



When the School is the Community, and the Community is the School– Connectedness is Everything: A Case Study of a Remote School at Yiyili, Central Kimberley, Western Australia

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Abstract

In 2023, a small team undertook a series of interviews and yarns with staff, students and families at the remote community of Yiyili in the central Kimberley. The case study formed part of a much larger study which sought to understand why attendance rates in remote Aboriginal schools have fallen over recent years, to unpack a whole raft of factors that might explain this, and to also investigate strategies that seem to be encouraging remote kids to attend school. The Yiyili case study demonstrated that heightened connectedness of school and community results in a greater sense of stability and cultural safety for students, school staff and community members. Such a blurring of lines between educational institution and community might not be possible in larger communities, but our study suggests that such institutional openness might prove crucial in cross-cultural circumstances such as remote Indigenous communities.

Keywords: *engagement, community and relationships, Indigenous education, cultural interface, remote schools*

Introduction

The notion of a school as a somehow separate the families and households surrounding it was brought into question by our study of Yiyili Aboriginal Community School ('the School'). In this community, and at this school, the edges of these two concepts were blurred as many community members worked, drew income from and contributed to learning programs at the School. The School, in turn, relied very heavily on support from community members, and performed many roles crucial in a small community, but beyond those normally associated with a mainstream school. This institutional flexibility seemed to work very well for the School. Community members we spoke to embraced the School and school-based education as core elements of community life.

The Yiyili Aboriginal Community School case study formed one of several case studies (See also that contributed to the *Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project* which was funded under the Australian Government's Department of Education *Emerging Priorities Program*. (See also Holmes et al., 2024, Oliver et al., 2024; Guenther et al., 2023 for report and other case studies) The research was conducted during 2023.

Yiyili: The Community and the School

The community of Yiyili is in the centre of the Kimberley, 120 km from Halls Creek and 180 km from Fitzroy Crossing (See Figure 2). It is on an excision from Louisa Downs station, a scenario not unusual in the Kimberley. The School was established by members of the Yiyili community in 1982, one year after the community of Yiyili was founded.

The community sought to establish a school in their community rather than send children to a residential hostel at Halls Creek, 110kms to the community's west, away from family and on other's Country. Since the establishment of the School, six outstation communities have been established on excisions from Louisa Downs. Children residing in these outstations are bussed each day to the School.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data from 2021, there were 366 people living in Yiyili and surrounding communities and 93 of them were children aged under 14. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021)

Yiyili, the School and surrounding outstations are on Gooniyandi Country (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Yiyili Aboriginal Community School prioritises the speaking of Gooniyandi at school and embraces the reality that all students at Yiyili are multilingual—speaking Kriol, Gooniyandi, English and other neighbouring languages such as Walmajerri, Gija and Jaru. The Margaret River, which winds its way behind the community, is a major part of life for members of the community. People spend time on the river, fishing and hunting.

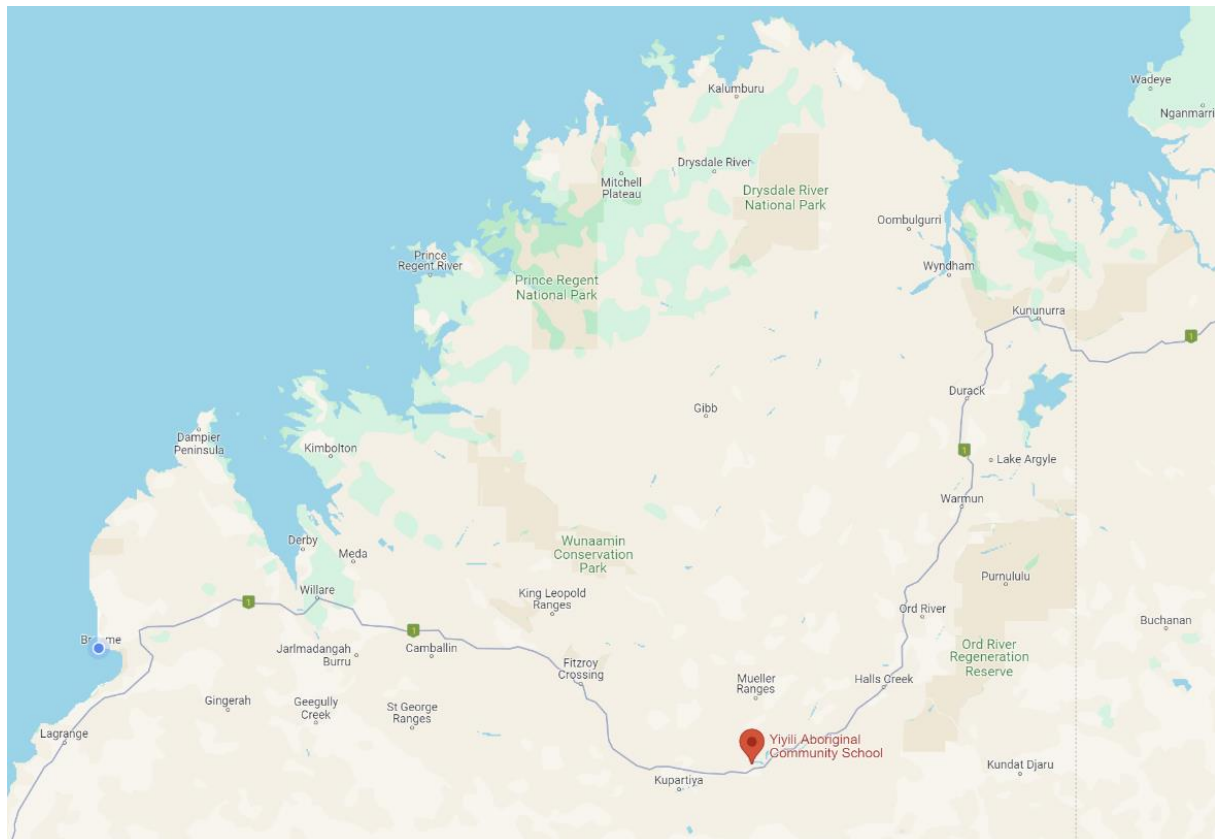
Yiyili Aboriginal Community School is a member of the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA). All AISWA schools have an Aboriginal governing body which is responsible for staffing, curriculum, school buildings, staff houses and financial accountability (<https://www.ais.wa.edu.au/aics>). AISWA schools must comply with the Western Australian Education Act, and other relevant national education policies, but are independent of governments and belong to, and are governed by, the communities they service.

Figure 1: Surrounding Landscape. Connections to Country form a Vital Part of Yiyili School's Focus



Like many very remote schools in the Kimberley region, the Yiyili Aboriginal Community School forms the backbone of Yiyili and the surrounding communities, providing their main source of stable employment, and acting as community hub for life and activities for the people. Apart from Louisa Downs pastoral station, which is only active seasonally, there are no other enterprises in the community of Yiyili, beside the school and the art centre. The school attracts most of the resources, delivers activities, and welcomes visitors. It provides the venue, and administrative and other support, for socio-cultural events such as the Yiyili Annual General Meeting, other meetings and funerals.

Figure 2: Location map of Yiyili Aboriginal Community School, Kimberley, Western Australia



Staffing

Staffing at the school in 2023 consisted of five full time teaching staff, and 22 non-teaching staff, (or the equivalent of 19.2 full time equivalent non-teaching staff). The non-teaching staff supported the school in areas such as cleaning, cooking, cultural input, on-country trips, language and in-classroom support and activities, and maintaining the food gardens.

Students

In 2023 there were 39 children enrolled at Yiyili Aboriginal Community School. School staff report fluctuations in attendance across the whole school throughout the year. Many factors are responsible for the fluctuations. Weather patterns, cultural imperatives, family responsibilities and family mobility for issues including access to healthcare, all impact the attendance patterns for students. During 2023, the impacts of the flood in Fitzroy Crossing saw numbers increase, and decrease at different times, for reasons outlined further below.

In-community attendance at the School is relatively high (that is, when the students are in community they are generally at school). However, as with all Kimberley schools, student transience, and family mobility, affect attendance. Chronic nonattenders are monitored closely, and staff discuss issues with families to maximise the likelihood that the student will return.

Attendance rates and enrolments have trended downward since 2014. The reasons behind these downward trends likely relate to wider socio-economic pressures on remote living Aboriginal families in the Kimberley where service provision, and government investment in general, has been uneven, and in some areas, trending downwards. (Office of the Auditor General WA 2021)

Research Team

The research team was led by Catherine Ridley, a Wangkatjungka/Ngaanyatjarra woman who resides at a nearby community, working alongside a team of three Yiyili women who were trained in research methodology. These community-based researchers were able to undertake several interviews, encourage community members to complete the survey and provide support and feedback to project team members when visiting the community. These women were supported by Kathryn Thorburn based in Broome.

Interviews

In total, five staff were interviewed extensively, including one teacher who has a 30 plus year association with the school. Two Aboriginal Education Workers and the Principal were interviewed. Seven community members were interviewed at length. Throughout the research process interviewees were reminded of the practices of confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal in plain language.

Findings

Interdependence of School and Community—Administratively, Financially, Socially and Culturally

The data collected via interviews indicated that the interdependence of Yiyili community members and the school is highly valued, and essential to the functioning of each. This interdependence is reflected in the knowledge of school staff that they are, in essence, employed by the community. It is also evidenced in the very strong commitment of school leadership to have an Aboriginal Education Worker present in each classroom, and the valuing of this arrangement by all school staff, and by community members. Aboriginal Education Workers have a role in teaching, rather than just providing a supporting role to the teachers.

This interdependence translates into the education provided at the School being highly valued. Community members are invested in the functioning of the School, through provision of relevant and quality education, and in the attendance and engagement of the children. Community members encourage children to attend School and spoke about the importance of English language literacy: *“Sometimes a kartiya [non-Indigenous person] come and you’ve got to understand what he’s talking about, you’ve got to learn the English”*.

Many people commented on the respectful quality of the relationships at the School and that the community felt listened to—not only via the School Board, but on a day-to-day basis—and that teachers valued the advice from Aboriginal Education Workers into particular students, as well as into delivering lessons that would keep children interested. This open communication enhanced the School’s ability to genuinely care for students, and to be trauma-informed by paying close attention to shifting family dynamics in the community. Aboriginal Education Workers performed an essential advisory role around the challenges facing particular children. The school presents itself as open to the community, not just the students (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Yiyili Community School is Positioned in the Centre of the Community, and Hosts Many Community Events



Two way Learning: Investment Beyond Tokenistic Approaches

Two way learning is a powerful tool for engagement of children at the School. Aboriginal Education Workers and cultural workers take children onto Country to conduct lessons which are around language and culture, but bring these experiences back into the classroom and reinterpret them around elements of the Western Australian curriculum. Two way learning reinforces the two worlds that families must continually navigate and provides non-local teachers with the opportunity to gain insights into the cultural world views and understandings of their students, and of the wider community.

Local teachers or Aboriginal Education Workers are essential to this approach, providing continuity and connection with Yiyili children, despite the turnover in non-local teachers. They act as knowledge holders, as experts, and where their commitment to the school remains over time, they act as repositories of corporate knowledge as to what has worked and what hasn't worked for Yiyili School children in the past. Two way learning, in Yiyili at least, also requires two way teaching. It requires very good working relationships between Aboriginal Education Workers and non-local staff, and provides opportunities for non-local staff to better understand Gooniyandi culture and language.

Being Purposeful Learners While Having fun, and Feeling Safe

One teacher with a multi-generational association with the School captured a wider approach in the School when she stated that

... it's got to be socially rewarding, I think making sure it's not stressful for children, so making sure that they're not bullied, that school is a safe place and that comes back to the classroom, that it feels like a safe place to learn, you're never made to feel dumb. That's the key thing I think, kids walk in and feel good when they walk into the classroom.

A constant focus on encouragement (rather than assessment) and on building the sense of possibility around kids in the classroom is a strength of the approach to teaching at Yiyili—that education can be empowering, and that children can feel in control of their own progress. This sense of control, of agency, of building confidence in kids, relates to what constitutes a safe learning environment. The school environment is intentionally engaging, with many hands-on

teaching and learning opportunities, for example, including the School's community garden (Figure 4)

Interviewees told us that feeling safe was not only about an absence of bullying, but that it also related to a learning environment where culture, language and values are respected. The cultural awareness of non-local staff is also critical to delivering safe learning spaces at Yiyili School. Relationships between non-local staff and Aboriginal Education Workers are vital to building this awareness. The atmosphere and culture of the school reflects the community and makes it an inviting place for the community to come together (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: The Yiyili Community School Garden Provides a Great Learning Space for Lessons on Nutrition and Diet



Partnerships are Crucial to a Vibrant Remote School

Yiyili Aboriginal Community School relies on collaborations with several external agencies and partners to enhance the programs that are delivered and to support the employment of additional local staff.

The integration of the School with the community has meant that connections are strong and constant. However, it is also the case that a school must meet a range of community expectations, and arguably fill gaps that in other communities would be filled by the community office and/or Chief Executive Officer. These include liaising with external agencies seeking to come to the community to hold meetings, deliver services, or seek community input.

Figure 5: Artwork at the School Reflects a Strong Connection to Country and Culture



The administrative arm of the School, which includes the Principal in this context, is regularly called on to coordinate these visits, provide infrastructure, provide (and maintain) accommodation for visitors and act as an advocate on behalf of the community as a whole.

The value of the School, and the role it plays as facilitator and mediator in these contexts is without question. While the Principal states that he is there “to run a school”, he concedes that he also does everything he can to assist with all of the other business that takes place in a remote community, including providing a venue (the only shaded venue of sufficient size at Yiyili is within the school grounds) for community funerals.

Partnerships also mean that the School atmosphere remains vibrant: “*There is always something happening at the School.*” (Yiyili community member) Health teams, eyes, ears, hip hop groups, allied health programs, government departments—they all deliver their programs via school infrastructure and with school support. This brings community members to the School, makes efficient use of shared resources and keeps energy levels high around the School.

Summary of Implications

Yiyili Aboriginal Community School maintains very strong connections with the community it serves, and these connections underpin very good attendance and retention of students. These connections depend upon the large number of local people employed by the School, people whose employment is generally much more stable than the non-local teachers.

Supporting these local staff to feel valued via training and via proper salaried positions would be an investment in the foundations of that connection going forward. The importance of building cultural awareness and trauma-informed teaching cannot be overestimated. These two elements together can enable dynamic teaching environments where children feel valued, and the education journey is shared between the community, the families and the School. A strengths-based approach pays attention to what children are good at and rewards them for achievements which are context-relevant.

Having community members on the School Board—whose focus is on meeting budgets and meeting policy requirements—is equally as important as having local Indigenous staff being active at all levels of the School. Embedding cultural knowledge in all levels of teaching ensures

that local people contribute this knowledge inside and outside of the classroom. This is critical to the School's relationship with the wider community.

Partnerships with external agencies bring resources to the School environment. They also allow a diversity of other programs—health-related, arts-related, skills-related—which keep the atmosphere of the School dynamic, and allow a whole range of activities to be delivered which would otherwise not occur. These kinds of activities enliven the School—not only for the students, and the teachers, but they also encourage community members to attend the **School** and to get involved.

The School maintains a central presence in the community, and the people of Yiyili feel comfortable there, and welcome there. The School enhances the sense of social harmony and wellbeing in the community.

The School however continues to struggle to recruit quality (external) teaching staff who will commit to staying over multiple years. Other options for local teachers to be 'trained up' are non-existent unless they are prepared to travel to Perth, some 2500km away. Despite the sense that the School is highly valued by the community, the metrics suggest ongoing problems with attendance. Falling enrolment numbers over the previous decade are likely to reflect the declining state of remote community infrastructure and housing across the Kimberley, and associated falling population numbers.

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