

No danger of another stolen generation

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LAST Sunday night I drove the five hours from my home town in Hope Vale to Cairns, unaware that there was a debate raging about whether I was proposing to revive the stolen generations policy by sending children packing to boarding schools down south. I had spent the weekend camping with my mother and family, hunting a species of migratory fish called gaalnggaan. At this time of the year, the men and boys of Hope Vale are out with their spears, hunting gaalnggaan as they run along the beaches or shelter on the side of the mangroves at high tide.

I have done this routine every year since I was old enough to be on the tiller for my father as he stood at the front of the boat with his spears. After primary school in Hope Vale, I was a boarder at St Peters College in Brisbane, to which I had been sent by decision of my parents and by opportunity provided by the Lutheran Church and the federal government. I looked forward to the school holidays.

Almost all of the indigenous people from remote Australia who have succeeded in education and gone on to make leading contributions on behalf of their people were educated at boarding schools – often a long way from their homes, most often at church schools. In Cape York Peninsula, no Aboriginal tertiary graduates have come from local public secondary schools.

Boarding schools are an old and well-established idea, going back to the 1960s for the people of our region. It is on this past practice – its successes as well as its failures – that we base our policy in Cape York Peninsula: scholarships to high-quality, high-expectation secondary schools down south. The allegation that indigenous children attending boarding schools represents a repetition of the stolen generations is just silly.

A more serious fallacy is that you can provide quality secondary education in remote communities. Attendance at high-expectation boarding schools has declined in the past 20 years in favour of attempts by governments to provide secondary schooling in our communities. This experiment failed profoundly and the remnant secondary facilities should be closed down. There is not sufficient scale and the teachers and specialisations required to provide a proper secondary education are impossible with small student populations.

Only in regional centres, such as Cooktown and Weipa in Cape York Peninsula, can a credible case be made for providing secondary education facilities. However, these schools in regional centres would need to be fundamentally reformed if they are to produce indigenous tertiary graduates. Thursday Island State High School is testament to the fact that this can happen.

Another fallacy – expressed by Peter Holt from the Hollows Foundation – is that boarding should be rejected because students risk suffering cultural loss. First, I have

as good a knowledge of the history and languages of my communities as any of my peers who never left Cape York – because of education. My advantage is that I can enjoy the best of both worlds. I can speak the Queen's English and Guugu Yimithirr.

Second, Aboriginal communities are disintegrating socially and culturally because of passive welfare and substance abuse. Unlike all other government policies that are being implemented in remote communities, high-expectation education offers opportunities. A life in which you are stuck with limited opportunities in remote communities is not conducive to cultural maintenance.

A more substantial objection to increased boarding concerns racial and class prejudice. But indigenous students will face these problems wherever they are – whether at high school in a regional centre or at a private boarding school in a capital city. This underscores the need for schools to understand the reality of this problem and to support their indigenous students. This is what Clayfield College in Brisbane has done so well.

Another real concern is the high drop-out rate of indigenous students from boarding schools. However, white and Asian youngsters suffer from homesickness as much as black children. If students do not find a place in the school community where they can gain a sense of achievement and recognition, then homesickness will be a fatal problem rather than the normal kind of feeling one has for home town and family.

The principal driver of the low retention rate in boarding schools (and secondary schools generally) is the fact that the students entering secondary school at Year 8 are not up to standard. While they have nominally completed Year 7, their literacy levels are around Year 3 or Year 5 at best. If you are in a Year 8 classroom and you are really at Year 5 level, then you are going to struggle to fit in and your chances of ultimate success are poor.

There is a fundamental and widespread underachievement problem in primary school education in remote communities. That is why another of our policies in Cape York Peninsula is: closing the gap between Year 7 in Cape York and Year 8 at secondary schools down south.

There is no practical alternative to primary schooling being provided in our own communities. We have to fix up primary schooling if we are to fix up the retention of indigenous students in secondary school. This is the greatest challenge we face, to which we are now turning our attention.