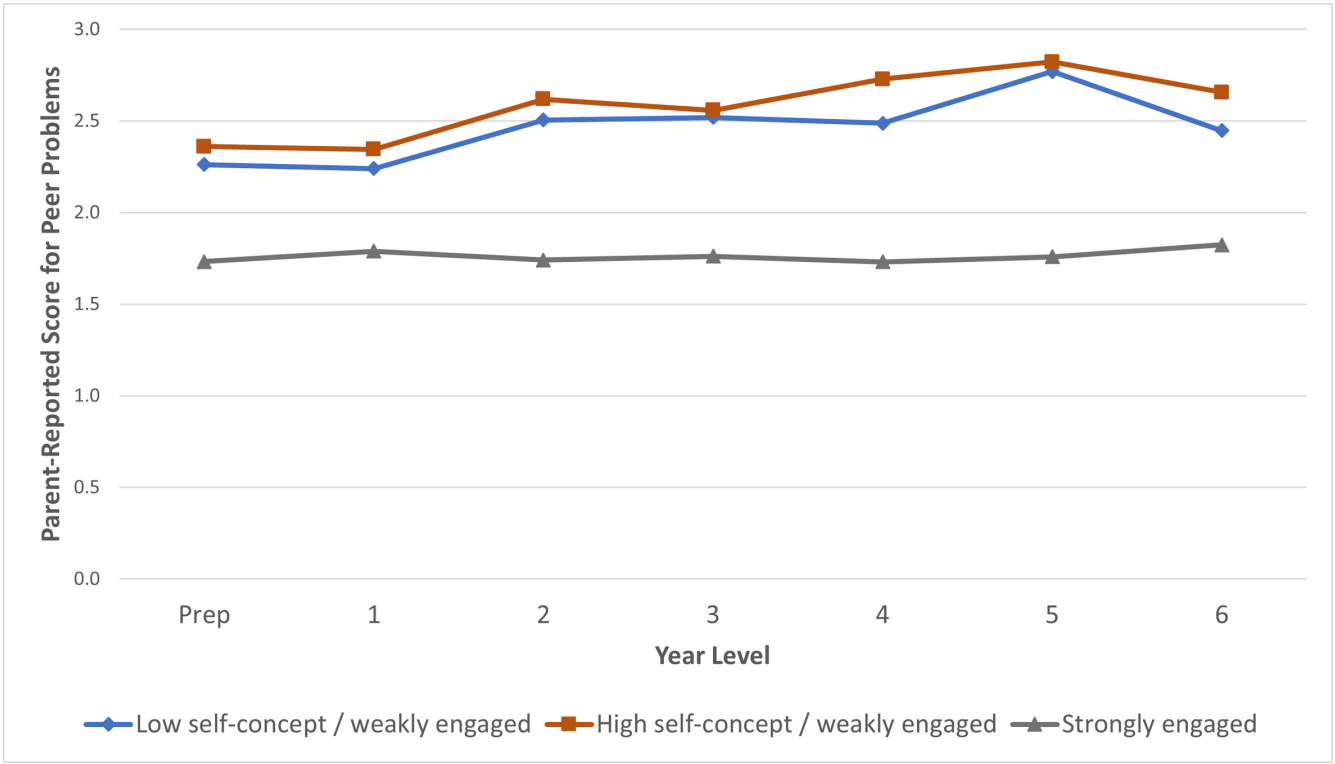
Figure 6.5 Portion of children in each of the engagement groups and in the full LSIC sample who are in the range indicating clinically significant concern



As well as overall social-emotional development as measured by the total problems score on the SDQ, we wanted to examine two SDQ constructs in more depth. Relating to peers and developing social networks within the school setting are important parts of primary school life. We therefore examined parent-reports on the SDQ peer problems subscale (e.g., picked on or bullied by other children) and the prosocial subscale (e.g., considerate of other people's feelings).

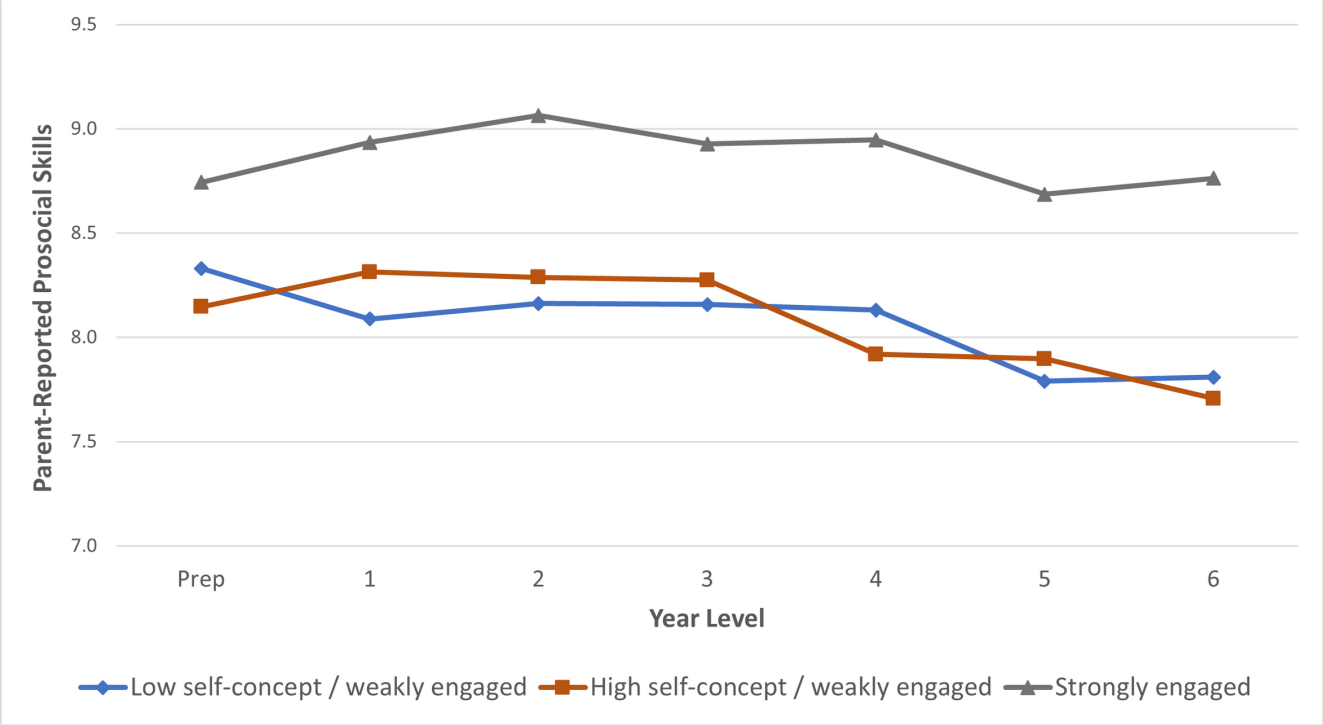
***Children in the* strongly engaged group had relatively low and stable levels of peer problems *compared to children in the weakly engaged groups, who had higher and generally increasing levels of peer problems over the primary years* (Figure 6.6).**

Figure 6.6 Parent-reported peer problems on the SDQ for each engagement group across the primary years



In relation to parent-reported prosocial skills, c**hildren in the strongly engaged group generally had higher levels of these skills across time that increased or remained stable** depending on the time period. Children in the weakly engaged groups showed lower skills overall which generally decreased across time (**Figure 6.7**).

Figure 6.7 Parent-reported prosocial skills on the SDQ for each engagement group across the primary years



In terms of parents' ratings of children's* overall health*, on average, all children were rated in very good health across their primary school years. However, there were some trends across the engagement groups, with the strongly engaged group rated slightly but significantly higher in their overall health by their parents compared to the weakly engaged groups.

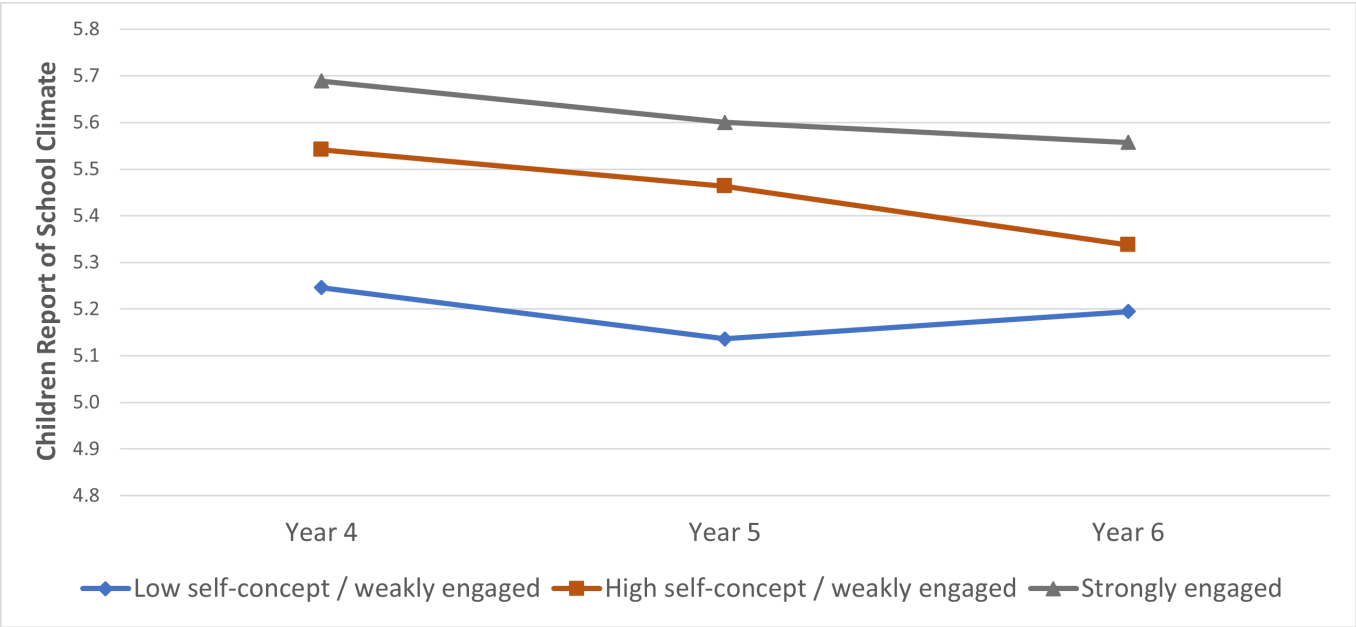
Are there any school, teacher, and classroom factors that help to support engagement?

We explored whether there were any key differences across the engagement profiles in terms of their school context and experiences.

Children's perspectives on school, classroom and teacher

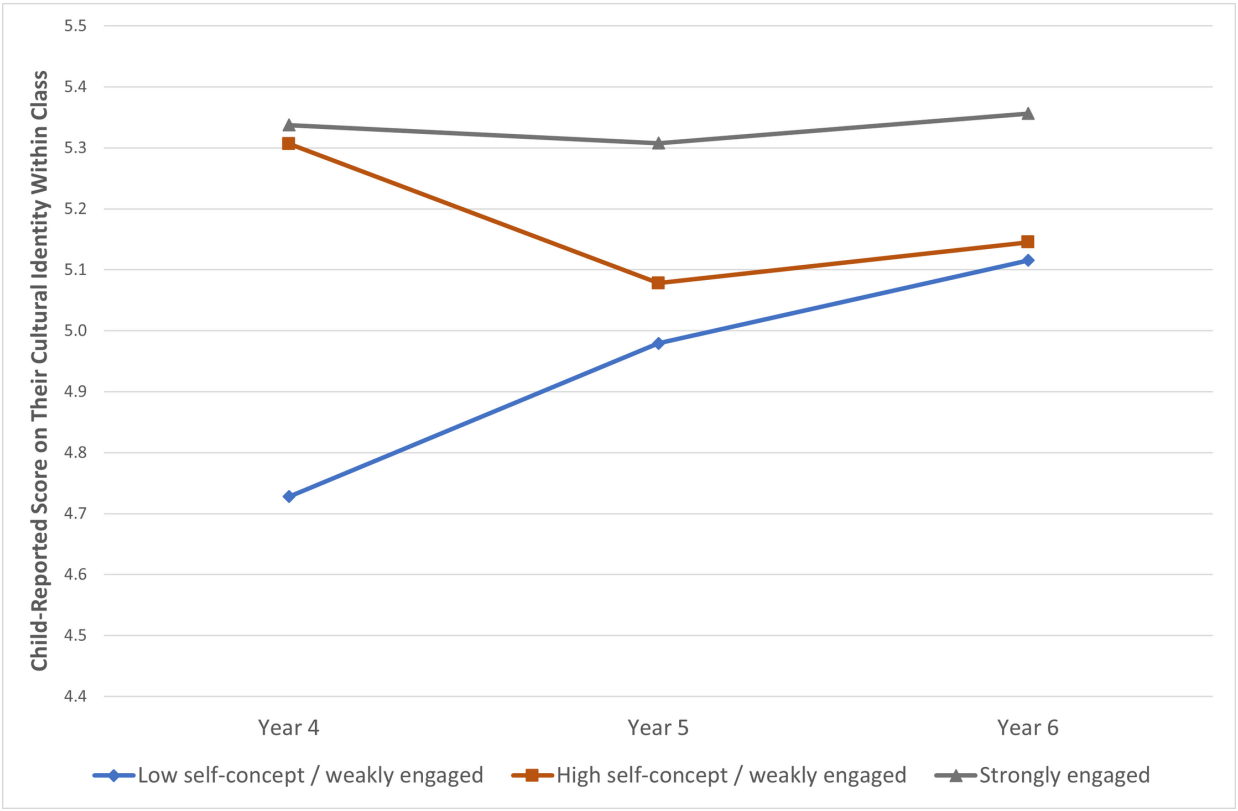
- We examined children's reports of **school climate** in Years 4, 5, and 6. This scale includes items about how safe, trustworthy, and caring the school environment is for children. On average, ratings were high, with children feeling their school climate was largely very positive. However, we did find that the **low self-concept / weakly engaged group rated school climate significantly lower compared to the other engagement groups at Year 4 and Year 5.** Overall, children's ratings of school climate decreased over time, with the sharp decline in school climate for the high self-concept / weakly engaged group meaning that, by Year 6, they were significantly lower on this score compared to the strongly engaged group, even though earlier differences were not significant **(Figure 6.8)**.

Figure 6.8 Child report of school climate across the engagement groups and Years 4, 5 and 6



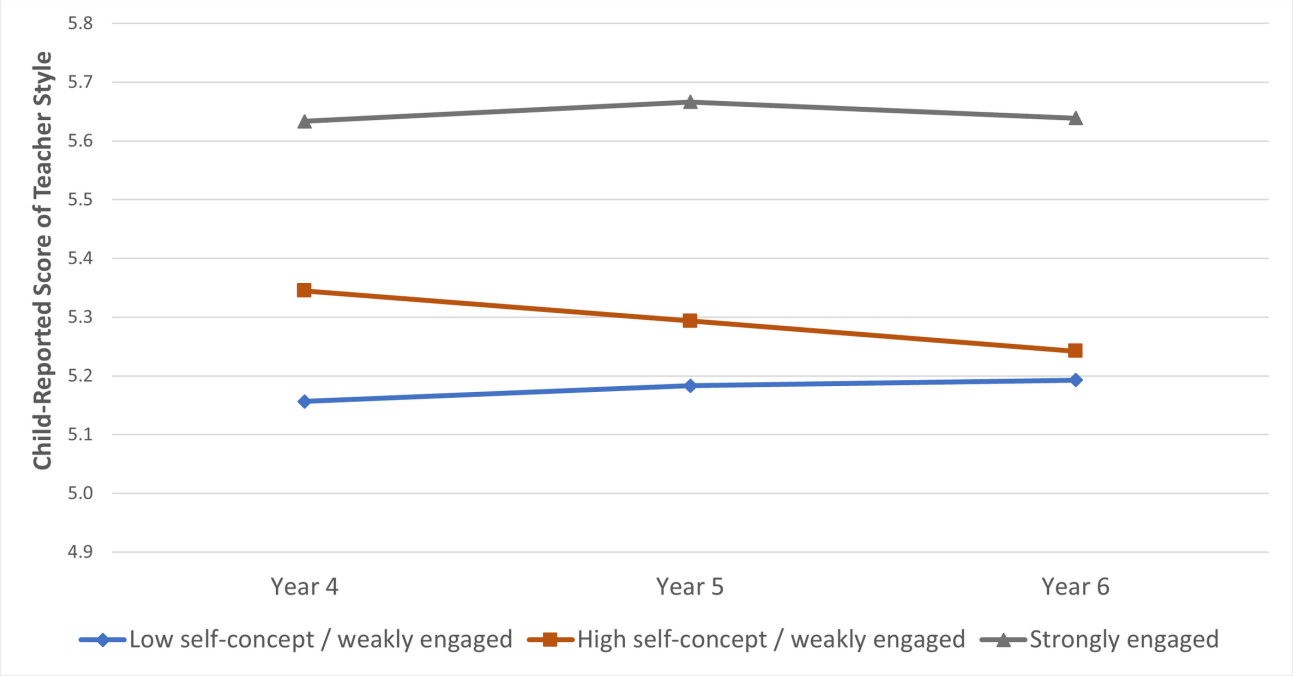
- We looked at children's reports of their own **cultural identity** within their classrooms. This is a scale made up of items that ask students how often they feel good about being Indigenous in the class, want to share things about being Indigenous, and feel safe to do so. The composite score created can range from 1 to 6 with higher scores reflecting higher cultural safety. Average scores across the sample were high, generally 5 or above. However, as shown in **Figure 6.9,** there were some slight but significant differences among the engagement groups. Both the strongly engaged and low self-concept / weakly engaged groups remained stable or improved in their feelings of cultural safety within their classroom while **the high self-concept / weakly engaged group showed a sharp decline in their experience of their cultural identity at school, particularly from Year 4 to Year 5.**

Figure 6.9 Child-reported scores on their experience of safety in their own cultural identity within their classrooms across the engagement groups



We also examined children's reports of their **teachers' style** (Biddle et al., 2019), which includes items related to whether teachers make class a fun place to be, are fair, and listen and understand children. Scores on the composite could range from 1 to 6. As shown in **Figure 6.10**, overall, children across LSIC scored teacher style highly (above 5 out of 6) across their senior years of primary school. There were some small but significant differences across the engagement groups with **the strongly engaged group rating their teachers higher than the other two engagement groups.**

Figure 6.10 Child-reported scores on their teachers' style across the engagement groups

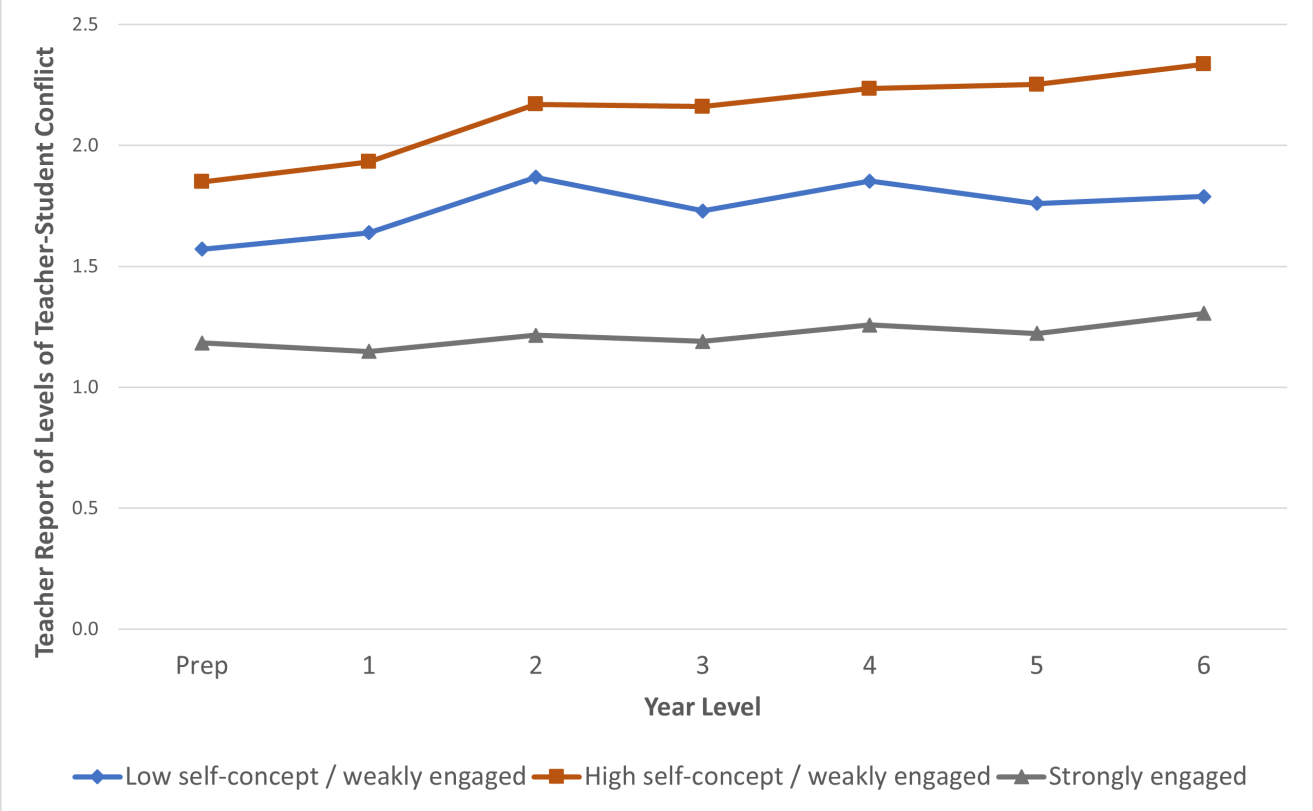


Teacher-child relationships

Teachers reported on two constructs tapping their relationships with students: closeness and conflict. We used the measure of closeness to represent part of emotional engagement in our engagement profiles (early in this chapter), which showed that **more close and warm relationships with teachers across the primary school years meant children were more likely to be in the strongly engaged group.**

Here we examine differences between the engagement groups on their teacher-reported scores for **student-teacher conflict**. Potential scores on this scale range from 1 to 5, with 5 representing a very high level of student-teacher conflict, and 1 representing no conflict. Overall, children in the LSIC study had relatively low levels of conflict with teachers, but as shown in the **Figure 6.11, for children in both weakly engaged groups there were higher levels of teacher-child conflict in the early years of school**, compared to children in the strongly engaged group, and this level of conflict tended to increase over time.

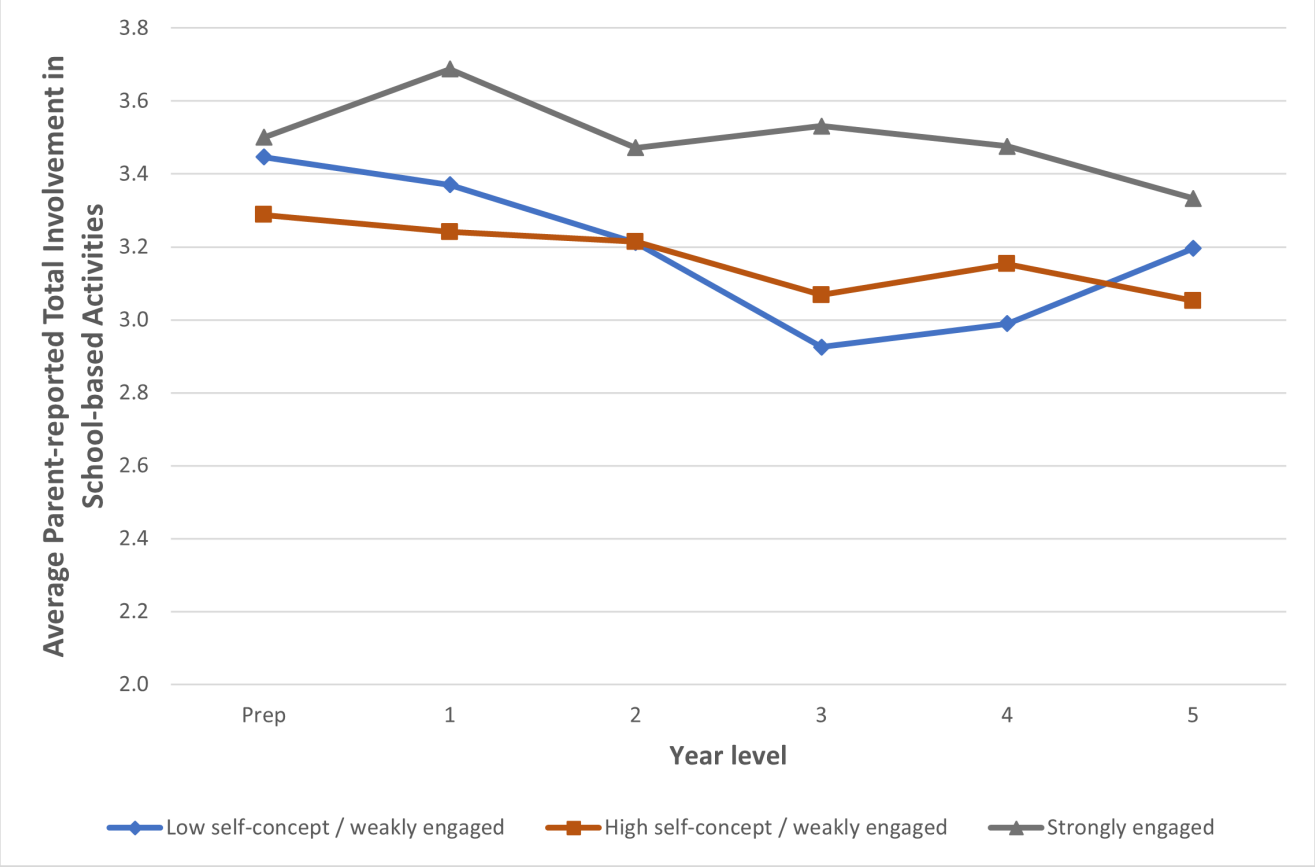
Figure 6.11 Levels of teacher-reported student-teacher conflict across primary school for the student engagement groups



The role of parent-school engagement and teacher outreach to families

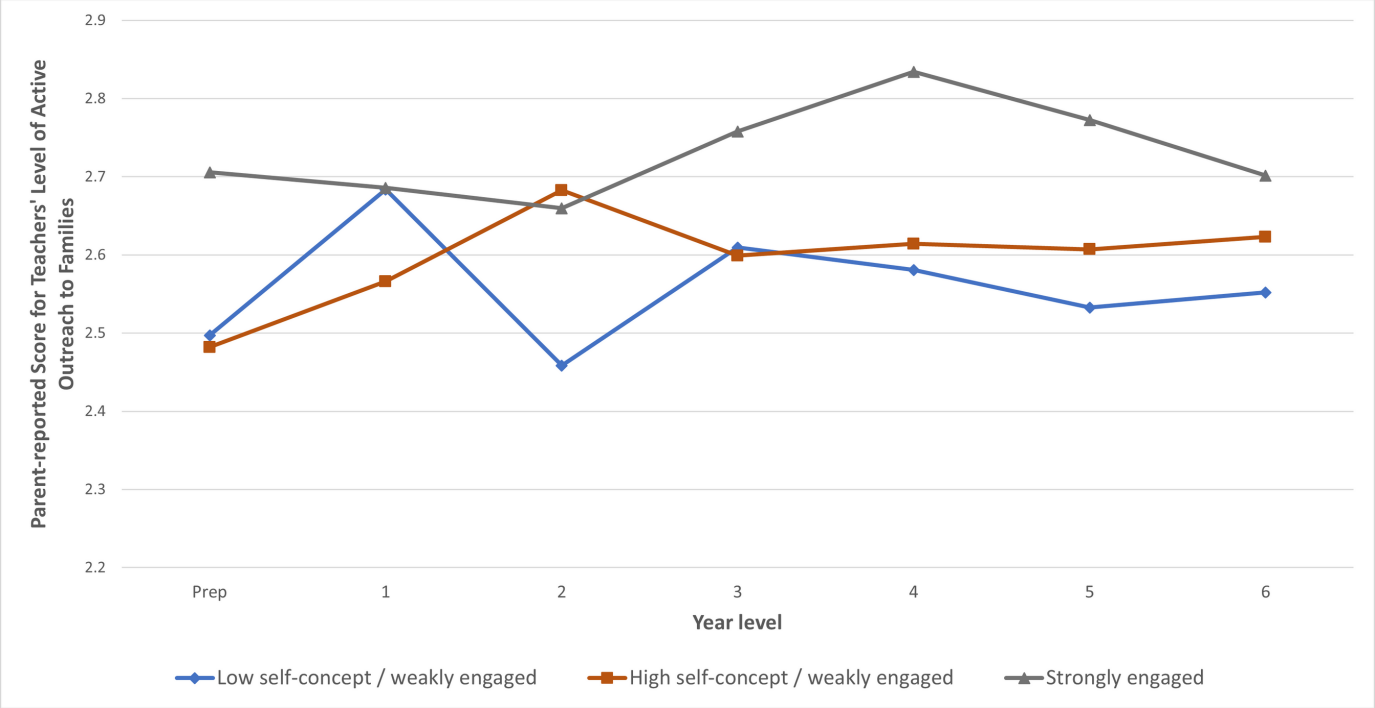
In Chapter 5, parent-school engagement was examined in detail. In this chapter we used the average score, across Preparatory to Year 5, of items that parents reported on in relation to their **involvement** with the school (e.g., visiting classrooms, contacting teachers). **Children in the strongly engaged group had parents who reported significantly higher levels of involvement** with the school over the primary school years, compared to both weakly engaged group who had similar levels of parental involvement **(Figure 6.12).**

Figure 6.12 Average parent-reported involvement in school-based activities across the engagement groups



We also examined the extent to which parents of children in the three engagement groups reported high levels of teachers' active outreach to families (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, newsletters etc). Findings depicted in **Figure 6.13** show that **for children in the strongly engaged group, parents reported higher levels of early teacher outreach** that remained largely consistent across the early years, increased to Year 4 and were still significantly higher than the other engagement groups in Year 5 (but of similar levels in Year 6). In comparison, for children in both weakly engaged groups, parents reported significantly lower teacher outreach in Preparatory, with fluctuating levels across the early years, and consistently moderate levels across Years 4 through 6.

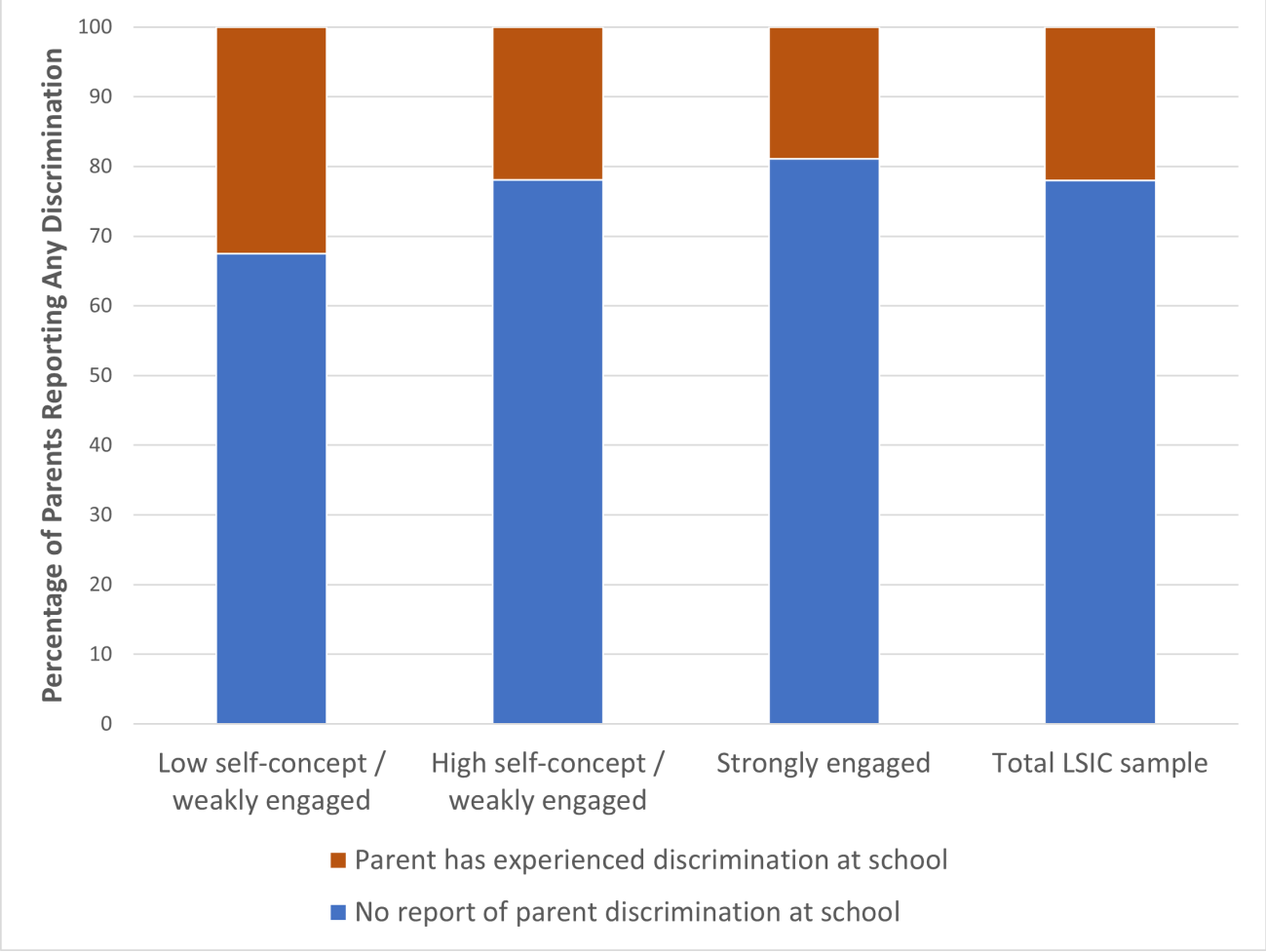
Figure 6.13 Average parent-reported scores for the extent to which teachers engage in active outreach to families, across the student engagement groups



Discrimination and bullying

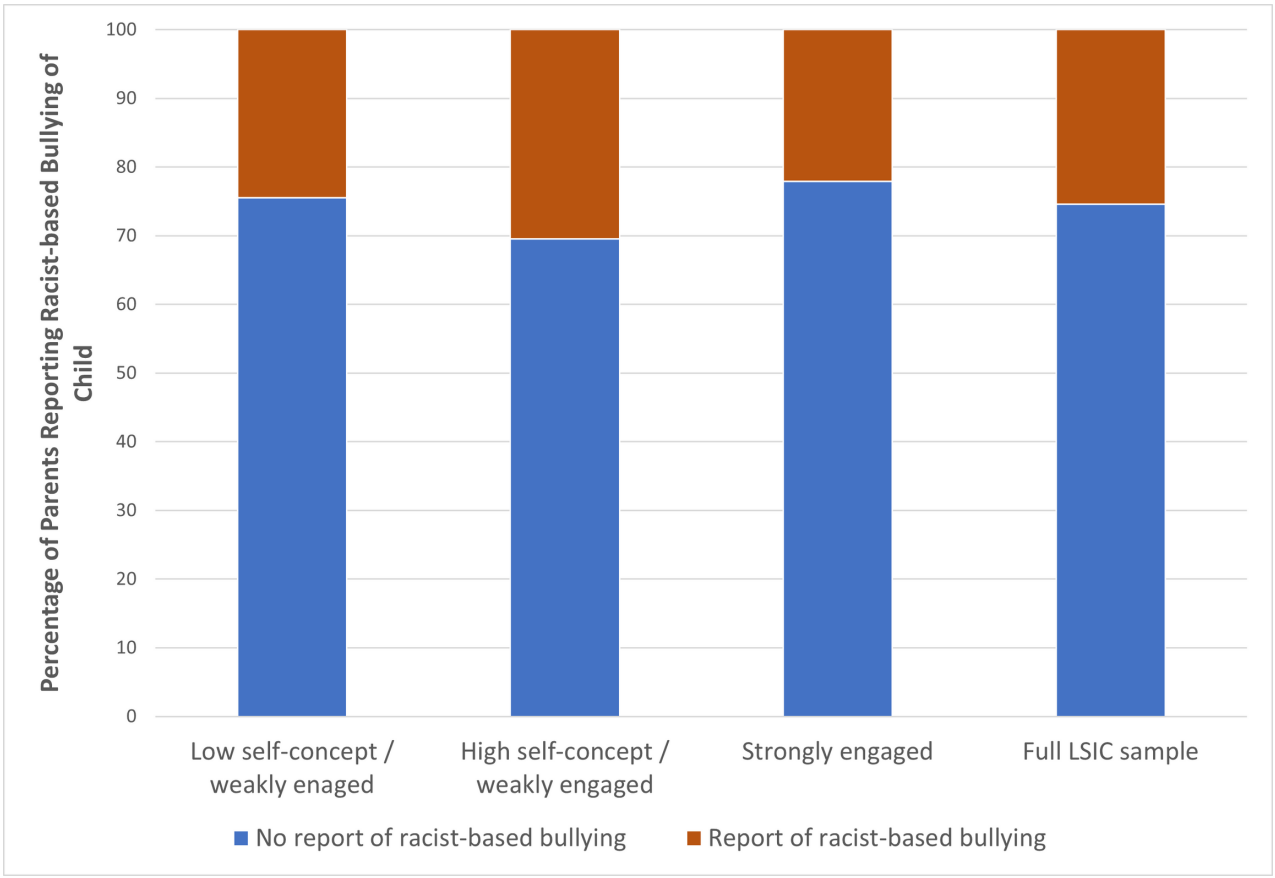
In terms of **parental reports of their own experiences of discrimination** at their child's school, these were common across the LSIC sample (22% of parents reported experiencing this at some time across their child's primary years). As shown in the **Figure 6.14** below, this prevalence rate was higher (32%) in the low self-concept / weakly engaged group compared to both the high self-concept / weakly engaged group and strongly engaged groups.

Figure 6.14 Portion of parents reporting any discrimination experiences at their child's school, across student engagement groups and the whole LSIC sample



We also examined parents reports of whether or not their child had experienced **racial-based bullying** during their primary years. As shown in the **Figure 6.15, children in the high self-concept / weakly engaged group had on average a higher rate of racist-based bullying than the other engagement groups.**

Figure 6.15 Proportion of parents reporting racist-based bullying experienced by their child at school, across student engagement groups and the full LSIC sample



What matters most for emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement: Integrative, longitudinal models

So far in this chapter we have shown that strong engagement across primary school is associated with:

- higher early developmental skills.
- better academic achievement.
- enhanced social-emotional wellbeing.

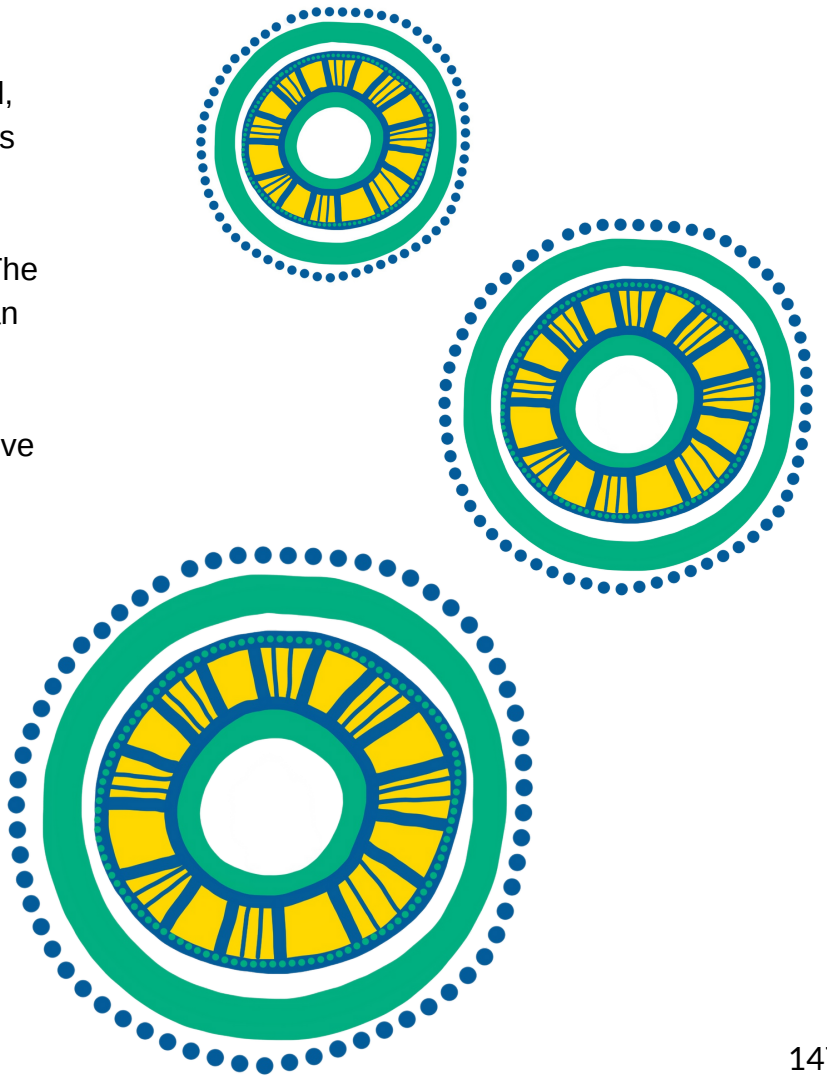
We have also reported that children with higher levels of engagement tend to:

- Feel more culturally safe at school
- Report a positive school climate
- Have warm and caring teachers
- Have few conflicts with teachers
- Have parents who are more involved in the school

In this section we use longitudinal modelling to create three models to explore how family demographics, child, and school factors can predict children's levels of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement in school, in the senior primary years (Years 5 and 6). The transition to high school for students can be a challenging time and strong engagement in the senior years of primary school is likely to support positive transitions to high school for many children.

We selected the most salient measures that differentiated the profiles for emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement to be **outcome variables** in these models. Specifically:

- ***Emotional engagement*** - closeness of the teacher-student relationship in Years 5 and 6, as reported by teachers.
- ***Behavioural engagement*** - parent report of how children were managing at school.
- ***Cognitive engagement*** - teacher report of children's approaches to learning in the classroom.



Hierarchical linear regression models were generated (one for each of the above three outcomes). Predictors were included in the following sets:

- **Socioeconomic factors** found to relate to engagement earlier in this chapter
  - Family socioeconomic status
  - Child gender
  - Parent education level (averaged when children were in Preparatory to Year 2)
  - Family financial stress level (averaged when children were in Preparatory to Year 2)
  - Significant life events (averaged when children were in Preparatory to Year 2)

- **Children's early developmental skills (Preschool to Year 1)**
  - Attentional regulation (parent report)
  - Emotional regulation (parent report)
  - School readiness (*Who Am I?*) – assessed

- **School and classroom experiences (Year 3 to 4)**
  - Student-teacher conflict (teacher report)
  - Reading self-concept (child report)
  - Prosocial skills (parent report on SDQ)
  - Peer problems (parent report on SDQ)
  - Teacher outreach to parents (reported by parents)

Table 6.2 presents the findings of the models.

Table 6.2 Results of an integrative regression model predicting senior primary school engagement levels

	Emotional engagement: Teacher-student closeness (Year 5-6)	Behavioural engagement: Parent report of child managing school (Years 5-6)	Cognitive engagement: Teacher report of children's approaches to learning (Years 5-6)
Variance accounted for by model	5%	19%	39%
		β	
Socio-demographic factors			
Socio-economic status (IRISEO)	**.10***	-.04	.07
Gender (female)	.08	.02	**.21***
Parent education	.04	-.05	.04
Financial stress	-.05	-.04	-.07
Life events	.02	-.01	.03
Children's early skills (Preparatory to Year 1)			
Attentional regulation	-.05	**.08***	-.01
Emotional regulation	.02	.03	.02
School readiness	.02	.02	**.17***
School and classroom experiences (Years 3 and 4)			
Student-teacher conflict	-.06	-.17*	**-.34***
Reading self-concept	.03	**.10***	**.10***
Prosocial skills	.03	**.16***	**.06***
Peer problems	.02	**-.17***	**-.09***
Teacher outreach to parents	.06	.06	**.07***

Note: β coefficients rounded to 2 decimal places; * p < .05

The predictive model of children's **cognitive engagement** (*Approaches to learning*) in senior primary was relatively strong, accounting for 39% of the variance. Being female and having strong school readiness skills in early primary school were important influences on cognitive engagement in senior primary. Lower levels of student-teacher conflict in the middle years of primary were the most important single predictor for cognitive engagement, over and above the contributions of any socio-demographic factors, or children's skills at school entry. Also important was a high reading self-concept, fewer peer problems, higher levels of teacher outreach to parents (as reported by parents), and stronger prosocial skills.

The predictive model for **behavioural engagement** (*parent report of how well children were managing at school*), accounted for 19% of the variance. A similar pattern emerged with the addition of early attentional regulation skills being significant in the model. Lower levels of student-teacher conflict, and fewer peer problems, were also important.

For the outcome measure of children's **emotional engagement** (*teacher reported closeness with student*) in senior primary school, there were no significant predictors apart from the single trend indicating children with higher scores on IRISEO (socio-economic advantaged) tended to have higher levels of closeness. One perspective on the failure of this model to predict emotional engagement is reassuring. Specifically, the model suggested that regardless of children's gender, early developmental skills, or level of teacher-student conflict and other mid-primary school and classroom experiences, teachers and students were still able to form close relationships in the senior years of primary school.

What can children tell us about how school could be more engaging?

We analysed the qualitative data provided by children on two LSIC items. The first item asked children 'what's good about school right now?' We analysed 904 responses from the B cohort only in Wave 11 when they were approximately 12 years old. Children identified a range of aspects of school that they thought were good, ranging from curriculum, social and emotional dimensions, and school events. **Figure 6.16** represents the nine most frequently used words; the larger the word, the more frequently it was mentioned.

The most frequently used word was 'friends'; around one third of responses identified 'friends' as a good aspect of school. Responses tended to focus on having opportunities to see and play with friends and make new friends.

- "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."
- "Since starting school, I have made lots of new friends."
- "That I get to see my friends every day."
- "I have many friends that are close to me and help me."

'Learn' and 'learning' were commonly identified as a good aspect of school:

- "It's a fun school and you learn about new stuff."
- "I learn heaps."
- "That I learn from class and get smarter in class."

'Sport' was frequently mentioned, referring to a range of formal sports (such as representing the school on team sports) as well as more informal sports and games (such as social sports at break times, including soccer, basketball, and handball).

- "We won the grand final for touch rugby."
- "We have sport and I do walking."
- "Basketball practice in the morning on Thursdays."

Figure 6.16 Word cloud displaying prominent responses from LSIC children when asked 'what's good about school right now?'

In addition, school camps and excursions were often mentioned. Some children reported that they liked that the school was safe and that teachers were caring and culturally inclusive. A small number of children responded that 'nothing' was good about school.

We also analysed data on what children would like to change about school when they were approximately 13 years old. **Table 6.3** displays the most frequent responses from 126 children.

Table 6.3 Children's reflections when asked 'what would you like to change about school?'

Homework	"No homework"
Staff	"More permanent teachers" "Change the teachers" "How teachers treat the children" "I would like the teachers to stop slaking"
Play areas	"Better playgrounds and more spaces to play" "Better basketball courts" "Better handball courts" "That they could make the playgrounds bigger"
Bullying	"Stop the bullying" "When children are being bullied, have a helper with you to give support" "Bullying tolerance"

While teachers rely heavily on homework as a strategy to both catch children up if they have not attended school (this chapter), and as a way to support parents to engage in their child's learning (Chapter 5), children's comments here suggest that homework may be a cause of disengagement and perhaps conflict in the home. There is little evidence for the academic benefits of homework in the primary school years (Jerrim et al., 2020) and, in fact, emerging evidence for its association with negative impacts including poorer emotional health for children, conflicts in parent-child relationships, and interference with sleep (Holland et al., 2021). Future educational policy that aims to enhance both student and parent engagement might consider whether and how homework presents as an engagement barrier.

Attendance: Children, schools, and the community

To explore attendance, we selected a single item asked of parents at each wave: Whether or not their child had attended school on every day in week prior to the LSIC interview.

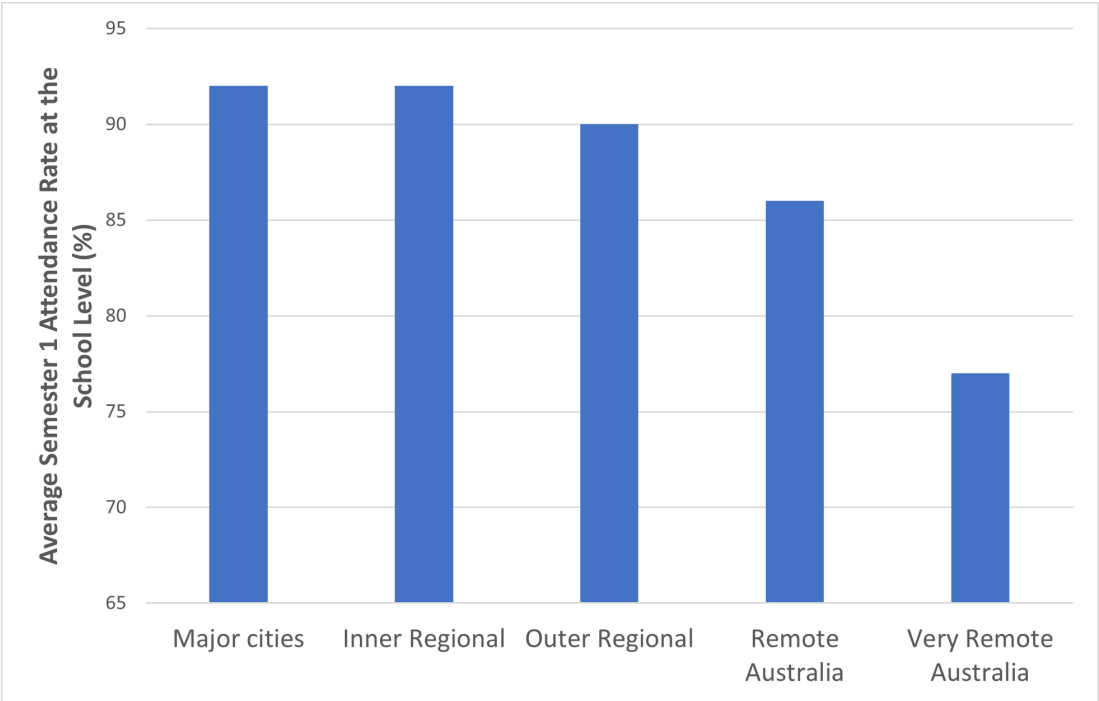
- On average in any year level of primary school, 25% of parents reported that their child had not attended school every day of the prior week.
- On average, across the school years, more than a third of these absences were due to school not being open or available (which may have related to the timing of the LSIC data collection if it was during or soon after school holidays), another third of absences related to child illness or injury, 10% were due to the child not wanting to go, and another 10% were due to family events.

With respect to reports of attendance by parents across all school years from Preparatory to Year 6, results were as follows:

- Never reported absences in the week prior (32%).
- Reported absence once (26%).
- Reported absence twice (17%).
- Reported absence three times (14%).
- Reported an absence in the prior week four or more times across the seven-year levels of primary school (11%).

MySchool data from Year 3 (used as an example snapshot here) indicated overall school attendance rates ranging from 65% to 97% for semester 1, with a mean attendance level of 89% (*SD* = 8.2%). School level rates of attendance did vary by location, with schools in remote and very remote areas reporting significantly lower rates of attendance **(Figure 6.17).**

Figure 6.17 Average semester 1 student attendance rate as a percentage, from MySchool data for LSIC children when they were in Year 3 (*n* = 729), by remoteness area

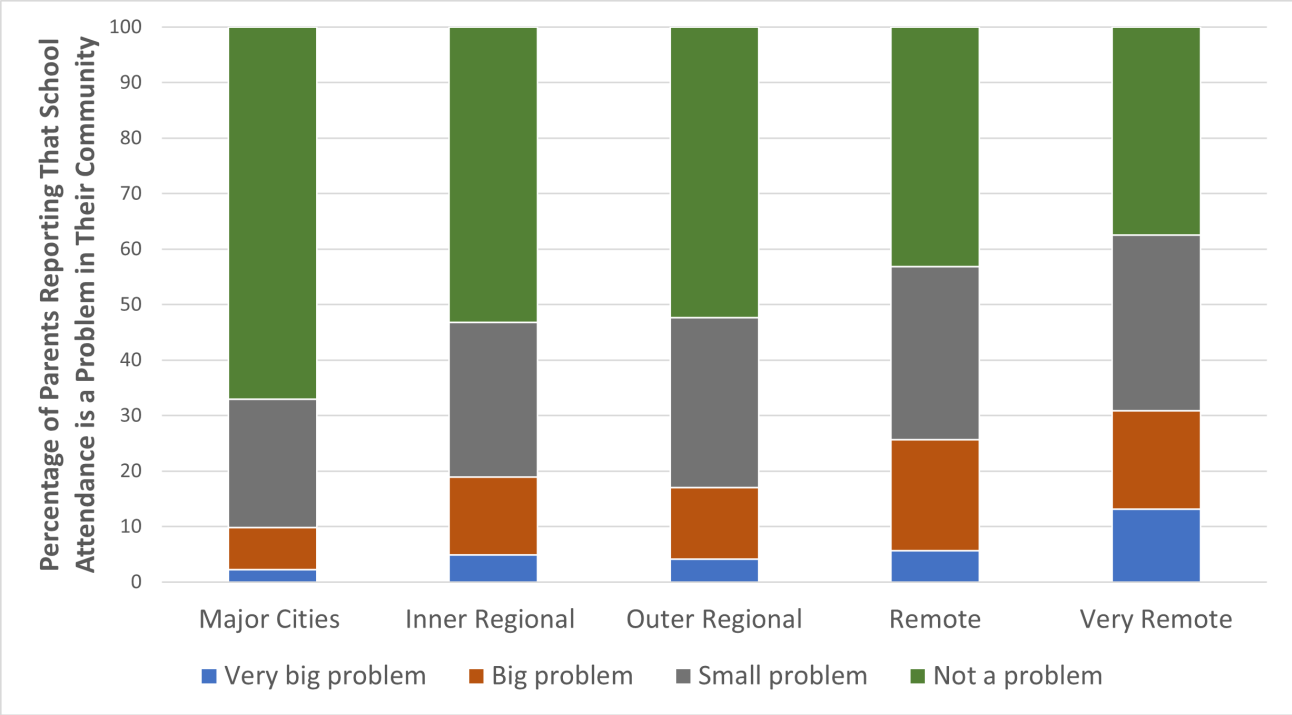


Parents were asked a series of items about their perceptions of community safety, which included an item about whether or not **children not going to school was a problem in their community**. We averaged responses across the primary school years for each parent and found that:

- Half of parents (52%) parents reported this was not a problem in their community.
- A total of 28% reported that it was a small problem (happens a bit of the time).
- Approximately one in seven (14%) reported it was a big problem (happens a lot of the time).
- Few (6%) reported that it was a very big problem (happens all of the time).

Aligned with MySchool administrative data on student attendance rates, parents' views on whether, or not, student attendance was a problem in their community varied by location. More than half of all parents in remote and very remote areas considered this a concern to some extent (from a 'small' to a 'very big' problem) (**Figure 6.18**).

Figure 6.18 Percentage of parents who report that children not going to school is a problem in their community, by area



How is attendance related to engagement?

We examined attendance data (parent report of whether child had attended every day in the past week) for children in each of the three engagement groups presented in this chapter.

Children in the strongly engaged group, on average, reported slightly more consistent attendance across the primary years. Both the strongly engaged and low self-concept / weakly engaged groups attended schools that, on average, had slightly higher but significantly different rates of student attendance reported in MySchool (89% average Semester 1 attendance rate) compared to the strong self-concept / weakly engaged group (86% average Semester 1 attendance rate).

What strategies do teachers use to promote attendance?

Teachers provided qualitative responses about how they promote students' school attendance. We analysed responses from 203 teachers of the K cohort, obtained when study children were approximately nine years old (Wave 5). **Figure 6.19** represents the range of strategies that teachers reported using to promote attendance. Some strategies seemed to be enacted at the classroom level, while others appeared to be whole-school programs.

Figure 6.19 Teacher report of strategies to promote students' school attendance

The most common group of strategies focused on extrinsic motivators, incentives and rewards for student attendance. For example, teachers reported that they incentivise individual students' attendance with prizes such as certificates, stickers, raffles, and public recognition at assemblies. Other strategies seemed to encourage a collective responsibility for attendance by establishing competitions that would reward the class with the highest level of attendance each term.

The second most common group of strategies was reported to centre on encouraging student engagement and a sense of belonging to their class. Here, teachers reported that they promoted attendance by focusing on how they could socially and academically engage students.

Encourage engagement and sense of belonging in class

"Create a warm and safe environment where students enjoy coming to learn."

"I have a happy class environment where we work hard but also have fun!"

"Engaging classroom. Attention to wellbeing of each student. FUN"

"I work very hard to make my lessons engaging. I try to incorporate hands on enquiry-based activities"

"I try to make my class interesting - strong art/science activity based. I work hard on knowing my students and being a significant other in their life."

"Ensure my lessons are engaging and fun so students are excited about attending school each day."

Extrinsic motivators, incentives and rewards

"Attendance chart, certificate at assemblies, attendance at excursions."

"Sticker chart reward system"

"Class checklist, end of week reward for 100% attendance. End of fortnight reward for 100% attendance"

"100% weekly attendance certificates with ice block."

What strategies do teachers use to help children catch up if they have not been attending?

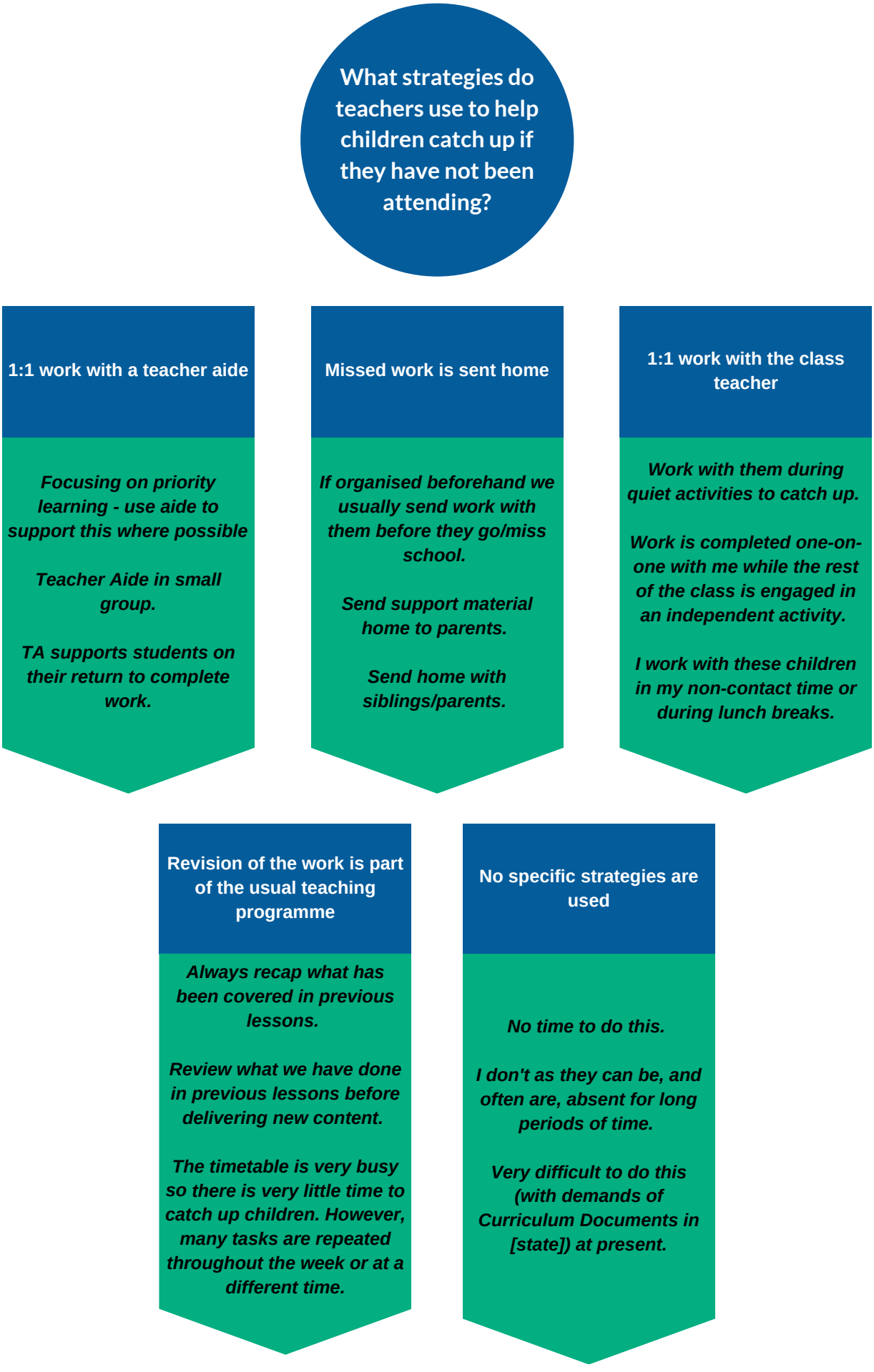
For the B cohort in Wave 6 (when children were approximately 6 years old), 226 teachers shared strategies to help children catch up after an absence from school. Most indicated that they do implement strategies to help children catch up. As shown in **Figure 6.20**, the four most common strategies were:

1. Children work one-to-one with a teacher aide to catch up on missed work.
2. Teachers send work home for children to complete. This seemed to be common when an absence was planned in advance, or if work was requested by a family.
3. Children work one-to-one with the classroom teacher. Some teachers suggested that it was a challenge to catch students up in this way, with several teachers explaining that they use their lunch breaks and non-contact time to work with students. At other times, teachers said they work with students during class time when other students are working independently.
4. Revise content in subsequent lessons. Teachers said that students would have opportunities to catch up on missed content during revision embedded in their usual teaching programmes.

Eight teachers indicated that the extent to which they could catch children up was constrained by a busy curriculum and fast-moving program. As a result, some suggested that they do not specifically help children catch up. It was noted that long periods of absence made it more difficult for students to catch up. A small number of other teachers said that they did not catch students up and did not provide detail.

Teachers noted a range of other strategies, including using peer support to catch students up or enlisting the support of other school support staff, and a small number of teachers (under 5) noted they modified the task the student was required to complete.

Figure 6.20 Strategies teachers use to help children catch up after not attending.



Implications and recommendations

Policy and practice

- While it has long been established that **children's school entry skills,** particularly in self-regulation, are important for ongoing academic success, the findings in this Chapter highlight their value in supporting engagement. Policies that increase participation in high quality evidence-based approaches to supporting early development are warranted, but so too is the embedding of practices that focus on these general skills in the early years of school.

- **Parents' views on whether or not their child is managing school** were a useful and sensitive indicator of children's engagement status, which in turn was associated with academic achievement. Schools should consider using parents' views on their child's management of school as an important indicator of child engagement.

- Quantitative models across the chapter show **the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and a lack of teacher-student conflict** in supporting student engagement. Children endorsed that an important change to school would be to ensure there are more permanent staff, reflecting their recognition of the importance of stable student-teacher relationships, which was also highlighted by parents in Chapter 5. Educational policies that address staff turnover are required, and teacher performance should be judged not solely on academic results for children, but the ways in which they are forming important and positive relationships with students and their families.

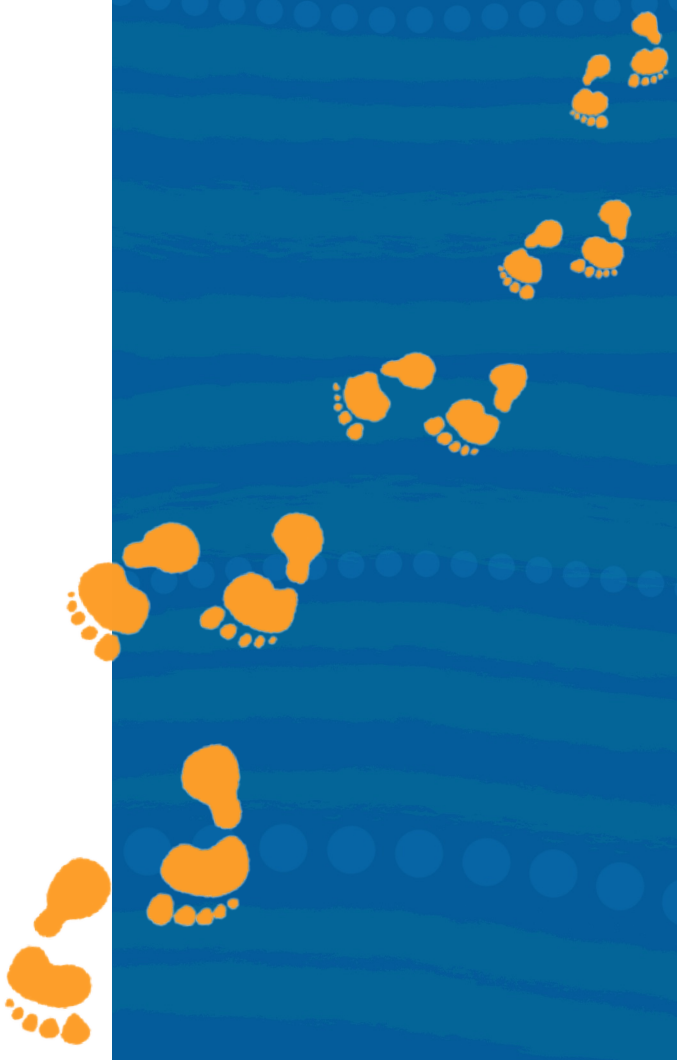
- Findings show that children who are less engaged are also experiencing more **racist-based bullying**. Notably, high engagement did not protect children from this bullying. In the qualitative data, children strongly identified with a need for schools to address bullying and this should be a high priority. Evidence from Chapter 3 suggests that increased cultural competency in teachers is desirable, along with education and coaching that can address colour blindness, and strong policies to address racist-based (and all) bullying.

- **Social and friendship aspects of school** were identified as important to children, with the quantitative models also demonstrating the negative role of peer problems, and the positive role of prosocial skills in terms of children's school engagement. Schools should not shy away from policies and actions that support children's social life with friends, and indeed it would be wise to address these as a priority.

- **Homework policies** across primary schools in Australia should be made more transparent and evidence-based. Findings in prior research and those presented here suggest that, while homework is a key strategy for teachers, parents and children may experience negative impacts of homework which in turn impacts on engagement. Future educational policy that aims to enhance both student and parent engagement might consider whether and how homework presents as an engagement barrier.

Future research directions

- High academic self-concept reported by students was not sufficient alone to support engagement or achievement. For example, although the strong self-concept / weakly engaged group had the highest academic self-concept rankings in later primary school, they still experienced poorer wellbeing and achievement. Further research on academic self-concept for Indigenous students, and the factors that contribute to positive self-concept, or reduce it is required.
- Further research to understand the connection between school climate and cultural competency, Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy, and student engagement is warranted.
- Children's responses on qualitative items related to what is good about school and what they would change are highly perceptive and notably align strongly with the quantitative models on children's school engagement. Future research should aim to centre the voices of Indigenous children to better incorporate their views and knowledges of the education system.



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Chapter 7:

Factors Supporting Strong Academic Progress Among LSIC Children

Previous research from LSIC and other Australian cohorts has identified a variety of factors concerning the school environment that can help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attain strong academic skills at school. These include having high expectations for student learning (both from the student themselves, and from their teachers and parents), strong teacher-student relationships, positive student wellbeing, greater student engagement and attendance at school, strong engagement between the school and parents, a supportive school and system leadership (with professional development of the teaching workforce), as well as cultural recognition, acknowledgement, and support (Productivity Commission, 2016; Department of Social Services, 2015; Department of Social Services, 2020; Helme and Lamb, 2011; McRae et al., 2000).

In the Wave 5 Report from LSIC (Department of Social Services, 2015), teachers' predictions of how far children would go in their education related significantly with teacher-ratings of children's combined literacy/numeracy achievement and with children's standardised scores on reading tests. Attendance at school, and teachers' perceptions of how involved they believed parents to be in their children's learning and development also related to these combined literacy/numeracy achievement scores, with greater attendance and parental involvement associated with stronger academic achievement.

The Report on findings from the first 10 years of LSIC (Department of Social Services, 2020) further identified higher teacher-rated early literacy scores (averaged across Preschool to Year 4), vocabulary (Preschool to Year 2), and mathematical thinking test scores (Preschool to Year 4) among children attending schools in which the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures had been implemented. These children's scores remained higher than those of children attending schools where this priority had not been implemented when controlling for other factors (such as attendance and parent/family demographic factors) known to relate to academic achievement.

These previous reports from LSIC provided snapshots of how the different experiences of children in the study relate to their literacy and numeracy attainment overall, without considering how this attainment changes over time. **In keeping with our strengths-based approach for this Report, we wished to know what might help all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make strong progress in literacy and numeracy, regardless of their starting level of literacy and numeracy in the early school years?**

In this chapter, we thus focus on identifying factors that relate to the amount of *progress or growth* in literacy and numeracy skills that children in LSIC make between the early and later years of primary school. We asked:

- Which factors - including socio-demographic and community, teacher and school, student wellbeing, and learning-related factors – differ for the children in LSIC who make *stronger progress* in literacy and numeracy across the primary school years compared to their peers who make weaker progress?
- Do similar factors relate to the amount of progress for both literacy and numeracy, or do some factors relate specifically to progress in literacy or in numeracy?

What are our key findings?

- Children who showed *stronger progress* in literacy and numeracy during primary school experienced more positive teacher style and lower teacher-student conflict, greater overall wellbeing, fewer significant life events, had stronger approaches to learning, had access to greater socio-economic resources, and attended schools that were more socio-educationally advantaged than their peers showing weaker progress in literacy and numeracy.
- Additionally, stronger progress in literacy related to having a higher reading self-concept, fewer difficulties with behaviour, and a lower community prevalence of early childhood developmental vulnerabilities.
- Stronger progress in numeracy additionally related to higher levels of engagement between school and parents, attending a school that the parent perceived as 'good for Indigenous children', fewer experiences of bullying or being treated unfairly due to being Indigenous, greater early emotional self-regulation skills, and fewer social-emotional difficulties.

What needs to be done?

- Building positive teacher-student relationships, fostering strong approaches to learning, and bolstering student wellbeing might assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to make strong progress in literacy and numeracy during primary school, regardless of their starting level of literacy and numeracy in the early primary years.
- Supporting a strong reading self-concept in students and delivering whole-school positive behaviour programs and community-based early childhood (Preschool) programs to support healthy development, might also support strong progress in literacy for Indigenous children.
- Building strong school-parent engagement, strengthening schools as supportive places for Indigenous children, and providing whole-school social-emotional learning programs may foster strong progress in numeracy for Aboriginal children.

Stronger versus weaker progress in literacy and numeracy attainment during primary school in LSIC

We used a range of LSIC data on children's literacy and numeracy achievement right across primary school to identify two groups of children: those who made stronger progress on literacy and numeracy relative to peers who entered school with similar skill levels (**stronger progress group**); and those who still made progress as would be expected across primary school, but their gains were not as substantial as those in the stronger progress group (we call these children the **weaker progress group**).

The Technical Appendix provides more detail on how we identified these *stronger progress* and *weaker progress* groups. Notably, we considered how much progress the children made relative to their peers within the cohort, with progress measured between the early years of primary school (Preparatory to Year 2) and the later years of primary school (Years 5 and 6).

The stronger progress group included children who were initially achieving in the middle of the range of achievement scores shown by children in LSIC during the early primary years and, also, children who were initially achieving in the lower third of the achievement range in LSIC during the early years – but these children all made stronger progress than their LSIC peers across the primary school years. That is, they showed greater relative change in achievement scores within the LSIC cohort between the early years and the later primary years. Similarly, the weaker progress groups included children who initially achieved in the middle of the range of academic achievement shown by children in LSIC during the early primary years and, also, children who were initially achieving in the lower third – but these children all showed smaller amounts of progress during primary school than their LSIC peers in the stronger progress group.

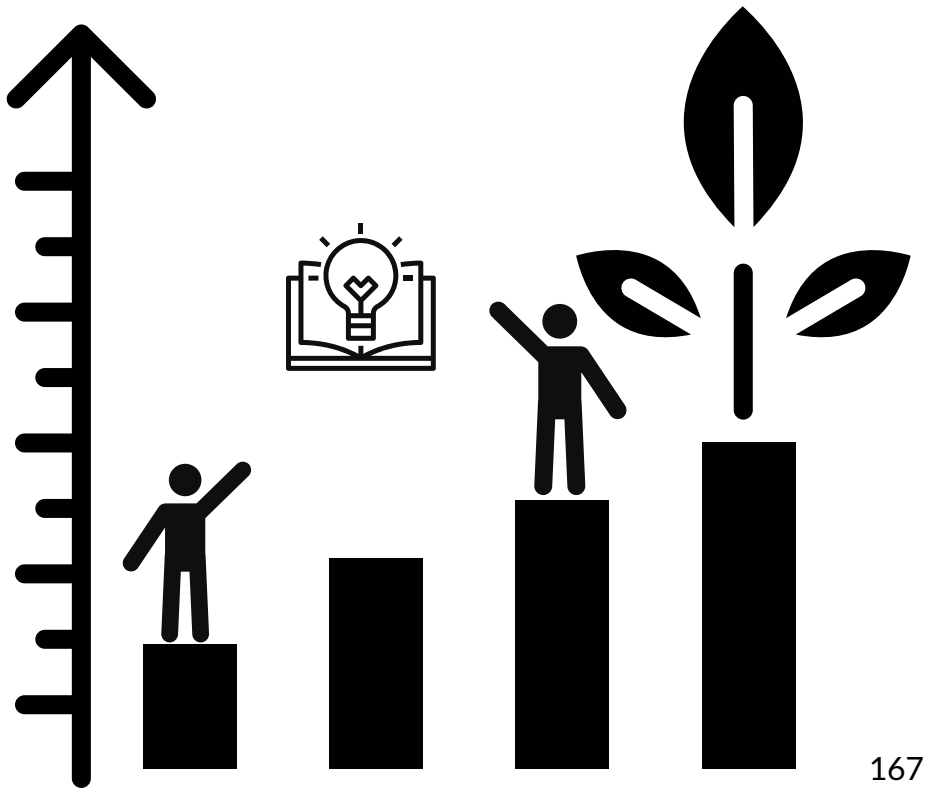


Table 7.1 summarises the number (and percentage) of children in LSIC that we identified within these two groups for analysis, for literacy and for numeracy. Girls and boys were equally likely to be in the stronger and weaker progress groups.

Table 7.1 Number (and percentage) of children in the stronger and weaker progress groups

	Literacy		Numeracy	
	Number of children	(%)	Number of children	(%)
Stronger progress:	374	(50.6)	253	(46.8)
Weaker progress:	364	(49.3)	288	(53.2)
Total number of children with measures of academic progress	***738***		***541***	

For many of the children (424 in total), information was available about their progress both on literacy and on numeracy. For these children, it was possible to see whether their progress on literacy and numeracy was similar or different. **Table 7.2** reports the number of children who showed a similar pattern of progress on literacy and numeracy during primary school (in bold) and the number of children who showed different patterns of progress on literacy and numeracy (in italics). In total, just over half of children (231 children; 54%) showed a similar pattern of progress on literacy and numeracy, while the remainder (193 children, 46%) showed a different pattern of progress for literacy than for numeracy.

Table 7.2 Number of children showing similar or different patterns of progress on literacy and numeracy

		Literacy	
		Stronger progress	**Weaker Progress**
Numeracy	**Stronger progress**	**137**	*97*
	Weaker progress	*96*	**94**

Which factors relate to stronger progress in literacy and numeracy for children in LSIC during the primary school years?

Next, we wanted to understand whether there were any differences between the stronger and weaker progress groups that might account for their different academic trajectories. Where available, we focused on factors that were measured during the middle years of primary schooling (Years 3 and 4), as these measures were completed in between the measurements of literacy and numeracy that were taken from the early years (Preparatory to Year 2) and later years (Years 5 and 6) and used to understand academic progress. We also examined some developmental factors that were measured only during early childhood (Preparatory and Year 1).

We examined measures reflecting socio-demographic and community factors, teacher and school factors, student wellbeing, and learning-related factors. **Table 7.3** summarises the findings from our analyses according to whether these factors related to stronger progress in literacy and/or in numeracy, relative to children who showed weaker progress during primary school. Further description of the measures used follow the table.

Table 7.3 Factors related to stronger progress in literacy and/or in numeracy during primary school

Factors related to stronger progress:	in Literacy	in Numeracy
Socio-demographic and community factors		
Greater socio-economic advantage	✓	✓
Fewer significant life events	✓	✓
Lower community prevalence of early childhood developmental vulnerability	✓	
Teacher and school factors		
Lower teacher-student conflict	✓	✓
More positive teacher style	✓	✓
Higher school-parent engagement		✓
School supportive of Indigenous children		✓
Fewer experiences of bullying or unfair treatment due to being Indigenous		✓
Greater school socio-educational advantage	✓	✓
Student wellbeing		
Fewer overall difficulties with behaviour, emotion, and social functioning	✓	✓
Fewer difficulties with behaviour	✓	
Fewer social-emotional difficulties		✓
Greater early emotional self-regulation skills		✓
Learning-related factors		
Stronger approaches to learning	✓	✓
Greater reading self-concept	✓	

Sociodemographic and community factors

Socioeconomic background of the students was measured as decile scores on the *Indigenous Relative Socioeconomic Outcomes (IRISEO)* index, averaged across Preparatory, Year 1, and Year 2. Children showing stronger progress on literacy and on numeracy were more likely to have *more socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds* (**Table 7.4**).

The **number of significant life events** experienced by children during the middle years of primary school (averaged across Year 3 and Year 4) were reported by the parent. Children showing stronger progress in literacy and in numeracy experienced *fewer significant life events* than their peers showing weaker progress in literacy and in numeracy.

Children showing stronger progress in literacy (though not in numeracy) were also more likely than their peers who showed weaker progress to live in areas that had a **greater community prevalence of early childhood developmental vulnerability,** as measured by the *2009 Australian Early Development Census*.

Other sociodemographic factors (Productivity Commission, 2016) that have been shown previously to relate to the level of academic attainment achieved by a particular Year/stage level (rather than to progress over time) did not differ significantly between children showing stronger and weaker progress in literacy or in numeracy. These children lived in areas of equivalent ***remoteness*** (as indexed by the *Australian Statistical Geography Standard 2016* indicator at Waves 1 and 2 of LSIC), and their families experienced a similar degree of ***financial stress in the past year*** (as measured mid primary school, averaged across Year 3 and Year 4).

Table 7.4 Sociodemographic and community factors related to stronger progress in literacy and/or in numeracy during primary school

Sociodemographic and community factors	*Literacy*		*Numeracy*	
	Stronger Progress	***Weaker Progress***	***Stronger Progress***	***Weaker Progress***
	Mean (SD)	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**
IRSEO decile (range 1-10, larger scores indicate greater advantage)	5.9 (2.2)	4.9 (2.4)*	5.9 (2.2)	5.2 (2.2)*
Number of life events (range 0-13)	3.6 (2.2)	4.0 (2.3)*	3.3 (2.0)	3.9 (2.1)*
Community prevalence of early childhood developmental vulnerability (%)	35.1 (16.5)	38.6 (18.1)*	34.7 (16.2)	35.9 (17.1)
Remoteness (%)				
Major cities	25.1	21.7	27.2	23.7
Inner regional	27.0	25.1	28.6	28.9
Outer regional	12.9	12.3	13.6	11.9
Remote	16.5	13.6	15.0	12.3
Very remote	18.5	27.3	15.7	23.3
Financial stress in past year (range 0-7, higher scores indicate greater stress)	0.9 (1.1)	0.9 (1.2)	0.7 (1.0)	0.8 (1.1)

Note: * indicates significant difference between stronger and weaker progress groups

Teacher and school factors

Children with stronger versus weaker progress on literacy and numeracy differed in the quality of teacher-student relationships experienced during the middle years of primary school, based on information reported by teachers (averaged across Year 3 and 4 measurements) on the *Student–Teacher Relationship* scale (**Table 7.5**).

Though children at each progress level were equally as likely to have a **close relationship** with their teachers, children showing stronger progress were *less likely* to **experience conflict** in their teacher-student relationships than children showing weaker progress. This aligns with the findings in Chapter 6 whereby children with the lowest levels of teacher-child conflict showed the highest level of school engagement. Children showing stronger progress were also more likely to be taught by teachers with a ***positive teacher style*** (Biddle et al., 2019), as reported by children on items related to whether teachers make class a fun place to be, are fair, and listen to and understand children.

For numeracy only (not literacy), the parent of children showing stronger progress were more likely than the parent of children making weaker progress to have positively endorsed the question "***Do you think the school looks after Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children well***?" at the Year 4 assessment. The parent of children making stronger progress were also less likely to indicate that their child ***experienced bullying or had been treated unfairly due to being Indigenous*** (measured as any experience reported across Preschool to Year 4). Children in the stronger growth group were also more likely to experience greater levels of teacher-reported ***engagement between the school and parents*** (averaged score across all years between Preparatory and Year 5).

For both literacy and for numeracy, children making stronger progress during primary school were more likely than children making weaker progress to attend ***schools that had greater socio-educational advantage*** (as indicated by the school-level Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage [ICSEA] score).

Table 7.5 Teacher and school factors related to stronger progress in literacy and/or in numeracy during primary school

Teacher and school factors	*Literacy*		*Numeracy*	
	Stronger Progress	***Weaker Progress***	***Stronger Progress***	***Weaker Progress***
	Mean (SD)	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**
Close teacher-student relationship (range 1-5; higher scores indicate a closer relationship)	4.0 (0.6)	4.0 (0.7)	4.1 (0.6)	4.0 (0.6)
Conflict in teacher-student relationship (range 1-5; higher scores indicate greater conflict)	1.6 (0.8)	1.8 (0.9)*	1.6 (0.8)	1.8 (0.9)*
Positive teacher style (range 2-6; higher scores indicate more positive style)	5.6 (0.5)	5.2 (0.9)*	5.5 (0.7)	5.3 (1.0)*
School is supportive of Indigenous children (%)	75.3	73.6	82.0	71.2*
Bullied or mistreated for being Indigenous (%)	18.7	19.0	21.7	14.2*
School-parent engagement (range 1-4; higher scores indicate greater engagement)	2.3 (1.5)	2.1 (1.5)	2.6 (1.6)	2.1 (1.4)*
School socio-educational advantage (range 515-1180; higher scores index greater advantage)	898 (118)	847 (135)*	897 (118)	862 (116)*

Note: * indicates significant difference between stronger and weaker progress groups

Student wellbeing

Students in the stronger progress group also differed from the weaker progress group on their overall wellbeing during the middle years of primary school (**Table 7.6**). For both literacy and numeracy, children in the stronger progress group experienced *fewer* ***overall difficulties in behaviour, emotional and social functioning***, as reported by their parent on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ Total Difficulties score averaged across Years 3 and 4).

For literacy only (not numeracy), relative to children making weaker progress, the parents of children making stronger progress reported fewer ***behavioural difficulties*** (measured as an average of Years 3 and 4 scores, summed across the SDQ Conduct Problems and Hyperactivity/Inattention subscales). This reflected fewer behaviours such as fighting with other children, stealing from home, school or elsewhere, and fidgeting, being restless, or distracted.

For numeracy only (not literacy), relative to children making weaker progress, the parents of children making stronger progress reported fewer ***social-emotional difficulties*** (measured as an average of Years 3 and 4 scores, summed across the SDQ Emotional Symptoms and Peer-Relationship Problems subscales). This reflected fewer experiences such as feeling nervous, worried, or sad, and more experiences of having a good friend, or being liked by others.

For both literacy and numeracy, children in the stronger and weaker progress groups did not differ on parent-reported ***prosocial behaviours*** (measured as an average of the Years 3 and 4 SDQ Prosocial Behaviour subscale scores, which includes behaviours such as being helpful and kind to others, and sharing).

For numeracy only (not literacy), children making stronger progress had higher levels of ***emotional self-regulation skills*** relative to children making weaker progress (as measured by parent-report on temperament items, with scores averaged across Preschool and Year 1). Conversely, children making stronger and weaker progress showed similar levels of other early childhood skills, including ***attentional self-regulation skills*** (average of scores from Preschool and Year 1), and ***school readiness*** (average of Preschool and Year 1 scores on the *Who am I?* measure).

Table 7.6 Student wellbeing related to stronger progress in literacy and/or in numeracy during primary school

Student wellbeing	*Literacy*		*Numeracy*	
	Stronger Progress	*Weaker Progress*	*Stronger Progress*	*Weaker Progress*
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Overall difficulties in behavioural, emotional, and social functioning (range 0-32; lower scores indicate fewer difficulties)	11.4 (6.0)	12.5 (6.3)*	10.9 (5.6)	12.0 (6.8)*
Behavioural difficulties (range 0-10; lower scores indicate fewer difficulties)	3.3 (2.0)	3.7 (2.0)*	3.1 (1.8)	3.4 (2.1)
Social-emotional difficulties (range 0-8.5; lower scores indicate fewer difficulties)	2.4 (1.6)	2.5 (1.7)	2.3 (1.5)	2.6 (1.8)*
Prosocial behaviour (range 0-10; higher scores indicate more prosocial behaviour)	8.6 (1.6)	8.5 (1.8)	8.7 (1.5)	8.5 (1.7)
Emotional self-regulation skills (range 1-6; higher scores indicate greater self-regulation)	3.6 (1.2)	3.5 (1.3)	3.8 (1.2)	3.5 (1.2)*
Attentional self-regulation skills (range 1-6; higher scores indicate greater self-regulation)	3.9 (1.2)	3.9 (1.2)	3.9 (1.2)	3.7 (1.2)
School readiness (range 0-43; higher scores indicate greater readiness)	25.9 (7.0)	25.2 (6.7)	25.9 (6.7)	25.6 (6.0)

Note: * indicates significant difference between stronger and weaker progress groups

Learning-related factors

During the middle years of primary school (the average of measures from Years 3 and 4), relative to children making weaker progress, children who made stronger progress had **stronger approaches to learning** (as measured by teacher report on items related to children's organisation and persistence in the classroom; **Table 7.7**).

For literacy only (not numeracy), children making stronger progress showed higher levels than children making weaker progress of ***reading self-concept*** (as measured in Year 4 using a subset of items from the Marsh Self-Description Questionnaire). ***Mathematics self-concept*** did not differ between children making stronger versus weaker progress.

Table 7.7 Learning-related factors related to stronger progress in literacy and/or in numeracy during primary school

Learning-related factors	*Literacy*		*Numeracy*	
	Stronger Progress	***Weaker Progress***	***Stronger Progress***	***Weaker Progress***
	Mean (SD)	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**
Approaches to learning (range 0-4.7; higher scores indicate stronger approach to learning)	2.9 (0.7)	2.7 (0.7)*	2.9 (0.7)	2.7 (0.7)*
Reading self-concept (range 1-6; higher scores indicate stronger self-concept)	4.9 (1.0)	4.6 (1.3)*		
Mathematics self-concept (range 1-6; higher scores indicate stronger self-concept)			4.6 (1.3)	4.6 (1.5)

Note: * indicates significant difference between stronger and weaker progress groups

Implications and recommendations

This chapter set out to determine which factors might help Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children make strong progress in literacy and numeracy, regardless of their starting level of literacy and numeracy in the early school years. Outcome Area 5 of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (Coalition of Peaks, 2020) specifies the desire for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve their full learning potential. Fostering strong progress in literacy and numeracy for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children during primary school is a critical step in achieving Closing the Gap Target 5, which requires an increase in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent. Our results identified a broad range of factors, spanning sociodemographic and community, teacher and school factors, student wellbeing, and learning-related factors that are associated with children making stronger progress during primary school. In total, we identified 10 factors that related to stronger progress in literacy and 12 factors that related to stronger progress in numeracy.

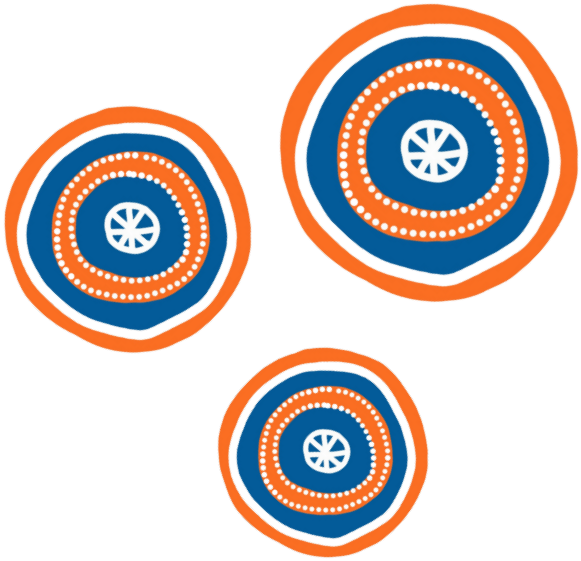
Policy and practice

- Most of the factors that can make a difference for student progress fall squarely within the remit of educators and school communities to influence. Our findings suggest that active outreach by teachers to students and their parents throughout the primary school years might bolster students' academic gains. Greater engagement of the family by the school additionally related to stronger progress in numeracy. These factors highlight the potential gains to be made in strengthening relationships and building opportunities for engagement between educators, children, and families.
- Positive teacher-student relationship was among the factors that related to stronger progress both in literacy and in numeracy, as reflected both in a more positive teacher style and in lower teacher-student conflict. This reinforces our recommendation in Chapter 6 that reducing teacher-child conflict is key to both school engagement and achievement.

- The relationship found between numeracy progress and attending a school that parents perceived as looking after Indigenous children, as well as fewer experiences of bullying or being treated unfairly due to being Indigenous, reinforce the messages delivered in earlier chapters in this Report, and in previous LSIC Reports (Department of Social Services, 2020). Specifically, exceptional cultural competence in schools is required, and equitable and consistent embedding of Indigenous knowledges, and the delivery of the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in their daily practice and school culture is essential.
- Our findings also highlight potential benefits to academic progress through teachers' fostering in their students a strong approach to learning and a strong self-concept as a learner. These results concur with previous research indicating that students who approach learning with confidence, have belief in their abilities and are not anxious about learning, are more likely to be successful learners and perform well academically (De Bortoli & Thompson, 2010).
- Further, our findings emphasise the relationship of overall student wellbeing on academic progress, as well as more specific associations between behavioural functioning and literacy progress, and between social and emotional functioning and numeracy progress. Whole-school social-emotional learning programs and positive behaviour programs offer important avenues to supporting academic progress (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013). However, the extent to which these programs encompass culturally appropriate understandings of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has not yet been evaluated. Our findings reinforce the need for local education systems to conduct formal evaluations of these (and other) programs to better understand their alignment with Indigenous knowledges and approaches to wellbeing, and to gauge their effectiveness in bolstering wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with consequent improvements in academic learning outcomes. We emphasise also a need to 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.

Future research directions

- While this chapter has explored factors that relate to progress in children's development of literacy and numeracy over the primary school years, following academic progress into high school is an important direction for future research. The move from primary to secondary school presents a significant transition in a young Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person's life. During this transition, students negotiate new learning environments, new and changing relationships, and increased academic and social expectations. Future research using the LSIC data might examine the extent to which additional or different factors relate to academic progress into the secondary school years.
- The method we used to identify the stronger progress and weaker progress groups combined information from different measures of academic achievement onto a common scale. This means it is not possible to quantify the absolute amount of progress made by students in the stronger and the weaker progress groups according to indices such as the 'number of years of learning' that have been defined for individual measures such as the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) (Goss et al., 2016). Future research within the LSIC cohort might use the NAPLAN measures, which are delivered nationally to all students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9, to quantify the amount of progress made across the primary and secondary years of schooling by the LSIC children in terms of the number of years of learning gained, and identify the factors related to stronger versus weaker relative gain on these measures.
- Future waves of assessment in the LSIC or other studies might also assess students' perceptions of what helps them to achieve academically and to progress in learning most effectively. Similarly, examination of academic progress might be broadened beyond literacy and numeracy to examine factors that relate to school-based learning of other skills and knowledges that are valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities.
- The relationships that we report here between strong progress in literacy and/or in numeracy and a variety of sociodemographic and community, teacher and school factors, student wellbeing, and learning-related factors were each identified in separate analyses. Several of the factors that we examined are likely to be related to each other, and some may be related to factors that have not been measured. For these reasons, it is important that all future policy and practice initiatives include a thorough evaluation of effectiveness, taking into consideration local needs and collaboration with communities in program and research design and implementation.



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Epilogue:

LSIC Children Have the Last Word

We finish this report by giving the children of LSIC the final words. This report is about their primary school experiences of Australian education. It is our aim to contribute to enhanced experiences and outcomes for these children and all Indigenous children into the future. LSIC children and their families have been generous in giving of their time and sharing their experiences, and so it is only just that children's voices should be front and centre and in our minds as we look to address the issues this report has raised. Here we end the report by reflecting on the LSIC children's responses to two questions:

- *What is your favourite thing to do at school?*
- *What would you like to be when you grow up?*

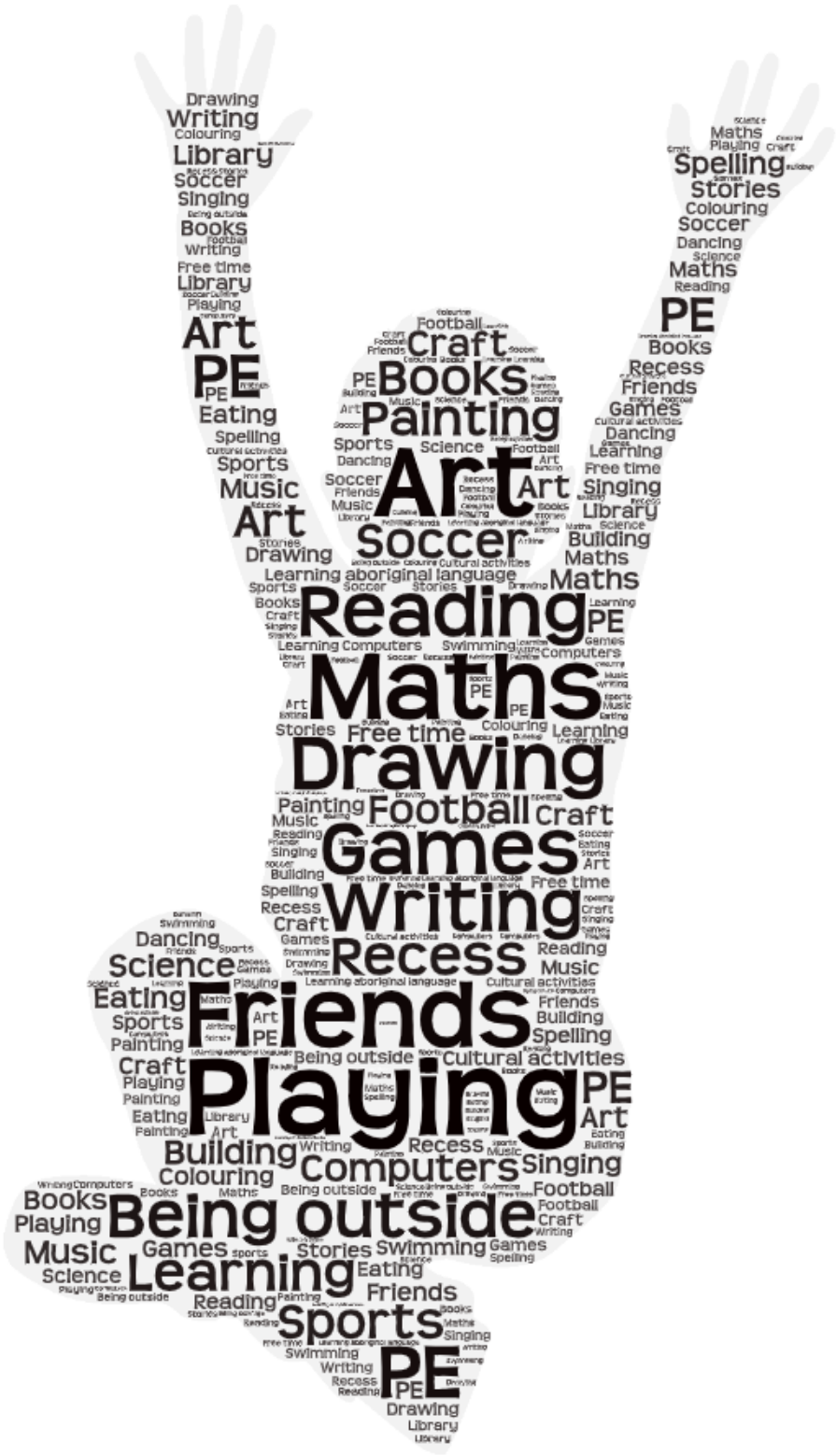
We note that children foreground playing and friends as their favourite things to do at school – this aligns with the United Nations **Rights of the Child to Play.**

It is exciting to read of children's aspirations and, in particular, to note the prevalence of children who aspire to be a teacher. No doubt these children's primary school experiences have shaped their ideas of the teaching profession, and it is our hope that there are ample opportunities for children to reach their career aspirations, in whichever field they choose. These children will be the teachers, principals, and education policy makers of the future and we hope that this report makes a contribution in this space for years to come.

What are children's favourite things to do at school?

When children were 7 years old, they were asked about their favourite things to do at school. In total, 1197 responses were recorded. The word cloud below represents the words that children used themselves to describe what they like about school (**Figure 8.1)**. The larger the word, the more commonly it was mentioned. It is clear that children foreground 'playing' and 'friends' in their responses.

Figure 8.1 Children's responses when asked what their favourite thing at school is



The diagram below (**Figure 8.2**) uses researcher-assigned codes to organise children's responses, ordered in frequency. Analysis indicates that children enjoy playing with friends, learning in a variety of curriculum areas, sports and using technology.

Figure 8.2 Themes of children's favourite things to do at school

Activities, playing outside, going on the bus and drawing.

Art because we do fun stuff and maths because some of the questions are easy and some of them are hard.

Everything, I like playing with my friends, and my favourite class lesson is rotating maths.

I like to play on the play equipment on the back oval, play with your friend's cousin and sisters and my favourite lesson is swimming lessons.

I like taking my homework back to school and getting stickers.

I like to play on the playground and play with my friends, I like reading books and wearing glasses and that's all I like.

I love doing maths and English also love doing art too I love doing sport with my friends and we play lots of games and I love the excursions like camp, and I love the mini fete that we have each year.

What do children want to do when they finish school?

Children were asked at 10 years of age what they want to be when they grow up. 606 responses were recorded. The word cloud below captures the range of futures that children imagine for themselves.

It is our hope that the insights and recommendations in this report will be used to improve the ways and extent to which schools meet the needs of Indigenous children and help them to grow up strong.

Figure 8.3 Children's responses when asked what they want to do when they finish school

I want to own my own school

A National Geographic Photographer

Go to university, go overseas to give aid, come back and be a teacher.

Health worker and an Aboriginal art painter (dot painting).

I want to be a famous person and work as a Starlight person who likes to cheer friends and people up

I want to become an Engineer and play professional football. I want to learn to put up a fence and I want to be rich.

A game creator

Become a builder and Didgeridoo player

A person who works with lizards

YouTube sensation

GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

Term	Definition
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Initiatives	**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Initiatives** are defined as activities in which schools engage to incorporate Indigenous knowledges, practices, perspectives, and cultures into education. These initiatives may include having Elders visit the school, recognising days of significance, and embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum and pedagogy. The initiatives analysed within this report are not an exhaustive list of all the practices schools can engage in, but reflect Indigenous-focused initiatives that should be universally delivered in all Australian schools.
Approaches to learning	**Approaches to learning** is a descriptive term for learning-related, regulatory behaviours that children exhibit when taking part in classroom activities. These behaviours include attention, initiative, persistence, and engagement. The technical appendix provides more detail on which specific measures were incorporated to represent this construct.
Attentional regulation	**Attentional regulation** describes children's ability to self-monitor their attention, including maintaining attention, ignoring distractions, and staying alert to task goals (Howard & Williams, 2018). Attentional regulation was measured using parent report on temperament items, related to task persistence and emotional reactivity which have been used extensively in prior Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and LSIC studies (Williams et al. 2017). See the Technical Appendix for further details.
Cross-curriculum priority	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures **cross-curriculum priority** is designed for all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures (ACARA). The cross-curriculum priority uses a conceptual framework to provide a context for learning. The framework comprises the underlying elements of Identity and Living Communities and the key concepts of Country/Place, Culture and People. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Identities are represented as central to the priority and are approached through knowledge and understanding of the interconnected elements of Country/Place, Culture and People. The development of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' law, languages, dialects, and literacies is approached through the exploration of Cultures. These relationships are linked to the deep knowledge traditions and holistic world views of Aboriginal communities and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Term	Definition
Cultural competency	**Cultural competency** is defined by AITSL as the ability to understand, communicate and effectively and sensitively interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, communities and staff (AITSL, 2019)
Cultural identity	For the purposes of this report, **cultural identity** relates to the level of safety a child feels about their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity in their classrooms. In Wave 8 and 11 children responded to four items seeking to determine their sense of cultural safety in their classrooms. This scale was adapted for LSIC by Bodkin-Andrews from the seeding success study (Craven et al., 2013). Example questions include I feel safe about being Indigenous in class and I want to share things about being Indigenous. See the Technical Appendix for further details.
Early primary	**Early primary** is inclusive of study children in Preparatory to Year 2
Emotional regulation	**Emotional regulation** refers to children's ability to successfully self-monitor their own emotions and express them appropriately (Raver et al., 2017). Emotional regulation was measured using parent report on temperament items related to task persistence and emotional reactivity which have been used extensively in prior Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and LSIC studies (Little et al., 2012; Williams et al. 2017). See the Technical Appendix for further details.
Footprints in Time (also known as LSIC: the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous 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. The ongoing study 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 study is the only longitudinal study of developmental outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children globally.
Hierarchical regression	**Hierarchical regression** is used to evaluate relationships between sets of independent variables (predictors) and a dependent variable (outcome variable). The independent variables are entered into analysis in a sequence of blocks, to establish how each block of variables contributes to prediction of an outcome variable. How each set of predictor variables adds to the variance explained is generally of interest, rather than the overall variance explained; as well as what individual variables have significant associations with the outcome variable.

Term	Definition
Indigenous language	**Indigenous language** refers to the unique set of languages and dialects, spoken by Australian Indigenous communities, which have been described as “storehouses of cultural knowledge and tradition” (AIATSIS, 2005, p. 21), where they are key to maintaining connection with ancestors, land and law (McLeod et al., 2014). It has been reported that an estimated 145 Indigenous Australian languages are spoken to some degree, 110 are critically endangered, and less than 20 Indigenous languages are spoken across all generations (AIATSIS, 2005; McConvell, 2008; Obata & Lee, 2010). Indigenous languages also include Creole and Kriol, which began by merging Indigenous and English languages to facilitate communication on missions and outstations. Over time, Creoles and Kriols developed in complexity and are languages into their own right (McLeod et al., 2014). Each Indigenous language is intimately connected to Country and has deep spiritual significance for its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
IRISEO (Index of Relative Indigenous Socio-Economic Outcomes)	**IRISEO** is a composite, rank order variable derived from information on the employment, education, income, and housing characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from Indigenous Regions across Australia (Biddle, 2009). This variable ranges from 1 to 10 (deciles) where higher numbers reflect higher socioeconomic outcomes. Correlations for children’s Indigenous socioeconomic outcomes across LSIC waves, and across our new dataset structured by children’s school year level, were all above .85
Latent Profile Analysis	**Latent profile analysis** is a person-centred approach that allows for statistically significant different sub-groups within a larger group to be found. These sub-groups (classes or profiles) are more like each other than they are like the other sub-groups. This approach can be particularly useful in longitudinal analyses where measures change across time, as it does not require the same measures at each time point. Further details on this analysis are provided in the Technical Appendix.
Longitudinal	The LSIC study is classified as **longitudinal** as the study tracks the development of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children over time, revisiting the same participants at different points.
LSIC Steering Committee	LSIC is guided by a Steering Committee of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic experts, with a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership. The **LSIC Steering Committee** provide advice on survey design, implementation, community engagement, ethical and cultural protocols, data analysis, interpretation, and reporting.
Main Carer	**Main Carers** were those that identified themselves as knowing the LSIC Study Child the best.
Mid primary	**Mid primary** is inclusive of study children in Year 3 and Year 4

Term	Definition
MySchool	**MySchool** data is an online resource for parents, educators and the wider community to find out important information about each of Australia's schools, including an indication of students' literacy and numeracy achievement including NAPLAN performance, throughout the schooling years. LSIC data is linked to the MySchool dataset so that researchers can examine school level indicators such as total enrolments, number of staff, attendance rate, etc. More information can be found by searching MySchool on the ACARA website.
NAPLAN	**NAPLAN** refers to the standardised school-based National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). It is a series of tests focused on basic skills which are administered to students in year levels three, five, seven and nine. Tests are supplied by state/territory governments where parent or guardian permission was granted.
Parent	While recognising the diversity of families and range of care arrangements that may exist for children, we use '**parents**' to refer to biological parents, legal guardians, or others who are primary caregivers for children, who may include relative carers, kinship carers, foster carers (South Australian Department of Education, 2022). In the context of LSIC, these were termed 'main carers' and self-identified as the person who knew the focus study child the best.
Parent Involvement	**Parent Involvement** is a common term used to describe parents' commitment to support their child's education at home and at school. Important dimensions of parent involvement include the nature and frequency of communication between home and school, parental involvement in school activities, and parent support for learning at home. Meaningful and effective connections and continuities between families and schools will maximise the benefits of parental involvement to children's educational outcomes.
Peer problems	**Peer problems** (also called peer relationship problems) is a subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 2001). This brief subscale (comprising five items) evaluates children's social functioning. Example items include child has at least one good friend and child is picked on or bullied by other children.
Prep (Preparatory)	**Prep** is an abbreviation for the Preparatory year. In this report the term used for the first full-time year of formal schooling.
Prosocial skills	**Prosocial skills** (also called prosocial behaviours) is the only strengths-based subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 2001). This brief subscale (comprising 5 items) assesses children's prosociality. Example items include child often volunteers to help others and child shares readily with other children.

Term	Definition
RAOs	**RAOs** are a team of locally employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research administration officers (RAOs) who conduct face-to-face data collection with children and their families in the LSIC study.
Remoteness	**Remoteness** refers to the study child's geographical remoteness which has been categorised into five descriptions: Major City, Inner Regional area, Outer Regional area, Remote area and Very Remote area. These are classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics based on a measure of relative access to services, measured by the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+). Further information can be found by searching 'remoteness' on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website.
School climate	**School climate** refers to the quality and character of the school environment, reflecting norms, relationships, organisational structures, and experiences related to school life. In Waves 8 to 10 children were asked to report on their school climate across five items which sought to capture the safety and relationships aspects of school climate (Biddle et al., 2019). This scale was created by adapting existing school climate measures (Ramelow et al., 2015). Example items include my school has safe places and my school has people I trust. See the Technical Appendix for further details.
SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire)	The **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire** (SDQ; Goodman, 2001) is a brief screening tool for child psychopathology. This questionnaire was developed in the United Kingdom using a national sample of parents, teachers, and youth, with scales later being developed for each of these informants (with the self-report measure validated for children aged 11 years and above). This scale comprises a prosocial behaviour subscale and four psychopathology subscales: emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, conduct problems, and hyperactivity-inattention. Williamson et al. (2014) have previously determined the construct validity and reliability of the SDQ subscales for Aboriginal children within The Study of Environment on Aboriginal Resilience and Child Health.
SEIFA (Socio Economic Index for Area)	**SEIFA** is an index created by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which ranks areas in Australia according to the relative socio-economic advantage. Higher rankings represent higher socio-economic advantage of the local area. The index is based on information from the five-yearly census data. More information can be found by searching SEIFA on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website. Due to the relative size of the Indigenous population, the standard SEIFA indices are likely dominated by the characteristics of the non-Indigenous population and hence IRISEO was created (Biddle, 2009).
Senior primary	**Senior primary** is inclusive of study children in Year 5 and Year 6.

Term	Definition
Stronger and Weaker Progress groups	**Stronger and Weaker Progress groups** on literacy and numeracy during primary school were measured by the magnitude of change (relative to LSIC peers) in academic attainment from the early primary school years (Preparatory to Year 2) to the later years (Years 5 and 6). The Technical Appendix provides detail on how these groups were identified.
Student engagement	**Student engagement** refers to participation in academic and school-related activities (Christensen et al., 2012) and has important implications for students' wellbeing and academic achievement. This multidimensional construct comprises three domains: emotional engagement, behavioural engagement, and cognitive engagement. In brief, emotional engagement relates to a child's emotional and affective attachment to school. Behavioural engagement reflects students' conduct in school and with related activities (e.g., homework). Finally, cognitive engagement refers to students' investment in academic tasks.
Student-teacher conflict	The **student-teacher conflict** subscale of the Pianta Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992) seeks to assess the degree of conflict and negativity that the teacher perceives in their relationship with the student. The factor structure, validity, and reliability of this scale in the LSIC sample has been previously explored (Biddle et al., 2019). Seven items are used for this scale, with example items including this child and I always seem to be struggling with each other and this child easily becomes angry with me. See the Technical Appendix for further details.
Study Child	The term **Study Child** refers to the child participating in the LSIC study. For readability purposes the word 'children' is used throughout the report when discussing study participants.
Teacher style	This student-report scale assesses student teacher relationships (**teacher style**). The five items that comprise this scale were derived from the Seeding Success project (Craven et al., 2013) and the factor structure and reliability of this scale was evaluated in the LSIC Education Technical Report (Biddle et al., 2019). Example items include: my teacher listens to me and my teachers care about me and want me to do well at school. See the Technical Appendix for further details.
Wave	Data is collected annually in LSIC, with each time point being referred to as a **wave**

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