



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project: Yipirinya School Case Study

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Abstract

Over the last few years, attendance rates in remote schools have fallen, and Year 12 completions have also dropped. We are not sure why this is, though events like COVID-19, floods and other natural disasters have not made it easy. The case study presented here was part of a bigger project that sought to understand what people in remote schools and the communities they are in think makes a difference to attendance and Year 12 completion. This case study outlines the findings specific to one of the four case study sites, namely, Yipirinya School on Arrernte Country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The overarching finding of the study indicates that attendance alone cannot be the primary measure of school success; rather, engagement needs to be the focus. To tease out this finding, the three main themes: relationships, purpose, and cultural safety, are identified as factors that made a difference at Yipirinya School.

Key words: *remote schools, attendance, engagement, First Nations*

Introduction

For over a decade, school attendance has dominated the remote education sphere. Despite this, attendance rates continue to fall. The motivation for this, in part, derives from the Australian Government's 'Closing the Gap' policies, which include attendance targets for First Nations students. There has been an assumption that increased school attendance will improve school outcomes.

This article investigates what students, school staff and community members say leads to increased school attendance and focuses on engagement. The article is based on research conducted in the Northern Territory and Western Australia during 2023 by a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute, Curtin University, and the University of Notre Dame (Guenther et al., 2023). The research focused on remote and very remote Independent and Catholic schools. Within the project there were four case study sites. Specifically, this article provides a case study from Yipirinya School in Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Northern Territory. The project sought to answer two questions: What has impacted student attendance, engagement, and retention in remote and very remote schools in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and how (including COVID-19 and other events)? And: 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 findings highlight the need for a focus on both attendance and engagement. We emphasise that concerns about school attendance is at best, a poor proxy for educational outcomes (Guenther, 2013; Waller et al., 2018). 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. We discuss the factors that encourage and negatively impact attendance. We also outline the factors affecting engagement, including historical connection, school environment, leadership, governance, teachers and teaching, student and external factors, systemic and policy issues. The findings have implications for schools, school systems, state and federal policies and associated funding priorities. The *Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project* was funded under the Department's Emerging Priorities Program. (see reports link <https://www.remoteschoolengagement.au/final-reports>).

Yipirinya School

Yipirinya is an independent, non-government Northern Territory school that caters for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from Transition to Year 10 (Yipirinya School, 2023). Students typically identify from one or more language groups: Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte. Located to the west of Mparntwe (Alice Springs), it is classified as a 'remote' school. The school has a distinctive community-driven history. Since 1978, the school has been centred on a two-way approach to education.

According to the 2023 *My School* data, there are 293 student enrolments, comprised of 155 boys (53 percent) and 138 girls (47 percent) (My School, 2023). Attendance rates from 2023 *My School* data are reported as 35 per cent (the highest since 2019).

Over the past two years, staffing in the school has increased dramatically. In 2021, *My School* data states there were nine teaching staff and 16 non-teaching staff (My School, 2023). This increased significantly in 2022 to 20 teaching staff and 55 non-teaching staff. Data from this project reflect another staffing increase in 2023 with over 109 staff (over 70% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent). Within the staff, several local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff

members are qualified primary education teachers. They are Luritja, Eastern Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte leaders who have worked in the school for decades.

Data from this project revealed that Yipirinya School is currently financially operating on an annual budget of \$15 million, hence, 302 enrolments equates to \$49,000 per student. This is a dramatic overall increase from the most up-to-date My School data (2022), which reports annual funding of \$11.2 million with 277 enrolments, equating to \$40,678 per student (My School, 2023).

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 (four from the Yipirinya School) 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. Batchelor Institute researchers worked with the community researchers to prepare them for the research work (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Two-day Community-Based Researcher Training Program at Yipirinya School in March 2023.



Methodology

Indigenist perspectives

Yarning, the oral tradition of storytelling (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010; Ober, 2017) is a feature of Indigenous social engagement, and 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 these conversational processes, prioritising 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.

At Yipirinya School several staff members took on the role of community-based researchers. They were critical to conducting the research.

Sample

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. Online surveys were completed by 226 respondents including 26 students, 63 community members and 137 school staff. At Yipirinya, 19 staff (including school leaders) and nine students took part in yarns with the research team and completed online surveys.

Findings

The overarching finding of the study indicates that attendance alone cannot be the primary measure of school success, rather engagement needs to be the focus. To tease out this finding specific to the Yipirinya School case study, three primary themes are outlined: relationships, purpose, and cultural safety. We also report the impact of COVID-19 and a weather event on attendance and engagement at the school.

Relationships

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, connection through family is an essential societal value in everyday life. Over the course of the data collection period at this case study site, ‘relationship and connections’ was a key recurring theme. For many of the Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte students, social relatedness is organised through the Law. Across central Australia, the classificatory section system, known as the kinship system, regulates how people relate with one another across all aspects of everyday behavioural patterns in life, marriage, funerals, land ownership and ceremonial life. When students step into the school setting, the societal value of relationships is not surrendered at the gate. With this in mind, Yipirinya School has rebuilt its workforce with Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte people (from 25 staff in 2021, 75 in 2022 to 109 staff in 2023 with over 70% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent). By having kinship family members in the school setting—both teaching and non-teaching staff—students expressed a sense of connection through their existing familial relationships that intertwine them into broader society. This finding reinforces the need for remote schools to invest in the local workforce. Yet, simply employing a local workforce cannot be the solution. Instead, local staff must be invested in through authentic, non-tokenistic approaches with access to training packages, by overcoming power imbalances with equal pay, professional development, housing, incentives, qualifications, salary, and the bridging of the digital divide. For non-local school leadership and staff, this requires an inward analysis of possible gatekeeping practices. Data from this case study indicated that the gatekeeping reality is not perfect at Yipirinya. However, the school’s transparency and willingness to try innovative localised solutions is evident. Additionally, the way the school was conceived may have contributed to the localised power, ownership, and authority over the school. Many of the Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte staff have been involved in the school for decades. One teacher’s father was part of the Supreme Court team in the 1980s advocating for the school to be formally registered. When it comes to school engagement, these long term, intergenerational staff connections and relationships are fully supported by students and the wider community.

Purpose

Another emerging theme from the case study data is the link between attendance, engagement, and retention to purpose. In the education sphere, purpose can be described as contextual meaning and connection to real life. At Yipirinya School, the data indicated that staff, students, and community members all expressed the need for learning to have meaningful connections to everyday life. Yipirinya School carries out purposeful learning through a strengths-based approach with on-Country learning and language programs. Currently, the school runs on-Country trips in their language groups. Students in their language groups also participate in a once-a-term, three-to-four-day on-Country camp. As an independent school, Yipirinya has financial agency over budgeting decisions and can spend money to build engagement and purpose into learning. While some concerns were raised with the process (e.g., some staff stated the on-Country trips were more like excursions, organised by non-local staff and some students expressed they'd like more cultural learning on those trips), the data overall indicated that on-Country learning programs and language curriculum were reasons for attendance in school as they gave contextual meaning and purpose to their learning. Data from this project indicated that while change was good, any changes to school structure should go through local governance and leadership structures.

Cultural Safety

All three participant groups (students, staff, and community members) reinforced the connection to cultural safety, with attendance, engagement, and retention. Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte staff highlighted the need for more cultural awareness training for non-local staff. Intercultural training and cultural inductions encourage students, families, and the wider community to respond, engage, and return to non-local staff who display understanding, empathy, and a willingness to learn about their socio-cultural values, practices, knowledges, and languages. Local staff who have been at the school for decades mentioned that in the past, there had been intercultural training and cultural inductions, which promoted cultural safety. However, in recent years, the events have fallen behind. This finding suggests that remote schools should improve non-local training and awareness for staff. In addition, the data from Yipirinya School leadership team reinforced the responsibility of higher education training providers to educate local preservice teachers. Non-local preservice teachers should be equipped with foundational cultural awareness to knowledges and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, importance of kinship and family, impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the Stolen Generations, and the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma. They also need tools for reconciliation, an understanding of the concepts expressed in The Uluru Statement of the Heart. This type of training would offer non-local preservice teachers the tools to enter remote schools with fair, safe, and respectful approaches to students, their families, and local staff.

Impact of COVID-19 and a Weather Event

Two major unexpected events impacted student attendance, engagement, and retention at the school: COVID-19 and a weather event. The weather event was a localised storm that damaged several of Yipirinya's school buildings. A reoccurring pattern across both events was the unexpected positives. While participants commented on the fear and uncertainty of COVID-19, the stronger narrative of the data indicated positive aspects of the pandemic as more time on Country with family. Similarly, participants referred to both the positives and negatives of the weather event. While the school was forced to close and relocate classes across the town, the respondents suggested that they enjoyed being linked to different organisations. The yarns reinforced that it can be easy to extract the negative impacts of unexpected events yet, the

positives may outweigh them as schools are focused to find innovative, community-led, less institutional solutions to teaching and learning.

Summary

The *Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and Their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project* aimed to understand the impact of unexpected events, including COVID-19, on educational outcomes for students. It sought to identify supports for disengaged students to improve educational outcomes and support for school attendance and completion. This case study of Yipirinya School has delivered findings that translate directly to strategic policy and recommended practice. The key finding of this project highlights the need to place dual importance on attendance and engagement. The definition of attendance needs to be reconceptualised to meet the localised, holistic needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. Alone, the measurement of attendance fails to capture the complexities and nuances required to provide contextually purposeful teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In relation to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools, a range of targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies have been highlighted in this case study. The findings of the project pointed to the importance of relationships, contextually purposeful learning, flexible school structures, cultural safety, the connection of funding to metric systems and the need for remote schools to be wrap-around holistic services. Over the data collection period, numerous remote school leaders who were interviewed for this project referred to the successes of Yipirinya School. These leaders described how they were adapting some of the structures, practices, and strategies to their own schools.

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