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Investigating Remote School Attendance, Retention and Engagement: A Case Study Involving Students as Co-researchers

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Abstract

Predating the introduction of the Closing the Gap strategy in 2007, First Nation students' attendance, retention and engagement in remote schools has been a concern for educators and successive governments. The following paper describes a case study—one part of a large Australian federally funded 'Emerging Priorities Program' project that sought to examine these issues. Specifically, it explores those factors that contribute to either exacerbating the decline in attendance, engagement or retention or lead to improved outcomes. The case study was undertaken at a Vocational Education and Training boarding school catering for Aboriginal students, mostly from remote areas of Western Australia. Students travel considerable distance to attend the school, often because of their family connections to the school. In this study students from one of the English classes became co-researchers in the project, providing input and collaborating at every stage of the research process. The findings indicate the need to adopt a strength-based approach when teaching remote students. This can be achieved through positive relationships between educators and students, which, in turn, is developed through cultural awareness and the use of community members and Aboriginal educators as role models and human resources for schools.

Keywords: *remote schools, Aboriginal students, attendance, engagement, retention, case study*

Introduction

In response to a decline in student attendance, engagement and retention in many regional and remote schools since COVID-19, the Australian Government announced funding as part of the 'Emerging Priorities Program' (EPP) to explore why this was the case. However, pre-dating the pandemic, there have been ongoing concerns among educators and successive governments about declining attendance rates. This article describes a case study – one part of this large federally funded Australian project that sought to examine those factors that contribute to engagement and retention in remote schools. (See <https://www.remoteschoolengagement.au/final-reports>).

School Context

This case study was undertaken at a boarding school - Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed (CAPS) Vocational Education and Training School. It caters to Aboriginal students from mostly remote Western Australia areas. It is located in the Goldfields-Esperance region of Western Australia close to the small farming community of Gibson, 715 kilometres south-east of Perth. The school is located within an operational farm consisting of approximately 1,000 acres of land. It is an independent school – part of a group of 14 Aboriginal Western Australia Independent Community Schools and one of three CAPS schools. These schools are governed by one board comprised mainly local Aboriginal community members.

Catering for up to 70 Year 11 and 12 students, at the time of this study about 60 were attending the school. All were First Nations students, speaking a language other than English as their first. The principal noted school attendance is not an issue—“*all students attend unless they are sick. There is nowhere to go. It is in the high 90%*”—however, retention remains “*a challenge*”.

Students travel considerable distances to attend Wongutha. They come from the Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfield and the central desert regions of Western Australia. Many come from small, remote communities. They are usually multilingual, speaking traditional languages (e.g., Goondiyandi, Kija, Nyangumarta) and/or Kriol (a creole spoken in northern Australia) and/or Aboriginal English (a distinct dialect of Australian English) and Standard Australian English (SAE)-the language they are least proficient in.

The school delivers accredited training and arranges assessments, focusing on Certificates I and II in Agriculture, Rural Operations, Hospitality, Business Administration, General Construction, Conservation and Environmental Management (CAEM), Horticulture, Automotive Mechanics, Metals and Engineering. The school aims to develop the students’ vocational skills and their proficiency in SAE, including their written and oral competence. Workplace learning provides opportunities for building confidence and relational skills, which directly pertains to the school’s motto: ‘Training For Life’. Students also study other subjects, including mathematics and literacy, which are levelled according to ability, not age.

Notably, the school ensures that by the end of a student’s enrolment, they have the credentials they need to live and work back in their community or elsewhere. Staff help students to obtain identifying documentation, including driver’s licences, bank accounts, Medicare cards, My Gov accounts, and birth certificates.

Research on Engagement and Retention

Two research team members, Oliver and McCarthy, have a long-established relationship at the school, especially working with Jackson – a teacher at the school. In a previous project about the life lessons, the students were trained as co-researchers to collect and analyse the data gained by way of interviews with past Wongutha students (see Shay et al., 2023). Building upon this, in the current study the students (n=11) were both participants and co-researchers. They interviewed ten family and community members. In addition, the principal and several teachers were interviewed.

Whilst the overall project addressed more general questions about attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools, and the impact of events including COVID-19, and what to do to improve these aspects, in this case study, students focussed on five main questions they helped develop:

1. Why do students attend school?
2. What supports school retention?
3. Why do students drop out?
4. Why do students disengage?

5. What difference did COVID-19 make?

Findings

The findings from this case study emerged both from the current students' input and also from the data they collected and analysed. The five multifaceted and overlapping themes include: relationships, cultural safety, supportive school environment, purpose, and outside factors. A final finding relates to the impact of COVID-19.

Relationships

When both current and past Wongutha students were interviewed, they reflected that their positive relationships with the teachers and staff supported their engagement, ongoing attendance and retention. One interviewee stated: *"A good thing for Wongutha is all the staff and all the teachers... they made me feel at home here"*.

They also described the support and positive characteristics of the principal, various teachers, and other staff, particularly boarding staff and past Elder. When describing Aboriginal staff who previously worked at the school, participants used the titles *"Aunty"* and *"Uncle"* out of respect (as is the cultural custom) and also with affection. The principal indicated that *"strong relationships are our highest value... (we) want that to be real (for the students)"*.

The participants attributed their relationships with peers as another factor that ensured their attendance and engagement – *"Fellowship, friendship and mates"* and *"coming out to Wongutha was a second home to me. And in the dorm with the boys, we were all... 'brothers'. Look after each other, help each other."*

Some participants also indicated that the team sports played in the local community contributed to their retention. Being a member of the local football and basketball team created a sense of friendship and solidarity. This generated a feeling of inclusivity and responsibility to return to school.

Finally, the participants acknowledged that attendance, engagement and retention at all schools are impacted by relationships. One interviewee indicated *"More encouragement, teacher relationships with the students"* was needed. Poor relationships at other schools with staff (in all cases non-Aboriginal, often culturally unaware staff), were noted as reasons for why Aboriginal students don't attend or engage in school.

Cultural Safety

Student participants acknowledged that Wongutha CAPS is a culturally safe environment. They recognised the school, with its long history of working with Aboriginal students, including from their own communities, meant that staff understood and knew about their culture and their ways of 'being and doing'. The principal and teachers indicated that understanding their students' culture governed how they approached, interacted with, and taught the students. The principal also outlined how there is ongoing cultural awareness training for all staff provided by Aboriginal staff. In addition, staff regularly escort students to and from school and engage with the students' communities, gaining a better understanding of where they come from, their language and culture.

The key role that Aboriginal staff play both at Wongutha CAPS and, more generally, was consistently emphasised by participants. Generally, it was reported that Aboriginal staff help foster culturally safe schools and enhance students' well-being by recognising and respecting their cultural identity. They also provide important and positive role models and a vital link between home, community and school. They are a resource that enables culture to be brought into the classroom (or taking the classroom out 'On Country'), fostering students' interest and

motivation. When cultural activities become part of the curriculum, students are engaged and want to attend school.

Supportive School Environment

Schools that provide supportive environments catering to student needs were seen to encourage attendance and engagement. Participants also discussed the converse (i.e., an unsupportive environment leading to poor attendance and engagement). One interviewee indicated that in unsupportive schools, there was a *“lack of communication, no support, and ... no encouragement”*.

Participants described the importance of creating supportive and fun classrooms where students can enjoy learning. This may involve creating peer work: *“It’s a good place... to learn social skills and to interact”*. A positive school environment uses approaches that cater to the student’s particular ways of learning and recognises their cultural *“ways of doing things”*. It occurs with a strength-based approach to learning—acknowledging what students bring to school, building on what they know and can do, and adjusting the teaching to suit their language background and needs.

Participants indicated that schools that did not create supportive environments were why students stopped attending – they *“drop out”*. When teaching is unsupportive and students feel behind - *“feeling like you can’t keep up, ”* they stop attending. *“Some people find learning hard, some people don’t enjoy it, some people struggle with class work ... it’s challenging”*.

Other participants reflected on bullying, racism, discrimination—even lateral violence—that they have experienced or seen at ‘other’ schools. The students discussed how this negatively impacts Aboriginal students’ school attendance and engagement. Finally, several participants pointed to trauma that some Aboriginal students have experienced and how this works against school attendance and engagement (e.g., *“Because ... they lost their parents”* or *“maybe they’re getting abused... a lot of things that could be going wrong”*).

Purpose

One aspect also widely discussed related to the purpose of education, namely, getting work after school:

You need education to get a good job, get a high-paid job, and once you get all the tickets ... there’s nothing stopping you ... With education, it will come easier.

This was a perception consistently captured in the data: *“education, to get a job”*.

Beyond these aspirations, others suggested engagement occurs because students see the inherent *“value of education”* and they *“have a desire to go”*. Again, Aboriginal role models were described as important for explicitly demonstrating the purpose of schooling. In contrast, lack of attendance and engagement was attributed to students not *“seeing the relevance of education”* and being *“bored”* at school. Students suggested others do not go because *“they think they know everything already”*, and *“once they know how to read and write they think they know enough and don’t need to go anymore”*.

The students also discussed the need to have schools make *“meaningful connections to everyday life”*. An interviewee indicated: *“Make it interesting for them, hobbies and VET classes and what they like doing. Getting their licence, you know”*. This was something also reflected by the principal when he said: *“We are purposeful... there is a reason to be here (at Wongutha)”*.

Outside Factors

Participants reflected on factors outside schools that affect attendance and engagement. Some attributed low attendance to the lack of parental support for schooling. Several Wongutha students reflected on how strict their parents, grandparents or other members of their extended family are and how they *“make them go to school”*. They talked about others not going (to other

schools) because they “*stay up late and then can’t get up to come to school*”, sometimes because they are “*playing computer games*” or watching “*TikTok, Snapchat*” late at night and it is “*too hard to wake up and get to school*”. Finally, others said some families did not have money for school supplies and excursions, and so did not send their children to school. One interviewee described how she could not return to school as there were no funds or support from her family.

The Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 was discussed and the response from participants was consistent - it did not make much difference to attendance and engagement, although it was acknowledged that it may have exacerbated an already existing situation. The principal did acknowledge that COVID-19 impacted the enrolments and after the shutdown, some students did not return because they had to be vaccinated and some communities and families were against vaccination.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that attendance, engagement, and retention are strongly aligned with meaningful, engaging, culturally sensitive learning. While family encouragement, workplace preparation and aspirations for the future were important, the most consistent reason for returning to school was to participate in purposeful and enjoyable learning experiences. Other key factors included having solid long-term relationships between students, their families/communities, and teachers. At Wongutha CAPS strengths-based programs and a strong sense of cultural safety provide further reason for coming to school and staying. At this school Indigenous knowledge, culture, and languages are valued.

Wongutha CAPS provides a model of education that, over time, has worked to address the needs of students. It caters for a particular cohort of students and continues to explore ways to improve what they do by building relationships, being supportive and culturally safe and working in ways that give purpose to their students’ education. However, at Wongutha CAPS, as elsewhere, there are perennial issues related to Aboriginal students going to boarding school - homesickness, unfamiliarity, travelling significant geographical distances, leaving family, community and adjusting to the cooler climate.

References

Shay, M., Oliver, R., Bogachenko, T., & McCarthy, H. (2023). “From the bottom to the top”: Learning through stories of transitioning from an Aboriginal boarding school to the workplace and life beyond school. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 33(3), 30–46. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v33i3.699>