



Remote School Retention in Australia: Why do First Nations Students Disengage and Drop out?

John Guenther

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

John.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Rhonda Oliver

Curtin University

Rhonda.Oliver@curtin.edu.au

Robyn Ober

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

robyn.ober@batchelor.edu.au

Catherine Holmes

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

catherine.holmes@batchelor.edu.au

Abstract

The Australian education system works well for most students. However, equitable access to secondary education is problematic for First Nations people living in remote communities. There is a strong emphasis on Year 12 completion as an indicator of successful engagement in remote First Nations education. This has been partly driven by Australian Government ‘Closing the Gap’ targets. Yet for remote students Year 12 Certificate attainment is trending down, from 113 in 2013 down to 82 in 2022. Nationally, the target to achieve 96% Year 12 or equivalent is not on track for achievement.

This article explores what students, school staff and community members say leads to disengagement and dropout. It is based on research conducted in Western Australia and the Northern Territory during 2023 by a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute, Curtin University and University of Notre Dame. The research focused on remote and very remote Independent and Catholic schools. It engaged 229 in surveys and 136 in yarns or interviews. Most of the respondents were First Nations people.

Keywords: *remote education, First Nations education, disengagement, retention, attainment*

Introduction

Completing Year 12 is seen as a critical indicator of how young people are achieving their “full learning potential” (Productivity Commission, 2024, p. 45). Year 12 attainment is also seen as an important stepping stone towards engagement in the workforce, and as getting post-school qualifications. And yet despite good intentions of 16 years of ‘Closing the Gap’ efforts, targets for closing this gap for First Nations students are not on track to be reached. Nowhere is this more evident than in very remote communities where Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates for 20-24 year olds are about 40%, well short of the 96% Closing the Gap target (Productivity Commission, 2023, p. 52).

One of the key reasons for high school non-completion is the limited access to senior secondary education in remote communities. Of 173 very remote schools with greater than 80% First Nations enrolments, 27 offer schooling up to Year 6, another 28 offer schooling to Year 9, 36 offer school to Year 11, and 82 offer up to Year 12 in 2023 (see Table 1 in the Appendix 1). Even taking these data into account, the rate of non-completion of those who do have access to Year 12 remains

high. Based on analyses of My School and Census data, we estimate that from a pool of approximately 1350 very remote 17-year-old First Nations people, 1061 do not complete in a given year. That is 78% of potential completers, drop out (see Table 2 in Appendix 2).

The research which forms the basis of this article was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education through its *Emerging Priorities Program*. It follows concerns about declining attendance rates in remote First Nations communities. The research team sought to find out what affects, and what could be done to improve, student attendance, engagement and retention, in remote communities. Detailed findings can be viewed in the reports for the project (Guenther, Oliver et al., 2023). Flowing from this work this article provides answers to the question: Why do so many young Aboriginal people from remote communities drop out of school and not complete Year 12? We note that there is a risk that by asking this question, we are inadvertently shifting responsibility away from systems that should be supporting students, to the students themselves. In another article, we consider what contributes to young people's engagement and retention (Guenther et al., 2024). Nevertheless, we do not discount the agency of young people, or their experiences of and responses to, schooling they receive.

Noncompletion, Dropout and Dis/engagement

With respect to completions, we use the definition offered by My School

Senior secondary outcomes reflect the following key areas of student achievement:

awarding of senior secondary certificate of education

completion of senior secondary school. (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2024)

Attaining a Year 12 certificate means that a student has achieved a prescribed standard, however completion of senior secondary school does not necessarily mean that the standard has been met. Furthermore, dropout (i.e., no longer attending school) can occur at any point in a learning journey. Dropping out of school is ultimately a consequence of disengagement.

There is considerable literature from the past decade highlighting many reasons why students disengage and drop out from school, assuming that there is a school offering senior secondary learning in their community. The literature reviewed here draws from Australian research, and can include references to urban, regional and remote areas from all jurisdictions.

Non-attendance may be a symptom of disengagement but is probably not a reason for disengagement. Instead, reasons may include students' low levels of 'self-efficacy' (perception of their ability to do well at school) or 'self-concept' (Anderson et al., 2019; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010). This in turn may be related to feelings of 'wellbeing' (Tomyn et al., 2015). However, these individual level factors do not necessarily explain why students drop out in remote communities. Walker (2019) for example, found factors related to family or community life, and relational issues with peers, along with aspirational factors, that contributed to disengagement. Our brief review of literature canvases five key reasons related to cultural priorities, shame and trauma, mental health and wellbeing, teasing and bullying, and learning challenges. Beyond these there are many other reasons why students disengage, including access limitations, punitive policies and programs, the choice-less choice of going to boarding schools (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander, 2012), along with funding and resourcing.

Shame, Stigma and Trauma

O'Bryan (2021) identifies antecedent trauma as a barrier to engagement for students attending boarding schools and highlights how the colonial history of Australia continues to resonate into current generations (p.299). Similarly, Guenther et al. (2016) argue that First Nations students in boarding schools are unlikely to continue in the environment due to the "*frustration and shame of*

not coping in the new environment (which leads) to behavioural problems” (p.7). Oliver and Exell (2020) explain how First Nations students report feelings of shame, and experience racism when speaking Standard Australian English and Indigenous language varieties. This is exacerbated by the general lack of awareness exhibited by teachers in terms of First Nation students’ language backgrounds (e.g. Oliver et al., 2011). The findings of their research suggest educational settings should support multilingual First Nations students and their families. A three-year study by Harrison, Burke, and Clarke (2023) on the impacts of teaching about the experiences of trauma on students studying to become teachers recommends the need of a trauma-informed pedagogy in schools. Houshmand et al. (2019) correlate trauma and strategic responses to racial microaggressions, which often occur in educational settings (Moodie et al., 2019). Chenhall et al. (2011) portray the “*stigma of underachievement*” for remote students, that “*sees them proactively avoiding school altogether*” (p. 45).

Student Learning Challenges

The reasons for the feelings of underachievement arise from several factors, which are related to pedagogy, curriculum, resourcing, and assessment methods. In terms of assessment, many researchers have challenged the validity of NAPLAN tests (literacy and numeracy assessments at national level) as a way of gauging students’ academic achievement (e.g., Hardy, 2013; Wigglesworth et al., 2011), partly because the tests do not reflect the realities of culture, language and Country (Angelo, 2013; Freeman, 2013; Freeman & Wigglesworth, 2020). Resourcing—more specifically under-resourcing—has a profound impact on schools and their ability to provide enough staff to meet the individual learning needs of students, and so it is not surprising that “*increases in student to teacher ratio [are] associated with decreases in school average NAPLAN scores*” (Coleman, 2018, p. 44). The absence of local teachers and support staff can also profoundly impact engagement (Guenther, 2016). The relevance of teaching to the Australian curriculum in remote schools is also seen as a reason for disengagement and a source of dissatisfaction with schooling (Harrison, Tennent et al., 2023). Conversely, incorporating local knowledge into curriculum and teaching is recognised as a positive influence for student engagement in learning (Disbray & Martin, 2017; Osborne et al., 2013). And beyond curriculum, the practice of teaching and learning often makes false assumptions about what good pedagogy is for remote learners (Osborne, 2023). Of course, all the negative influences described above can be turned around with intentional effort and adequate resourcing.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Concerns

Osborne (2013) highlights the need for a shared understanding of what ‘mental health’ means in remote community schools. Dudgeon et al. (2014) describe how First Nations people prefer to take a holistic view of mental health (p. xxv)—one that includes social and emotional wellbeing. It is also a view that encompasses the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community and how these affect the individual (p. 548). Milgate and Giles-Brown’s (2013) research with a group First Nations students, parents and carers reveal that health and wellbeing is one of the six key themes of an effective school for First Nations children and, in fact, for the whole school community. In this instance, health and wellbeing include “*strategies to support students, aspirations and career development, behaviour, feeling safe and happy, sense of acceptance and belonging, cultural pride and identity, self-confidence and transitions*” (p. 5). The parents and carers of the group indicated that student support was the most important factor whereas, the students stated that racism was the most important factor in relation to their health and wellbeing. This is an important finding as it forms the basis of research by Priest et al. (2013). They review 121 global studies where racial discrimination is significant in the data. They argue the “*complex role that racial discrimination plays as a determinant of child and youth health*” (p. 115) and the need for further investigations into the effects on child and youth health in Australia.

Cultural Priorities

Another significant factor contributing to the barriers to remote children and families attending, engaging and retaining in school programs is the cultural mismatch of home and school environments. Krakouer (2016) proposes that culturally aligned early years programs can have a positive impact in creating a smoother transition from home to school. Lowe et al.'s (2021) systematic review of cultural programs in schools pointed out the cultural discrepancy between the school and community and calls for greater resourcing, easier access and improved leadership. Miller and Berger (2022) argue:

The school environment often had a different value system to that of Aboriginal communities. These differences created barriers for school staff to work collaboratively with parents and families to support First Nations students. Teachers identified that when culturally relevant practices and procedures were put in place, First Nations parents and families were more likely to engage with the school (p. 493).

Anderson et al. (2022) suggest there is a lack of pedagogical readiness for First Nations students in schools which leads to a dissonance in aspirations and priorities between home and school. At times, that dissonance results in a non-negotiable default to participate in cultural ceremonies and funerals, which inevitably result in a problem for schools, described as 'mobility' (Doyle & Prout, 2012; Taylor, 2012), and a deficit for First Nations people (McCallum & Waller, 2020). While attending a funeral might be seen as disruptive for schools and students, they are seen as essential for families. Benveniste et al. (2022) comment:

While it may be tempting to suggest that students should avoid coming home mid-term, not being able to attend funerals or other cultural events also deprives students of access to important sources of psychological wellbeing and protective factors, such as connection to land, family, culture and spiritual identity. (p.6)

There is little doubt that managing cultural obligations can be unsettling for young people, particularly those studying away from community in boarding settings, and can 'exacerbate feelings of homesickness' (Benveniste et al., 2022, p. 6), which in turn may affect school engagement and retention. However, maintaining cultural obligations ensures that young people remain connected to their community, family, language, Country and culture. This connection is fundamentally important for many remote families.

Teasing, Bullying and Violence

Guenther et al. (2018), in a case study of a school in central Australia, find that teasing plays a significant role in disrupting safety at school, and this leads to disengagement. They highlight that teasing ranges from non-verbal cues to extreme physical violence and resulted in parents withholding children from school (see also Niddrie et al. (2018)). They also conclude that teasing starts outside the school gate (see also Coffin et al. (2010)) but fixing teasing would not necessarily solve the attendance problem. Coffin (2011) also notes the intra-racial prevalence of bullying in schools, and the connection this had to challenges about children's Aboriginal identity. More generally, the connection between bullying and engagement and retention is difficult to clearly define and it may be that factors associated with attendance and academic performance lead to bullying (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). Nevertheless, schools are required to provide safe working and learning environments for staff and students. A safe school environment is of course far more attractive to students than an unsafe one.

While there are other factors reported in the literature on the topic of retention, engagement and attendance, those discussed above are among the strongest themes which arise from the literature. The findings discussed in this article allow us to test whether there is general support for these factors, from a sample of school staff, community members and students in remote communities of Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Researcher Positionalities

The team who undertook this research consisted of two First Nations and six non-Indigenous researchers and 26 First Nations community-based researchers who brought their own ways of being, doing and knowing to the task, ensuring the research instruments were culturally appropriate for remote and very remote communities.

Methodological Foundations: Indigenist Perspectives

The oral tradition of storytelling, known as yarning (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010; Ober, 2017) is a feature of Indigenous social engagement. It aligns strongly with Indigenous methodologies. This style of communicating, relating, coming together and connecting is an important way of sharing through stories. In the research reported here, semi-structured interview schedules guided this conversational interview process, prioritizing Indigenous ways of communicating, culturally prescribed, cooperative, humorous and respectful (Walker et al., 2014). Utilising yarning and storying during the data collection helped to ensure the research design was culturally safe enhancing the validity of the data (Fredericks et al., 2011). Other related strategies for data collection included the Kapati Method (Ober, 2017) which draws on a narrative inquiry approach.

The role of the community-based researchers was critical to implementing the research plan in the selected remote communities of Northern Territory and Western Australia. They were involved in various activities including interview schedule design and data collection. Eleven senior students from Wongatha Christian Aboriginal Parent Directed (CAPS) School in Western Australia were also involved as co-researchers, conducting interviews with community and family members.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this project:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia (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?

The focus of this article is one of the reasons for disengagement and dropout in remote schools (Research Question 1), though it is often difficult to disentangle concepts of attendance, retention, engagement, transition and attainment. Reasons for engagement and retention, along with a response to Research Question 2 can be found in the final report for the research project (Guenther, Oliver et al., 2023).

Sample and Instruments

The final data set included 139 interviews undertaken by trained community researchers, conducted with 28 Elders and community members, 50 school staff, 13 principals or school leaders and 48 students at various remote locations in Western Australia and Northern Territory. Rich data descriptions resulted from the longer yarning sessions that occurred at four case study sites (Nawarddeken Academy, Yiyili Aboriginal Community School (Thorburn & Ridley 2024), Yipirinya School (Holmes et al., 2023) and Wongatha CAPS School (Oliver et al., 2023). All reports from the project can be downloaded from <https://www.remoteschoolengagement.au/final-reports>.

Online Qualtrics surveys were completed by 226 respondents including 26 students, 63 community members and 137 school staff. All students and community members identified as

First Nations people, as were about half of the school staff and leaders. We asked the same questions of each group in the survey so we could compare the results.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed and summarised using Qualtrics inbuilt statistical analysis tools, including preparation of cross-tabs and summary tables for each question. Additional analysis was conducted using exported data into Microsoft Excel, for the purposes of comparison of the three separate survey results.

Yarning and interview data were transcribed and added to an NVivo database for thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Ethics

Ethical Approval was granted by the Northern Territory Menzies School of Health Research Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Human Research Ethics Committees from University of Notre Dame (Australia), and Curtin University. Ethics clearance was granted from Australian Independent Schools (Western Australia), Australian Independent Schools (Northern Territory) and Catholic Education in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia. We applied for but were not granted approval to work in government schools in both jurisdictions.

Limitations of This Research

We acknowledge several limitations with our methodology and the findings. The biggest group of very remote schools in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are government schools. As we did not have access to these schools, the specific concerns relating to public education are not addressed here.

An online survey is not necessarily the best way to gather information from remote community members, partly because of internet access issues and partly because the idea of an individualised survey may be unfamiliar. Further, the survey constrained people's responses to the 13 questions, though we did give the opportunity for respondents to put their additional comments in a text box.

Most of the respondents we spoke to were in some way associated with schools, either as staff, parents of students, students or Elders and community members with an interest in education. While we have no reason to doubt the validity of their responses, it is possible that people who were not so well connected to a school, could have different opinions.

Finally, when we yarned with people, the distinctions between attendance, engagement and retention were not necessarily clear in the minds of respondents. While in our data analysis, we tried our best to separate responses into these categories, in many cases, the discussions merged the concepts together.

Findings

In the sections that follow, we present findings from the survey which was conducted with 229 participants across Western Australia and the Northern Territory. We then examine the yarning dataset to see what it tells us about the top five ranked reasons.

Survey Results: Reasons for Dropout and Disengagement

Figure 1 summarises the reasons for dropping out, sorted in community-member respondents' order of priority. The most frequently reported reason for community members was 'teasing and bullying' (n=24); for school staff it was 'cultural reasons or priorities', (n=55) and for students it was 'shame' (n=8). Mental health and wellbeing also figured strongly in the reasons, as did a belief that 'students feel like they can't keep up'. We noted earlier that systemic and institutional

issues are important to consider. Our survey instrument did try to capture some of these issues (for example teaching styles, racism and discrimination, financial difficulties, problems with teachers and the principal). However, the main responses to questions of disengagement and dropout focus on how students respond or react, rather than what schools are/not doing to support them.

Figure 1: Reasons why Students Stop Going to School/Drop out (n=229)

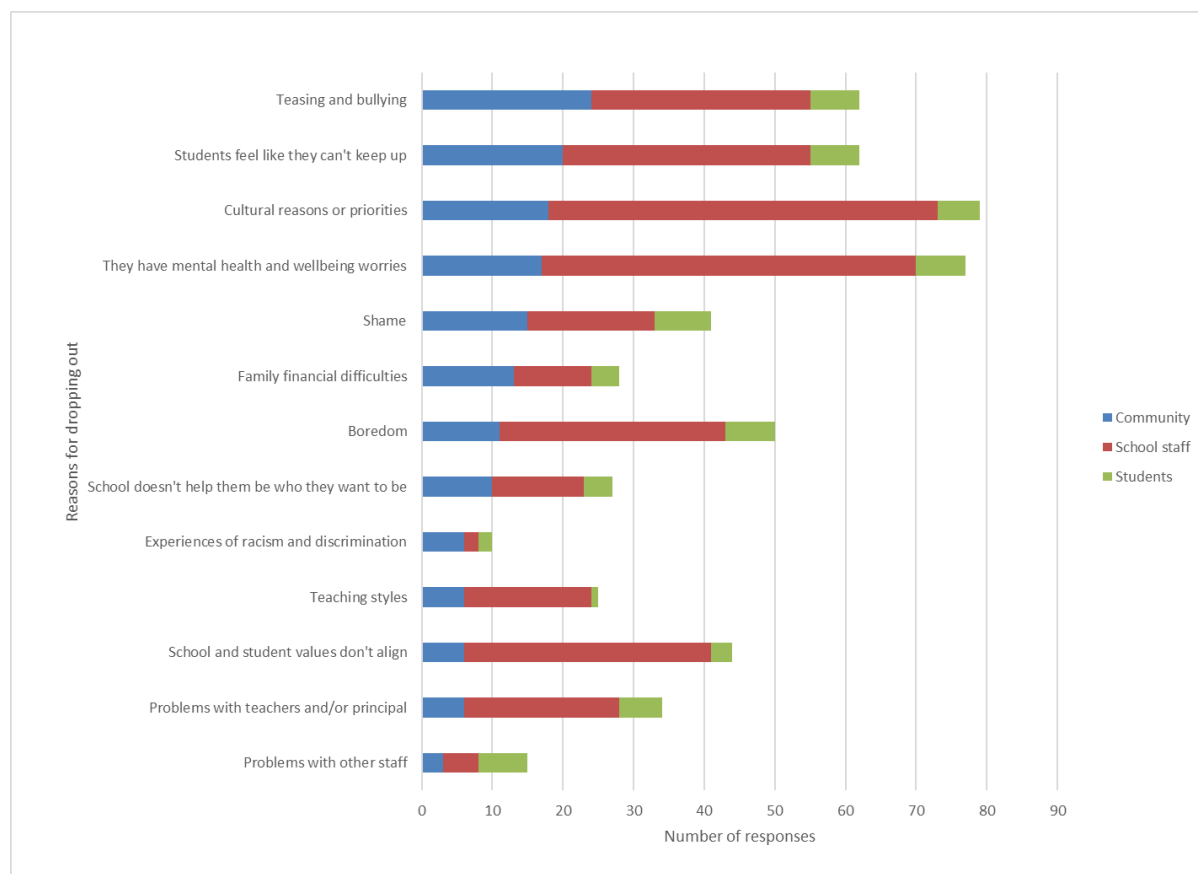
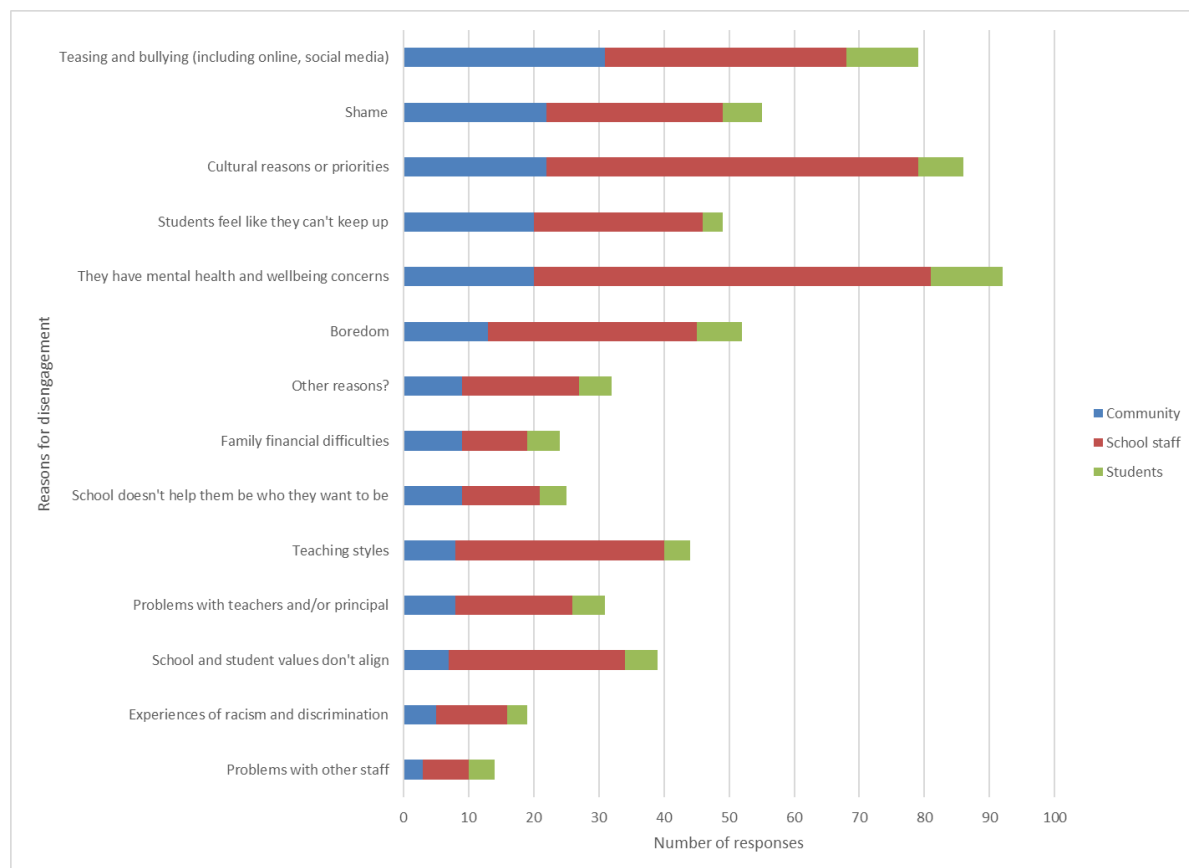


Figure 2 summarises the reasons for disengaging, sorted in community-member respondents' order of priority. Community members again nominated 'teasing and bullying' (n=31) as the main reason, while staff felt that 'mental health and wellbeing' (n=61) was the main reason. Students saw both these issues equally (n=11) as the main reason for disengagement. The other reasons for disengagement were 'shame', 'not keeping up' and 'cultural reasons or priorities'.

Figure 2: Reasons why Students Don't Attend Every day/Disengage (n=229)



Findings From Yarns and Interviews

The figures above highlight other concerns raised by respondents related to ‘boredom’, ‘teaching styles’, ‘school values’ and ‘racism or discrimination’. However, for this article, we concentrate on the top five issues identified by community members, which as we noted earlier, are very much focused on young people’s responses to issues of disengagement and dropout.

Teasing, Bullying, Fighting and Conflict. While the survey identified ‘teasing and bullying’ as an issue, the discussion in the yarns turned also to fighting and conflicts as a reason for both disengagement and drop out. Respondents were candid about where they saw points of disengagement. Teasing and bullying were described variously as ‘jealousing’, staring, and fighting

Q: Is there much bullying issues at the school, like teasing and stuff?

R1: No.

R2: Sometimes it will happen like for fights but mainly that’s all the girls. They’re jealous of each other for their boyfriend.

R1: We all stay in the same dorms and stuff.

R2: Sometimes it’s the year 12 girls jealousing of the year 11 and 10 girls.

Q: Oh wow, what for?

R1: Boyfriend.

Q: Because they’re looking at them?

R2: Staring.

Q: *Talking to them?*

R2: *I say staring is the main one I think. (Students, Western Australia)*

Some respondents commented on how family conflicts sometimes resulted in children staying away from school.

When I first came here, I picked up on it straight away. If there was family fighting, all of a sudden there wouldn't be as many kids. Then when the families came back together, at the school, there was just so much involvement. (Non-local teacher, Western Australia)

Asked why children stay away from school, some respondents commented on fighting and arguments:

R1: *Fighting, teasing each other.*

R2: *Fighting.*

R1: *Sometimes the one person gets it and the other one wants it so they kind of argue. (Local teachers, Northern Territory)*

Another commented on problems arising when people from neighbouring communities come to stay:

Other young people when they come from other outstations, there's a lot of fighting going on. (Local teacher, Northern Territory)

Some of our respondents spoke of harrowing experiences of gangs coming into the community, fighting and threatening families. This had an immediate impact on engagement at school as the school had to close from time to time to ensure that everyone was safe.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Trauma, Health and Mental Health. When respondents discussed issues related to health and wellbeing, they described a complex set of experiences and circumstances that did not neatly fit into a discrete category. For example, one local staff member described 'family issues' as a reason for disengagement, but around that were issues of teasing, food security, funerals, ceremony, money management and alcohol or drugs.

Parents... Not looking after their kids proper way, misuse their money, teasing at school. Main reason is some kids don't want to come to school, yes, because of family issues. Funerals, ceremony, they don't see family bring their food at home when they go to the shop, they spent on grog and buying gunja. (Local staff, Northern Territory)

Another respondent from Western Australia, when asked about disengagement, mentioned substance misuse, family violence, criminal activity, and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) in one sentence.

I think there's a lot of stuff going on in the community that's really impacting kids and a lot of elders and not even elders, just parents are really concerned about the social breakdown in communities which a lot of people say is worse than it's ever been. Substance misuse, family violence, criminal activity of the kids, the FASD is through the roof. (Principal, Western Australia)

Another principal spoke also about domestic violence and the consequences for complex trauma in children.

The domestic violence rates in the [region] are some of the highest in Australia and that has been increasing as well, so the amount of children that we're getting through that are getting diagnosed with complex trauma is huge. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Even with the best facilities and school set up to cater for vocational pathways, and with strong leadership and buy in from communities, schools may still find it difficult to retain students. To some degree this is because of social and emotional wellbeing concerns.

It is about retention for us – it is the key and the challenge... Students go home because of the cold, because of social/well-being and family issues... Some find it difficult to be ‘off country’ and away from family. (Boarding school principal, Western Australia)

Learning Challenges and Shame. The concerns raised in the survey about students feeling that ‘they can’t keep up’ was linked to ‘shame’ in some of our yarns. We therefore combine these two issues in our presentation of interview findings. One teacher felt that students might think:

I’m not going to feel the shame and embarrassment of not knowing or being put on the spot. (non-local Teacher, Northern Territory)

A principal explained how shame and learning challenges are linked. From their response, the sense of shame is related to confidence, or feeling safe in an environment where the student does not understand what is going on:

A lot of the struggles that I think bigger schools have [such as] kids coming from other clans, other kids looking at them, [with] you know, the big eye and that shame of perhaps not being able to engage at that level; that shame of “we’re all learning about Pythagoras’ theorem and how do we implement that?” And the shame of “I really don’t know what’s going on here”, versus not only the curriculum but also if there is a problem and someone is looking at you funny and there’s a blow-up, we deal with it in five minutes. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Students saw shame as linked to their classroom experiences. When asked what turns young people off going to school some students offered this list:

Don’t like reading in front of everyone

SHAME

Bullies

They just don’t like it

Boarding school, being away from home/country, homesick

Teachers pepper them with questions too much

Teachers use big words

Distracted by family members both at school and by family calling from home

Students running each other down, rumours, gossip

Not enough sleep

Work is too hard or boring

Relationship problems, like young kids get shamed to go to school coz they think they are gonna see that girl/boy (Students, Western Australia)

Other students talked about “being married up” (i.e., being in a relationship) as a reason for not going to school. Others described getting caught in the system: “Young people get stuck in the system and don’t [go to] school—police, DCP [Child Protection], juvenile justice”.

‘Shame’ was associated with other factors related to ‘boy/girl’ relationships, not understanding ‘big words’ that teachers use, rumours or gossip. In another quote in response to a question from a student, the ‘turn off’ is connected to the ‘shame’ of not understanding, but it is also linked to bullying from other students, and what is happening at home:

Maybe they don't understand some of the questions and they don't know how to answer them so they get shame and they, I don't know, yeah, probably that. Maybe other kids picking on them, maybe they're getting abuse and whatever from home so there's a lot of things that could be going wrong. (Community member, Western Australia)

Funerals, Ceremony and Cultural Obligations. Funerals or 'sorry business' were cited as reasons for 'low attendance' and temporary school closures.

If there's funerals in [nearby community] and when they have the funeral, they decide that they want to stay there for how many weeks they want to stay there, then their attendance can go low. (Student, Northern Territory)

The impact of funerals varies from community to community, but it is evident that frequent deaths do affect how many staff and students are at school.

And funerals affect people differently, so [another community], because it's so small, the community closes, funeral, closes, whereas here we don't do that, it just impacts staff numbers and student numbers. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Some respondents alluded to the mobility associated with attending funerals. One principal suggested that sometimes student numbers increase as a result of funerals:

It takes more people away so families will go off and they might go off to a funeral in one of the other communities nearby and then there's another funeral, so they move off to that one and it becomes a cycle of attending. People can be gone for weeks around those things. 'Sorry camps' can consume people but sometimes it brings students to us, sometimes it takes students away. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Community members also identified funerals as a reason for dropping out. Asked by a student, why their family member had left school, the respondent stated:

The reason why I left school was back when I was schooling down at the [School], there was an incident with my grandmother passing away and I had to go back home to the Kimberley. I went back home there and that was it. (Community member, Western Australia)

Another community member described how he chose to participate in Ceremonies, even though he wanted to learn the "western side of schooling":

Ceremony. I wanted to go to school to learn more western side of schooling, anyway, and then, I went for the first one, the second one, I was attending all the Ceremonies by the time when I finished all the Ceremonies, it was too late. I was already 17. (Community member, Northern Territory)

Complexity and Interwoven Nature of Issues

We have described just five of the factors that respondents to the research identified as contributing to disengagement and dropout. The factors identified by our respondents align quite closely to the more general Australian literature. However, the examples they give, and the language they use, are discussed within a cultural context that may be markedly different from non-remote areas.

Why do Young People Disengage and Drop out of School?

We note that disengagement and non-attendance are associated with drop-out. That is evident from the similar responses to both issues in the survey (Figure 1 and Figure 2). As previous research has shown, drop-out is more likely when attendance drops below 60% (Dadi et al., 2023). There are some individual factors that contribute to drop out and disengagement such as shame, mental health and wellbeing concerns, and feelings of not keeping up—some of which might be

related to self-efficacy or self-concept as noted earlier (Anderson et al., 2019; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010), but it is likely that individual factors are also connected to relational and institutional factors. For example, ‘shame’ could result from pedagogical/curriculum challenges that mean that students feel like they are behind, but shame could also be linked to teasing and bullying, which may include lateral violence (Coffin, 2011; Coffin et al., 2010). Cultural priorities, which result in family mobility add to the difficulties faced by school, though it should be noted that mobility is not necessarily seen as problem for students and families. Young people exercise choices which align to their values and their community’s expectations, and this inevitably means that many choose not to continue at school in favour of other options such as getting ‘married up’. Beyond these choices, some young people described getting caught in non-school institutional traps, such as the juvenile justice system.

What becomes apparent, on reading through the comments, is that there is no single reason for disengagement and drop out. Further, even when a range of support factors and attendance motivators are put in place, there is no guarantee that students will remain engaged and complete Year 12. In our field visits we saw and heard about many good examples of school communities going above and beyond what might be reasonably expected of them—including strong local school governance, breakfast programs, learning on Country, on-Country boarding programs, supportive and proactive vocational programs, strong local employment, and community engagement initiatives—and yet most struggled with consistent engagement, and those that were offering Year 12, struggled to keep them there.

Access Remains an Issue for Many Remote Communities

Aside from the factors identified in the surveys and supported by the yarning/interview data, access to secondary education in remote communities remains limited, with less than half of all very remote communities having reasonable local access to Year 12. Boarding schools may be a solution for some communities or individual students, but they create another set of problems for young people, and it is likely that they accelerate disengagement (Dadi et al., 2023). Interestingly, our respondents rarely discussed ‘access’ as an issue, quite possibly because (as noted in the Limitations) they had successfully navigated access options that they were comfortable with. The other point to note here is that there may be an expectation among many remote community members that limited access is a ‘given’. Nevertheless, with less than half of all very remote schools offering a locally based pathway to Year 12 (as shown in Table 1), this is still an important equity and justice issue that should not be dismissed (Guenther, Fuqua et al., 2023). It may also be worth noting that after years of pursuing boarding as the main option for secondary provision following the Wilson Review (Wilson, 2014), the Northern Territory Government’s latest review of secondary education recognises the need to provide more locally based secondary education options (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023).

What can or Should be Done to Ameliorate the Challenges?

While the intent of this article is to highlight why disengagement and dropout occur in very remote First Nations community schools, the reasons we have presented here do beg the question of what should be done. How can schools create environments that are culturally and physically safe for students? How can (or should) schools influence the agentic decisions of young people to engage in learning at school and stay to complete year 12 (when that option is available to them)? How can schools and systems work together to meet not just the education needs of young people, but also the social and emotional needs related to traumatic experiences? The answer to each of these questions demands a serious response and should not be dismissed as issues that are out of schools’ control, as Wilson (2014) did in his Northern Territory Indigenous Education Review when he stated: “*Schools and school systems cannot control these issues and should not be blamed when matters beyond their control limit their*

achievements.” (p. 14) This is hardly a just or equitable response to an issue that at its heart is a human rights issue.

Conclusions

There are many reasons for disengagement and Year 12 dropout of First Nations students from remote community schools. While the research presented here focuses on how students respond to these concerns, we cannot ignore the access issues that remote students face—with less than half of all very remote schools offering an accessible pathway to Year 12 completion. Equally, we cannot ignore the experiences of students and dismiss them as beyond our control. Those experiences include trauma, stigma and learning challenges associated with learning in a language environment which does not reflect local languages and cultural knowledge. Nor can we ignore the experiences of teasing, bullying and violence and the concomitant concerns about mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Schools and systems can do better at working together with specialist services, with parents and community members to address those concerns. A response to the issues raised by respondents, requires an understanding of the complexities associated with learning in very remote communities. Change is possible, particularly where there is political will and resourcing available to address the many challenges that remote First Nations students, parents, schools and communities face.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Number of very remote schools with >80% First Nations students, by jurisdiction, 2023

Highest Year level offered in community*	Very Remote schools with >80% First Nations Students	Very Remote schools with up to 80% First Nations students
3	1	
5	1	
6	25	44
7	12	
8	2	
9	14	2
10	24	10
11	12	1
12	82	60
Total	173	117

Source: My School data for 2023, * The highest level of schooling to the community includes schools are within one-hour drive from the community, and therefore could be accessed via a bus/car commute.

Appendix 2

Table 2: First Nations Year 12 completers and non-completers in very remote schools

	2011	2016	2021
First Nations Year 12 completers counted on Census night (A)*	8119	10762	12238
Intercensal Growth of First Nations Year 12 completers (B)=A(y5)-A(y0)		2643	1476
First Nations 17 year olds counted on Census night (C) *	1	1349	1356
Annual intercensal growth of VR Year 12 completers (D) =B/5		529	295
Year 12 completers, First Nations students in very remote schools (average over 5 years) (E)**		230	261
Balance of average annual growth from boarding schools, migration or other sources (F)=D-E		299	34
Year 12 Non-completers (G)=C-D		820	1061
Proportion of 17 year olds who drop out		61%	78%

Sources: * ABS Census (Tablebuilder) place of usual residence, **My School, Estimate based on very remote schools, Year 12 completion numbers and proportion of First Nations students in schools with >80% First Nations enrolment and schools up to 80% First Nations enrolment.



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