Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project

Executive Summary

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Introduction and Background

This research project is funded by the Australian Government’s Emerging Priorities Program to explore educational outcomes in relation to school attendance, engagement and retention of First Nations students in remote schools in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Given attendance rates in very remote schools declined sharply in 2021-2022 this exploration is both general, but also with respect to the impact of unexpected events, including COVID-19.

It was conducted by a team of First Nations and non-Indigenous researchers from three tertiary institutions: Batchelor Institute, Curtin University and the University of Notre Dame Australia (Nulungu Research Institute). We (the research team) brought considerable research expertise to the task, as well as extensive teaching experience and knowledge of working in the Indigenous Education context.

It should be noted that the key constructs of this research: attendance, engagement and retention overlap and how they are measured is less than clear cut. Attendance, as noted in this report, is at best a poor proxy for educational outcomes and concerns about school attendance are more often about engagement in learning at school than they are about the proportion of children and young people attending school on any day.

Our motivation for this research stems from the researchers’ concerns for improved outcomes for First Nations students living in remote communities. It also comes from our desire to respond to the ongoing narrative about educational failure—the ‘wicked problem’ of education in remote schools. This project responds to the systemic failure of the Australian education system, where there has been a lack of responsiveness from successive governments that has impacted remote students and their families, and yet where a deficit rhetoric continues to be reinforced and where mainstream ‘metrocentric understandings of success’ have been perpetuated. Previous research has highlighted how policy continues to place pressure on remote students to be more mainstream and how the ‘othering’ of First Nations children is prevalent, with unfair comparisons continuing to be made (e.g., National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy or NAPLAN measuring cultural knowledge rather than literacy skills). Community-led metrics and solutions have failed to infiltrate the education discourse despite First Nations families, elders and organisations trying to offer community-led solutions.

In this report we begin with an account of the literature pertaining to these issues and as they relate to school attendance, engagement, and retention in remote schools. Recognising that it is counterproductive to concentrate only on ‘the problem’ we outline both the positives, as well as the challenges. With a clear understanding that ‘one size does not fit all’, we describe the importance of First Nations led and governed systems of success and how the recognition and inclusion of local language and culture, with associated employment of local staff, and ‘On Country’ learning have been found to support engagement of students. From the literature we also note calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum, and the promotion of the use of interdisciplinary, beyond-school approaches that serve to build student confidence and support school-to-work transition. We outline other factors that have been identified within the research literature as making positive contributions including school environment, localised and collaborative leadership, strong relationships—with students and the community, quality early learning programs, place-based literacy programs, and health and wellbeing initiatives.

Methodology

This research was undertaken using a mixed method approach with both qualitative and quantitative data being collected and then analysed in culturally appropriate and robust ways. Our data set is both extensive and rich: 139 interviews, undertaken by trained community researchers, were conducted with Elders, community members, school staff and students at various locations, and especially at our four case study sites. Online surveys were completed by 226 respondents. It should be noted that we purposefully included participants from boarding schools as sites for data collection and as one of our case studies because in some remote communities’ families have ‘no other choice’—a “choice-less choice” as there is no other education service in their community and because graduations of remote students from boarding schools have increased in recent years. Our
case studies provide an in-depth account of the experiences of very remote schools and, in the case of the boarding school, one catering for students from very remote areas.

Research questions which guided this project are as follows:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia, and what has been the effect of external factors (including COVID-19 and other events)?

2. What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools of Northern Territory and Western Australia?

Before commencement of this research, we sought ethics approval from the Menzies Institute and the relevant systems and sectors so that all types of schools could be included in this research. Ethics clearance was granted from Australian Independent Schools (Northern Territory), Australian Independent Schools (Western Australia) and Catholic Education in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It was unfortunate that the government school departments were unwilling to accommodate this research and raises serious questions about their willingness to allow independent research to be conducted within their jurisdiction for the purposes of educational improvement. This result is the basis of one of our recommendations.

Although differences existed in the data for the different locations and cohorts, and between the survey and interview responses, there were many consistencies and key themes were clearly identifiable. Many of the factors seen as supportive or challenging were interrelated (e.g., a school that employed local staff was also seen as a supportive school, in part, because of what those staff members could offer). The key findings pertaining to attendance, engagement, and retention as well as the impact of COVID-19 are outlined below in order of positive and then negative issues. Targeted support strategies are then briefly summarised. Many of the findings align with those identified in literature and suggestions clearly indicate what is possible for improvement.

**Findings**

**Attendance**

The facilitative role of family; schools being ‘safe places’ in terms of meeting the physical and social needs of students and as places to learn, and the role of teachers, their teaching, and school principals were identified as key areas in both the survey and interview data as contributing in positive ways to attendance. Desire to learn and aspirations for the future were also identified by students in their surveys and across the interview responses.

In terms of things that impact negatively on attendance, within the interviews participants indicated that some families neither encourage their children’s attendance nor see the value of education (because of their own negative experiences); students also choose not to attend because they want to be with their family and/or do cultural things. In the interviews, participants described how young people’s autonomy within communities meant that some do not attend because they choose not to, either because they don’t like school and/or their teachers, or don’t see the point of school. Others explained this choice is made to avoid the feelings of ‘shame’ and ‘hopelessness’ of not being able to do their classwork. Other negative factors are ‘external’ to students and their schools and include such issues as overcrowding in houses; lack of money (e.g., for food, excursion, school supplies); the transience and mobility of families; student illnesses and limited access to health services; lack of services more generally; and weather events.

**The Impact of COVID-19**

Within the surveys, community members indicated that they felt COVID-19 made no difference, whilst staff and half of the responding students indicated that they thought it made engagement and retention worse. In the interview data, respondents described how they struggled with the ‘confusion’ and ‘uncertainty’ of COVID-19 mandates, such as testing and vaccinations suggesting they added another layer of rules and complications to their already complex lives; and they felt ‘socially isolated’. However, many described the impact of COVID-19 on education as not being significant, simply an inconvenience. In terms of attendance and engagement, some indicated a negative impact such as some schools closing for short periods of time and teachers becoming sick or unable to return to
the community because of border restrictions. Others reported that it led to some disconnection from the school and that it was hard to rebuild school and classroom routines post-COVID-19. Others indicated positive outcomes in terms of COVID-19 and education such as families becoming more involved with their children’s learning.

Factors Affecting Engagement

In the survey responses, those factors impacting in a positive way on attendance were also connected to engagement. In addition, within the qualitative data other factors emerged including a strong historical connection of the community to the school with participants describing how they appreciated the ethos of their school because the principles governing it came directly from their families. They described how community schools were developed to address the limited schooling options available to their children and because they had a shared vision about the value of education and learning and the transformative impact of education.

In addition, participants described the impact of a positive school environment starting with the leadership and governance of the school - where adequate and appropriate resources were ensured and where decisions were made in close collaboration with community. The key roles of teachers and the teaching at the school were also recognised, with praise given to the respect afforded to and the inclusion of community members and local staff. Strong relationships between the leadership team, teachers, community members and students underpinned these interactions. The employment of (more) local staff was seen as vital within remote community schools, particularly, but not only because they provide the care and support needed for students. And for non-local teachers, participants identified the need for them to undertake appropriate training and for them to be ‘willing to learn’.

Positive learning experiences were also nominated by many participants as vital to engagement because students engage when they like school. First and foremost, two-way learning and ‘On Country learning’ were listed as key. Participants also described the need to provide hands-on-learning’, learning that is holistic’ and that matches the students’ needs. It was indicated that learning also needs to be relevant to who they are and where they live. Such learning experiences also need to involve ‘integrated learning’, awareness of ‘learner cultural identity’, and teaching approaches that recognise and involve ‘culture’ and ‘first language(s)’. Participants described the need to teaching English alongside ‘first language(s)’.

The factors that impact in negative ways were the counterpoint to the same issues identified as having a positive impact on attendance and engagement. Specifically, a school environment that was ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘unsafe’ resulted in reduced engagement. Related to this, within the survey four key areas were each identified as having a deleterious effect: mental health and wellbeing concerns; teasing, bullying and violence; feeling ‘shame’ when at school, leading to school avoidance, and school not aligning with cultural priorities.

Within the qualitative data, in addition to these factors, other additional issues were identified including: the ‘ongoing impacts of colonisation’; systemic and policy issues as impacting in negative ways on student engagement (e.g., changes to policies that had previously had good outcomes such as ‘bilingual approaches’) with participants attributing this to inherent ‘racism’; excessive bureaucracy; insufficient educational funding in remote locations resulting in students in remote communities being denied access to quality schooling and, in some cases, even to full-time schooling; considerable time and energy spent on just applying for necessary funding and also dealing with the bureaucratic demands around such application processes. There were also personnel issues within the schools such as a lack of respect between members of the school community – staff and students and especially the devaluing of local-teachers and their skills and knowledge; poor leadership (e.g., inability to listen, ‘lack of consultation’), and leaders imposing curriculum/practices that were ‘inappropriate’ or unnecessary, and, making too many ‘changes’ too rapidly. Participants described the difficulty in attracting and retaining appropriate non-local staff, a factor exacerbated by a national teacher shortage. Some lamented the lack of appropriate training and development opportunities for teachers working in remote areas and others described teachers using negative, even punitive behavioural management within their classrooms and teaching in culturally inappropriate ways.
Beyond the school and the staff, conflicts and disputes extending from outside into school and other community issues were described as impacting on engagement. In addition, the weather and weather events were indicated to have detrimental impacts.

Retention

In terms of the survey responses, retention is attained when there is family/Elder support and encouragement for schooling; when education aligns with students’ future plans; when students value their education; and, when they have positive self-esteem. Retention was encouraged when there were First Nations role models in the students’ lives. In contrast, students dropping out of school were attributed to several factors: ‘shame’, mental health and wellbeing issues, problems with staff, teasing and bullying, boredom, and students not feeling they cannot keep up.

These responses were reflected in the qualitative findings with participants describing how families encourage students to remain at school, celebrate their successes, talk with them about their futures and their need for ‘self-improvement’. Having family members work at the school also supports student retention. Teachers were seen to encourage retention when they support students and their learning, by challenging and encouraging them and building on their existing strengths and knowledge. Retention was also associated with teaching practices that prioritise ‘culture’ and scaffold understanding by using home language and concepts (e.g., through On Country learning). These latter factors can be achieved through the work of local staff because of their ‘understanding’ and because, unlike non-local staff, often stay long-term at the school.

Students were reported to drop out of school because of lack of vocational pathways, therefore, adopting these into schools can offer a ‘real purpose’ for education. Of particular importance are those vocational pathways that allow them to stay in their community, supporting and ‘making a difference’. For example, training that leads to ranger work where they can ‘look after country’ were listed as positive initiatives. It was evident that there was an interconnection of factors that support retention—family, work On Country, strong governance and role models within the community, and these factors come together in pathway opportunities supporting transition between school and life after school. At a systemic level, however, this requires structural and policy support for schools to be flexible and responsive in how they structure their programs for students.

Respondents described how students choose to leave community and complete their education at boarding schools for multiple reasons, including historical and family connection to the school, what is/is not available in the community, ‘getting away from’ issues in the community, and also the options they provide, such as pathways (as described above) and religious instruction. Whilst attendance at boarding school does not create the same issues as in schools located at communities, retention remains problematic. Being too far from family and off country, homesickness and the weather were also issues as problematic with respect to retention at boarding schools.

Targeted Support

A variety of suggestions were made pertaining to the type of support that encourages attendance, engagement, and retention. These ranged from: how schools are organised and the resources they have (e.g., need for more culturally appropriate and well-designed outdoor spaces); using an holistic approach to support students; partnerships with community and families (e.g., through outreach, family days, open days, community meetings and assemblies); conducting ‘Two-way’ and ‘On Country learning’ and even having students graduate ‘On Country’; following an appropriate and targeted curriculum; improving the provision of ‘wrap around’ services e.g., transport to and from school, involving allied health services (e.g., psychology, occupational therapy) and case workers; incorporating health programs (e.g., hygiene, various therapies); providing child-care and early childhood programs; providing food programs; and, improving accommodation (e.g., culturally appropriate places in boarding schools), housing and safety (e.g., developing relationships with police working onsite at schools).

Suggestions were also provided about various programs that would be useful (e.g., bullying programs, driver education programs, music and art programs). Supporting students to follow positive pathways included the provision of career guidance; increased vocational training opportunities connected to the school/communities; improved
Recommendations

Overall, there are many needs, but also enormous possibilities for improvement. Granting communities agency about education for their young is a clear first step. Improved funding models and policies, and flexible implementation that allow for relevant education is necessary. Supporting students’ home language and culture as part of this learning is essential as are additional programs that target student needs and their future pathways. Learning experience needs to be delivered by staff well prepared for these contexts. Promoting opportunities for local staff and offering ways for these staff to become teachers is vital. Finally, there is an ongoing need for close collaboration between education and local communities and between schools and services for their students.

Recommendation 1. We recommend that training and recruitment of First Nations school staff be a priority as part of a broader plan to engage community in schooling.

Recommendation 2. We recommend that preparation for pre-service teachers planning to work in rural and remote community schools, be improved.

Recommendation 3. We recommend a strengthening of local participation in governance of remote schools, as part of a broader plan to improve First Nations community engagement in schooling.

Recommendation 4. We recommend that induction processes for newly recruited staff working in remote schools, be improved.

Recommendation 5. We recommend a review of the assessment and reporting requirements for First Nations students in remote schools, to ensure that Indigenous culture and knowledge are embedded.

Recommendation 6. We recommend the continued funding, and expansion, of learning on Country programs.

Recommendation 7. We recommend that greater support be provided for mental health, social and emotional wellbeing in remote community schools.

Recommendation 8. We recommend that development of new policies and funding streams be assessed to determine potential for systemic and institutional racism.

Recommendation 9. We recommend a review of mechanisms used to determine funding for remote schools.

Recommendation 10. We recommend creation of intergenerational learning hubs in collaboration with schools, to focus on adult learning as a vehicle for increasing families’ support of their children at school.

Recommendation 11. We recommend additional support and incentivisation for First Nations staff to act as co-principals and principals in remote schools.

Recommendation 12. We recommend that all new initiatives funded by the Australian Government be evaluated independently.

Recommendation 13. We recommend that remote schools be encouraged to integrate post-school pathways.