



Resilience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students: What have we learned so far?

RESEARCH BRIEF

Defining resilience

We used a socio-ecological definition of resilience to study the resilience of remote-dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (11 – 18 yrs) who attend boarding schools across Queensland:

“In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.” (Ungar, 2008)

Students exposed to adversity

When a young person moves from a remote community primary school into a boarding school, they may face several challenges, such as:

- *Changes in residence; cultures, language, autonomy, being away from family and country*
- *Changes in schooling; educational standards, curriculum, teachers, expectations*

- *Supervision; parental influence, personal freedom, institutional discrimination and racism*
- *Physiological changes; from childhood – adolescence – emerging adulthood*
- *Peer relationships; increased peer pressure, heightened participation in risky behaviour (alcohol and drug use, sexual activity)*
- *Psychological risks; increased risk of depression*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents also cope with many ongoing home and community-based stressors that stem from enduring systemic socio-economic disadvantage and the challenges of living remotely such as:

- *Exposure to high levels of grief and loss*
- *Limited access to a range of physical and mental health services in community*
- *Overcoming home-school communication difficulties because of geographical distance & high travel costs*



How do students navigate their way to resources that sustain their wellbeing?

We found that the resources that were important in sustaining the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding school students- what students say make them strong - are factors that sit largely outside of their individual control. These were:

Sources of Resilience

- Connection to culture
- Caring and supportive friendships
- Connection with family
- Role models
- Safe home with good food to eat

The expressions of students' resilience – that is, how they showed that they are strong were more individualised. They included:

Expressions of Resilience

- Staying on task
- Helping others
- Interpersonal social skills
- Knowing how to behave in different situations
- Celebrating culture



What is important to resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents?

The findings highlight what students say is important to their resilience. It is essential that a collaborative and integrated support from schools, families, communities and peers is provided, and that resilience in individuals is recognised and celebrated.

These findings provide practical guidance to human services working with Indigenous youth and should be taken into account for people working with and supporting Indigenous adolescents.

References

Ungar, M., & Liebenberg, L. (2011). *Assessing Resilience across Cultures Using Mixed Methods: Construction of the Child and Youth Resilience Measure*. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 5(2), 126-149.

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