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Remote secondary education retention: What helps First Nations students stay until, and complete, year 12

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Over recent years there has been a strong emphasis on year 12 completion as an indicator of success in remote First Nations education. The research reported in this article explores what students, school staff and community members say leads to secondary school retention and, ultimately, completion. The research was conducted in the Northern Territory and Western Australia during 2023 by a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Curtin University and University of Notre Dame. The research focused on remote and very remote independent and Catholic schools. The findings suggest several factors encourage retention, including the supportive role of families (although questions remain on how families might also be supported to encourage their children), the quality of teachers and their teaching, specific school programs and initiatives, post-school pathways, and boarding schools. Student aspirations and motivation are also critical for retention. The findings have implications for schools, school systems, state and federal policies, and associated funding priorities.

Keywords: remote secondary education, First Nations students, secondary school completion, year 12 retention, family support, remote teachers and teaching

Introduction

According to the Australian Government Department of Education (2024), completing year 12 is considered an essential foundation for a young person's future: "There's a clear link between getting a year 12 certificate (or equivalent qualification) and improved social and economic outcomes for young people."

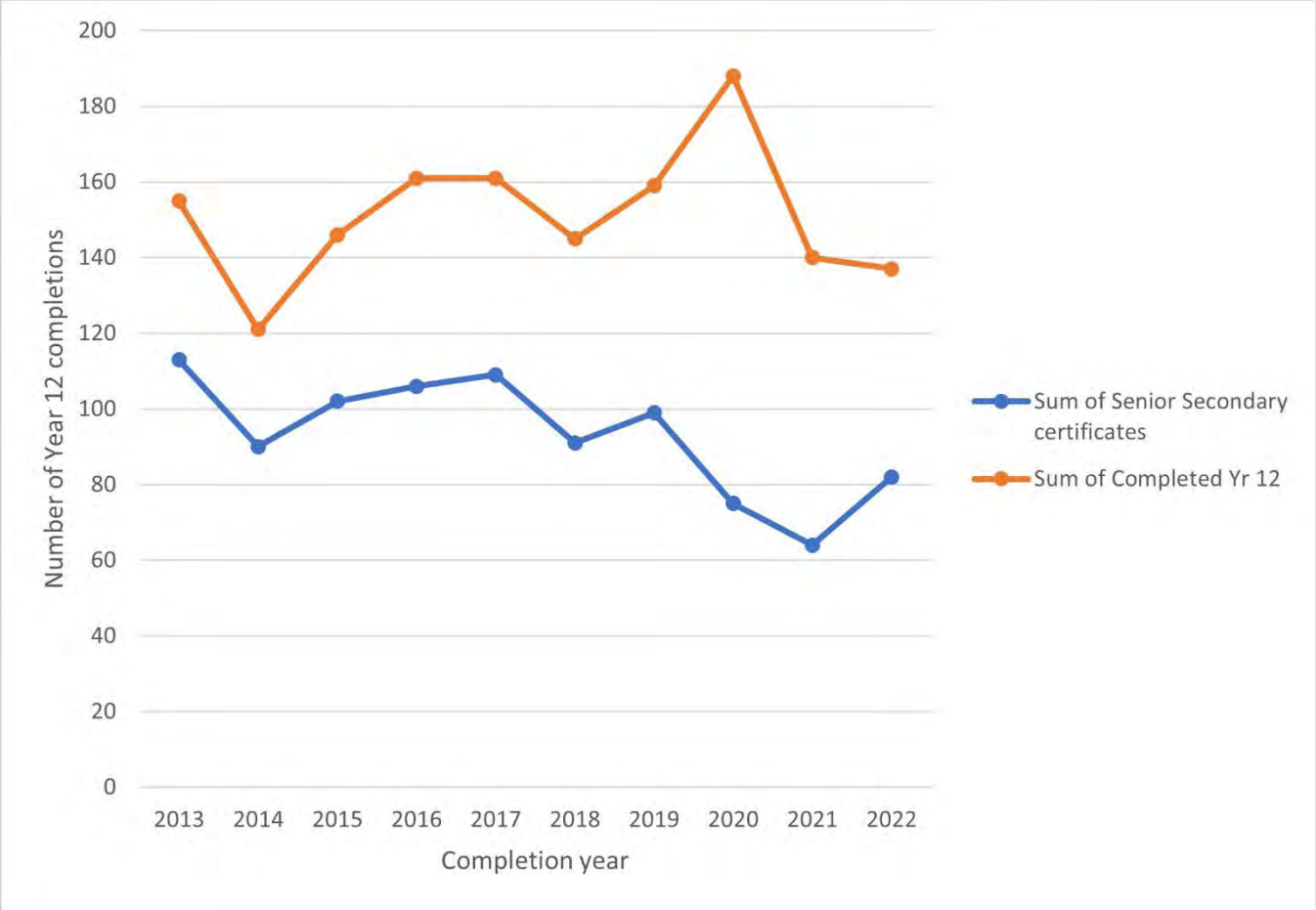
The economic benefit for individuals translates to between 10% and 13% average earning gain compared to non-completers (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). The personal and social benefits of year 12 completion are also acknowledged in terms of health, wellbeing, housing and nutrition (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023; Cameron & Biddle, 2012); it is also a "minimum prerequisite" for many jobs (Biddle, 2010, p. 5).

Closing the Gap Target 5 aims for 96% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20–24) to attain year 12 or equivalent by 2031 (Productivity Commission, 2023). In 2021, 68.1% of 20- to 24-year-old First Nations people had attained year 12, with rates increasing by about 1% per year (Productivity

Commission, 2023). However, the proportion of completers varies considerably from state to state and by remoteness. For example, in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, completion rates were 40.2% and 61.1% respectively (Productivity Commission, 2023).

While the benefits of year 12 completion are not shared equally among First Nations and non-Indigenous people, the perceived value of doing so is high. Yet, the number of very remote school completers reported by My School has changed little over time, and the number of completers with a senior secondary certificate has trended down (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Year 12 completions in very remote schools with >80% First Nations students



Source: My School data, 2013–2022, myschool.edu.au

The decline for very remote school certificate completers is, in part, due to a concerted effort by federal, state and territory governments to encourage young people to attend boarding schools (see *Study Away Review*, Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). However, the number of very remote students attending boarding schools in recent years has decreased, as indicated by the decline in ABSTUDY non-living allowance recipients over recent years (Australian Government 2024).

Furthermore, as shown in Table 1 there is a declining proportion of 17-year-olds in very remote Australia who are completing year 12, either away from community (e.g., at boarding school) or in community,

down from 40% of the "usual residence" population (571 out of 1,349 17-year-olds) in 2016 to 24% (324 out of 1,325 17-year-olds) in 2021.

We acknowledge that exact Census counts and even school completion numbers can be contested, but the point of Table 1 is to simply demonstrate the overall low numbers of First Nations young people from very remote communities who complete year 12 (324 or 24% of 17-year-olds), with even fewer completing secondary school in their communities (159 or 12% of 17-year-olds). Even allowing for a relatively high margin of error, these proportions fall well short of the 96% target promoted by Closing the Gap.

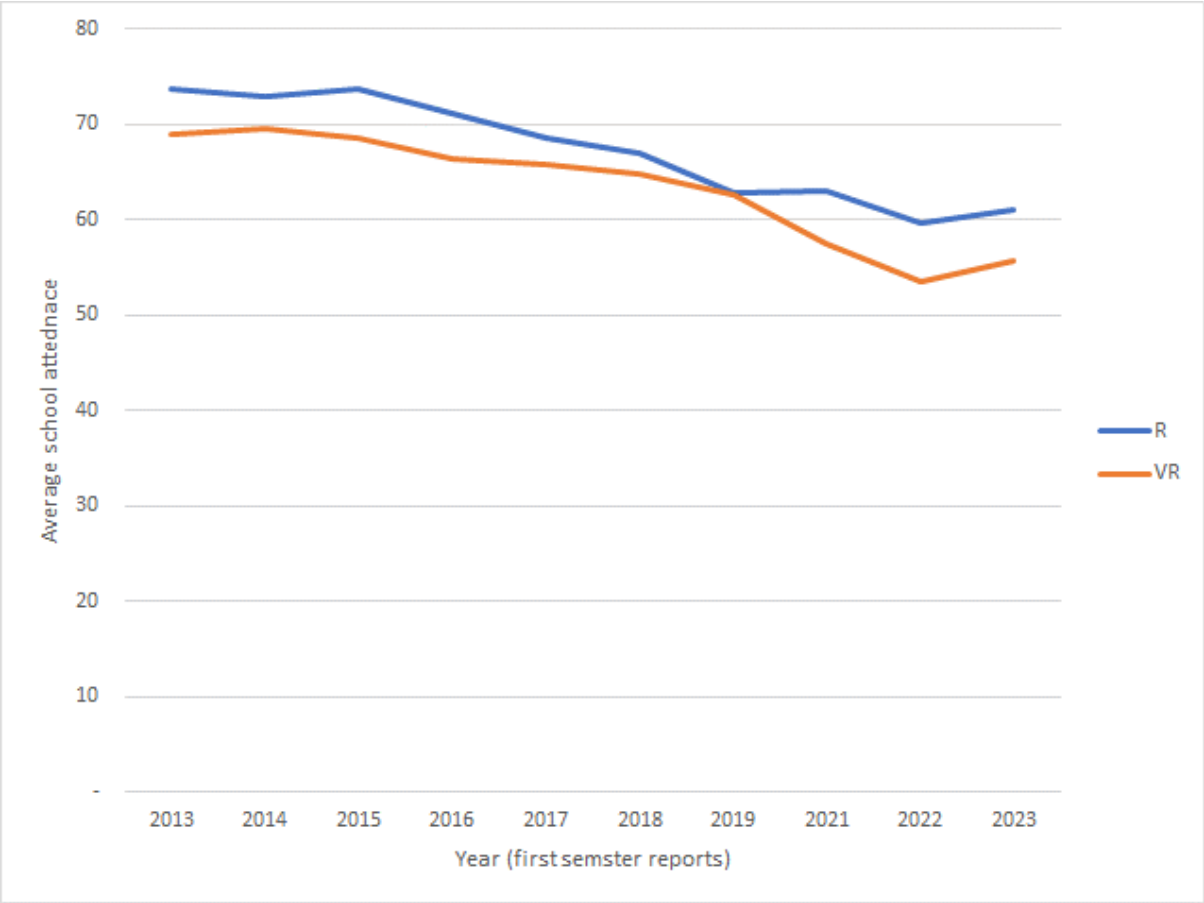
Table 1: Year 12 completers very remote schools/regions

Year	**2011**	**2016**	**2021**
First Nations year 12 completers counted on Census night* (very remote Australia)	8,202	11,055	12,679
First Nations 17-year-olds counted on Census night* (very remote Australia)	1,477	1,349	1,325
First Nations 17-year-olds who report attending school, TAFE or university* (very remote Australia)	439	420	455
Annual intercensal growth of year 12 completers* in very remote Australia		571	324
Year 12 completers from local >80% First Nations enrolment schools (average over 5 years)**		146	159
Balance of average annual growth from boarding schools, migration or other sources, including schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolment		425	165

Sources: *ABS Census data based on place of enumeration from Tablebuilder Pro, abs.gov.au/statistics/microdata-tablebuilder/tablebuilder; **My School year 12 completers from very remote schools, myschool.edu.au

This result is coupled with a decline in school attendance rates from 69% to 55% between 2013 and 2023 in very remote schools with greater than 80% First Nations students (see Figure 2). Remote schools have followed a similar trajectory, with 2023 attendance sitting at 61% (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Average very remote (VR) and remote (R) school attendance (first semester) for schools with >80% First Nations students



Source: My School data, 2013–2023, myschool.edu.au.
Data for 2020 not available due to COVID 19.

Furthermore, of the 174 very remote schools with greater than 80% First Nations students, only 87 (50%) offer year 12 (see 2022 My School data). Of these, only 24 (14%) reported completions and 16 (9%) reported year 12 certificates. A further three remote schools also reported that students graduated with year 12 certificates.

The issue for retention, however, is not only about how to keep First Nations students at school, but how to provide meaningful secondary options. While we could ask why students are choosing to drop out, this only reinforces deficit narratives about these students. Instead, we ask, Why do First Nations students choose to stay and complete year 12? The data presented is based on research conducted for the Australian Government Department of Education during 2023. Research reports can be found at the project website (See Guenther, Oliver et al., 2023).

Literature review

It is difficult to disentangle the contributing factors to retention from those related to attendance and engagement, attainment, and transitions, as they are interconnected. Here, we focus on high school retention to year 12, though a reasonable assumption may be that students who complete year 12 are more likely to be engaged and attend regularly (Dadi et al., 2023). While our focus is the retention of remote and very remote First Nations students, a reasonable assumption could be that some of the factors

supporting remote First Nations students may also affect non-Indigenous and non-remote students. Concomitantly, removing factors that contribute to dropping out of high school will improve retention. There are multiple factors at play, which include community, individual, institutional, policy and funding mechanisms, along with the socio-cultural and historical contexts associated with achieving retention in what is a complex system (Guenther et al., 2020). The coverage of the literature here is not exhaustive, but we feel it reflects the weight of research evidence that has emerged mostly in the last 10 years.

Family support

First Nations parents provide the foundations necessary for their children's futures, not just for school, but for engagement in community, culture, ceremony, language and connection to country (Burton & Osborne, 2014; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014; Osborne et al., 2014). Guenther et al. (2014) found that parental training qualifications and labour force participation were associated with higher attendance rates in Australian very remote schools (see also Guenther, Rigney et al., 2023).

One of the potential solutions for improving engagement and retention is adult education, training and literacy. This is the logic behind the "Yes, I Can" adult literacy campaign, which seeks to improve adults' reading skills (Williamson & Boughton, 2020). As it enables parents to better support their children at school, the potential benefits go beyond literacy to social capital, health and employment outcomes (Beetson et al., 2022). Beyond the importance of family, research also indicates the importance of community partnerships for improved engagement and retention (Halsey, 2018; Lowe, Harrison, et al., 2019; Miller & Armour, 2021). With this comes the need for strong local school governance and local decision making (Stanley, 2024).

Teachers and teaching

Teachers make a difference in schools, not just because of their teaching methods, but through their student, parent, and community relationships (Guenther et al. 2015) and through their positionality within settler colonial structures of education (Weuffen et al., 2023). Non-local teachers and principals can be effective in remote schools provided they are prepared to learn and build supportive relationships with students and families, and are self-reflexive and non-judgmental in their work within what can be considered a foreign place (Lowe, Bub-Connor, & Ball, 2019; Lowe, Harrison et al., 2019; Schulz, 2014).

Sarra (2011) comments that "teachers must be encouraged and supported to go beyond their classroom to develop more contextual knowledge [to facilitate] better Indigenous student outcomes" (p. 162). While Sarra writes from a primary-school-age perspective, his calls for building First Nations student identities also applies to secondary cohorts. The assumption underpinning this is that teachers are likely to be non-local and non-Indigenous. However, there have been many calls for increased numbers of local staff in remote schools because local staff connect with students in their first language and in a culturally appropriate manner and are, therefore, critical for improving student engagement and retention (Guenther et al., 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2021; Miller & Armour, 2021). Furthermore, they can facilitate team-teaching approaches that build upon the skills and knowledge of both First Nations and non-Indigenous staff (Angelo et al., 2022; Corrie, 2021; Poetsch, 2020) in classrooms.

School environment

Milgate and Giles-Brown (2013), in a review of the literature on positive learning environments for First Nations children, found six key variables that create an "effective school": "cultural environment, quality teachers, community engagement, student health and wellbeing, curriculum and school leadership" (pp. 1-2). While supporting these, Sarra (2011) adds the importance of affirming cultural identity and creating environments underpinned by high expectations. Miller and Berger (2022) describe how the "school environment was often a traumatic place for parents or family members of First Nations students" (p. 493), and so they indicate that First Nations culture must be incorporated into the classroom and school environment. This allows students and their families to feel safer, welcomed and connected and, therefore, more likely "to report their positive schooling experiences" (Miller & Berger, 2022, p. 493). This can be further enhanced by the explicit inclusion of culture and language, and strong support for positive relationships (Guenther et al., 2015; Lowe et al., 2021; Gutierrez et at., 2021; Osborne et al., 2022; Osborne et al., 2020). An additional factor is the physical environment of the school, including careful design of spaces in ways to support student wellbeing (Whettingsteel et al., 2020).

Aspirations and pathways

There is evidence to show that remote students aspire to gain meaningful work after school, and that this motivates them to stay engaged at school (Rutherford et al., 2019). It should be noted that in remote communities work may have a different meaning than in an urban context, and may include cultural practices, governance responsibilities and family responsibilities (McRae-Williams, 2008). Student work aspirations are supported by parents and elders (Osborne et al., 2022), though "work" in itself is not the only outcome that parents want for their children. Parents also want their children to be confident and strong (McRae-Williams, 2008).

Student wellbeing

Remote school cultural programs that support and embed local knowledge systems cultivate positive opportunities that promote student wellbeing (Gutierrez et al., 2021; Moodie et al., 2021). Gutierrez et al. (2021) highlight families' desires for children to have access to cultural (and language) programs that "revive and maintain their language and cultural practices" (p. 78) to maintain the wellbeing and cultural safety of their youngsters. Likewise, Moodie et al. (2021) reinforce the importance of remote schools valuing local knowledge systems, as such practices have a positive flow-on effect to students' wellbeing. Programs must be intentional and designed in conjunction with local people associated with the schools (Clarke & Denton, 2013; Osborne, 2013).

The relationships between wellbeing and education interventions and outcomes are interdependent; "health influences capacity to derive benefit from education" and "education creates opportunities and capacity for better health (Midford et al., 2020, p. 5). These educational interdependencies apply to a range of physical and mental health factors. For example, students with disabilities, such as hearing loss or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), will likely have difficulty in classrooms that are not adjusted to meet their needs (Wagner et al., 2020). However, it is quite likely that, as communication demands increase in primary and secondary years of schooling, the impact of hearing loss on learning outcomes increases (Howard, 2020). Thomson et al. (2012), in their discussion of the health and education nexus, suggest several health concerns for First Nations children which contribute to "poor" educational outcomes. Mental health is of particular concern in boarding schools and, along with homesickness, is probably one of the main reasons that children drop out (MacDonald et al., 2018; Mander et al., 2015).

Over the last seven years, considerable research has been undertaken to address such concerns (Benveniste et al., 2020; Lester & Mander, 2020; McCalman et al., 2017; McCalman et al., 2020; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017).

Boarding schools

For a decade, boarding schools have contributed to increasing the number of year 12 completers, notwithstanding the downward participatory trend noted in Figure 1 and Table 1. While the impact of attending boarding can have a negative impact on high school completion (Dadi et al., 2023) and student wellbeing (O'Bryan, 2021), for some students boarding schools and residential colleges provide desirable educational experiences unavailable in-home communities (Lloyd, 2020; Macdonald, 2018). For some, boarding school provides skills and knowledge that assist transitions beyond school into employment (Osborne et al., 2022). Additional strategies can improve boarding experiences and ameliorate the negative impacts of leaving country to attend foreign school environments. These include providing adequate support in the transition to boarding (Stewart, 2021), attending to mental health and wellbeing needs (McCalman et al., 2020), fostering supportive relationships between staff and students, and allowing for family to connect with and support students (Benveniste et al., 2019). Partnerships between boarding schools and home communities may also contribute to successful outcomes for boarders (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). However, regardless of the costs and benefits, many parents in remote communities want children to stay, learn and graduate "on country" (Guenther et al., 2022).

Researcher positionalities

The team who undertook this research consisted of two First Nations and six non-Indigenous academic 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. All members of the team have lived in and/or worked in remote communities and have worked as teachers, lecturers, evaluators and researchers. We acknowledge that this intimate understanding of remote education contexts may be perceived as creating researcher bias.

Methodology

Indigenist perspectives

The oral tradition of storytelling, known as "yarning" (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 this research, 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 (Atkinson et al., 2021). Other related strategies for data collection included the Kapati Method (Ober, 2017), which draws on a narrative inquiry approach. Four case study sites were used to explore participant experiences in more detail: Nawarddeken Academy, Yiyili Community School, Yipirinya School and Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-Directed School (CAPS). After consultation with the schools, community-based researchers were identified. A team of community researchers had been used previously at two of the

sites (Nawarddeken and Wongutha CAPS), and they were given the opportunity to take part. At the other two sites we worked with senior staff at the schools to identify those who might be interested. 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 Wongutha CAPS School in Western Australia were also involved as co-researchers, conducting interviews with community and family members. At each case study site, the academic team provided two days of training covering ethical issues, practical interviewing techniques, technical use of recording equipment and contextual refinement of the interview schedule. After the training had been completed, potential community-based researchers were given the choice of participating in the project or not. At each site, members of the academic team were available to support the community-based researchers as required. At all case study sites, several visits to the school allowed for back-and-forth discussion with staff, community members and students about the issues that were being raised and to ensure that the appropriate representation of the school and the community was achieved.

A survey was also used to capture the views of students, school staff and community members. However, for this article, we only report on qualitative data.

Research questions

Research questions were developed by the academic members of the research team in response to the funder's program guidelines. While the academic researchers did have pre-existing relationships with the case study schools and there was consultation with these schools ahead of the research regarding the overarching questions, we acknowledge that the questions used to guide the research did not come from communities, and this could be seen as contrary to the principles of Indigenist methodologies, discussed above.

The questions guiding the research presented in this article are as follows:

1. What has impacted student retention and year 12 completion in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia?

2. What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student retention and year 12 completion in remote and very remote schools of Northern Territory and Western Australia?

Data sources and instruments

The final data set included 139 interviews/yarns undertaken by trained community researchers, conducted with 28 elders and community members, 50 school staff, 13 principals or school leaders and 48 students (aged 15 and above) 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. Yarns and interviews varied in length from about 30 minutes, to well over an hour for some individuals and groups.

Questions used for yarns were initially developed by the academic team and then tested/adjusted during the community researcher training days at the school sites. The adaptations involved adjusting expressions to fit the local context and to allow respondents to freely tell their stories.

Analysis

All yarns and interviews were audio-recorded, except in a few cases where the participants preferred not to be recorded, in which case notes were taken. Audio recordings were transcribed and analysed in NVivo qualitative analysis software. A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to create codes, based on recurring patterns in the data. Members of the academic team were responsible for coding the data they had collected. The team came together for an analysis workshop to ensure consistency of coding and analysis.

All students and community members identified as First Nations people, as were about half of the school staff and leaders.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Northern Territory Menzies School of Health Research Human Research Ethics Committee, 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

One of the disappointing aspects of this research was our inability to engage with government schools. While we expect many of the issues that arose in the independent and Catholic schools we engaged with would be the same, we suspect that there would have been some nuanced findings that do not appear in our data. During 2023 there was considerable discussion in the media about the Northern Territory funding model for government schools (see, for example, Spina-Matthews, S., & Chaseling, O., 2023). The issue of funding models was seldom raised by our respondents. There was also media attention about the neglected state of many homeland learning centres in the Northern Territory (see, for example Stevenson et al., 2023). In our data, independent schools on homelands appeared to be well resourced and, while there were some comments about resourcing, homeland education was seen as a strength, rather than a problem for our participants.

We also recognise that while we consulted with community once we had received notification that our application was successful, the two weeks we had to prepare the grant application did not allow for proper consultation about what schools and communities wanted from this research. We did, however, have pre-existing relationships with our case study school sites, as we had previously worked at each of these. The relationships and previous research gave us a fair understanding of what the parents, elders and other community stakeholders might want to see come out of this research. Finally, we acknowledge that our positionalities and long involvement in remote education and research may result in a perception of bias. However, we do not claim to be objective in our research methodology. Rather, the research we undertook is inherently subjective, consistent with qualitative research and Indigenist paradigms.

Findings

Presented below are a selection of the many hundreds of responses about how to support retention. The seven sections below reflect the major themes which emerged from the analysis. These findings largely respond to the first research question: "What has impacted student retention and year 12 completion in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia."

Family support

Both positive and negative responses about the role of family were reported by the participants. Family providing strong support for retention was reported by several participants, particularly community members. For example, when asked about returning to boarding school, one student described how key parents are: "If you want good kids, you gotta have good parents who raise them right" (boarding school student, Western Australia).

Other participants described how families encourage students to remain at school, celebrating their successes, talking with them about their "futures" and their need for "self-improvement": "We tell them the school is here, you have to go to the school and learn. Maybe sometimes, you know, you mob might take over the school, you know" (community member, Western Australia).

Having family members work at the school also supports student retention: "A lot of our staff are Indigenous workers as well, so a lot of the kids have those family members there who, you know, come to work but also they know that they have to bring their kids" (principal, Western Australia).

However, some participants did not remain at school because of problems within their family or needing to look after family: "I dropped out because of my little sister and my parents couldn't look after us" (community member, Western Australia).

Illness or deaths in the family also led some students to dropping out of school or, in the case of boarding schools, students returning home to family: "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" (ex-boarding school student, Western Australia).

Being geographically separated from family was an issue mentioned by several participants, particularly with regard to boarding schools (also see the Boarding school section below).

Student motivation

Some students indicated that retention was related to their "motivation" and "aspirations". Respondents described how positive personal attributes of students leads to greater retention: "We are actually getting a crop of kids to year 12. Most of them are the women. I guess it takes perseverance" (principal, Northern Territory).

For others, because the level of autonomy that exists for young people in community means that staying at school is purely a student's choice, sometimes choices are made because of their lack of understanding of the consequences: "They [the students] have no grasp of the consequence[s] of not getting an education; they are simply living in the here and now and they are not motivated to go to school" (administration staff, boarding school, Western Australia).

Teachers and teaching

With few exceptions, when reflecting on teachers, teaching and retention, responses were mostly about what teachers and schools should do. Participants described wanting to see teachers "supporting" students and their learning, but also "challenging" students and "encouraging" greater achievement. They also wanted to see student successes celebrated: "It's celebrating those small successes and being able to move forward and being able to see progress. … It's supporting them [students] where they need support, encouraging them to keep going on" (principal, Northern Territory).

Participants described the need to build on students' existing "strengths and knowledge" and giving priority to their "culture". Several participants highlighted the role of local staff as key to retention. Local staff were described as "understanding" of the students and their needs, being able to support the students in culturally appropriate ways and, in doing so, facilitating attendance, engagement and retention: "You have to have an AEW [Aboriginal education worker], you know, our people to be in the school because if anything is wrong there, you've got the AEW to talk to the kids, you know" (community member, Western Australia).

Many local staff we interviewed had been working in their community's school long term—in some cases, more than 20 years. This was recognised as making a positive contribution to retention: "AIEOs [Aboriginal and Islander education officers] often stay long term and have a strong understanding of the students and their language and culture" (teacher, Western Australia).

Within remote communities a team approach, "building teams" and "working together", especially in collaborative ways involving co-leadership and "local leadership", were all deemed important for fostering positive engagement: "Strong leaders, both Balanda [non-local] and Bininj [local] working together can see that kind of through to fruition" (teacher, Northern Territory).

Programs and school initiatives

Respondents made suggestions about programs and initiatives that may support students. For retention, in particular, there were two noteworthy points.

Firstly, "on country learning" can motivate students to stay at school because it "teaches where they are at", keeping them interested in schooling through its "cultural relevance" and inherent "hands-on learning" (see also Guenther et al., 2022; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014; Osborne et al., 2014). Students commented on this kind of learning favourably: "We love doing work experience with the rangers" and "That's like taking care of Country, you know" (students, Northern Territory).

Secondly, the limitations of academic opportunities in remote communities and, in particular, the impact of the lack of sustainability and the closing of programs, often due to funding models based on metro-centric metrics, can impact retention negatively. Comments were received about secondary programs being closed and students needing to move from family to attend school, particularly boarding schools, which for some students was not a path they were willing to follow.

Pathways

Some participants despaired about the transition from school to life beyond school. They suggested that students could not see "the point of school", especially as there were "no jobs in community". For

example: "So there's that, what's the point? We go to school, it doesn't make any difference" (principal, Northern Territory).

Several other participants celebrated "work readiness" pathways created to help students move from school to work, especially providing opportunities to get "qualifications" (e.g., TAFE certificates) that support them "to get employed": "Our aim is to have every child leave here with a job" (CEO, boarding school, Western Australia).

Such vocational pathways offered a "real purpose" to school, encouraging students to remain at school and to "graduate". Many student participants were very positive about this aspect of their schooling: "We love doing work experience" (student, Northern Territory).

Even for those schools not currently pursuing this approach, it is something they hope to do in the future: "Like strengthening local job pathways for the older kids would be a beneficial thing, for kids to stay in community, work in community. That's something that we're looking at" (staff, Northern Territory).

Students commented that staying in community, supporting and "making a difference" to community and family, and "looking after Country" were positive outcomes of these initiatives. For example, when asked why he wanted to become a ranger, one student participant said:

> To support our family. … To protect our area, our Bininj area. … My dad, he's a ranger. He protects his mother Country and he takes me out and shows me like all the rock arts and how our, how that big rainforest is protected. (student, Northern Territory)

Student wellbeing

Several respondents mentioned student wellbeing as a factor that contributed to retention: "We've put some things into place around student wellbeing and building those relationships, trying to put it to staff that your relationship with a kid in the classroom is important" (principal, Northern Territory).

In this case, the school had implemented several psychological, social and emotional wellbeing support services. Students who do not feel good about themselves, who experience mental health issues, are also less likely to engage in learning (or attend regularly). Numerous responses from students linked positive engagement with the "care" and "support" provided to students and the "respect" they received in school. One Western Australia principal described how within their school there was real "intentionality to really connect with the students, valuing and respecting students". Others suggested a positive school environment meant students felt "included" and "safe", even "loved", knowing that they were in a "safe space".

Boarding school

Students choose to leave community and complete their education at boarding schools for multiple reasons (see also Osborne et al., 2022; Lloyd, 2020; Macdonald, 2018). They reported historical and family connections to a school, what is/is not available in their community, "getting away from" issues in the community and the options boarding schools provide such as pathways (described above) and religious instruction. While boarding school attendance does not create the same issues that apply to remote schools, retention remains problematic. One principal indicated that "all students attend unless they are sick. There is nowhere to go. It is in the high 90%, however, retention remains a challenge". Numerous reasons were provided to account for this difficulty, including geographical distance from home,

suffering from "home sickness" and being away from family: "I just stopped [going to boarding school] because I wanted to be home with family" (ex-boarding school student, Western Australia).

Some boarding students and staff participants had positive experiences, for example: "[Initially] there is friction between students coming from different 'traditional Countries' when they board, but, by the end of the year, that's what they actually like about the school, getting to know people from other places" (staff, Western Australia).

While boarding school can result in positive outcomes for students, support for boarding schools was not universal. Participants indicated that communities did not want their children "so far from home", "they want the kids around". One participant described a compromise by locating boarding schools closer to home communities:

> The old model of sending them away for boarding is a bit like another stolen generation, but [while] they're away from [community] here and away from [other communities], they're not that far away. Everybody is related to everybody else, the mobs. We work very hard to make sure we take a few children from [each] community so there's always more than one. (CEO boarding school, Western Australia)

Discussion and implications

The discussion below is designed to respond to the second research question: "What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student retention and year 12 completion in remote and very remote schools of Northern Territory and Western Australia?"

How can schools facilitate families to support students?

Family support may seem beyond the scope of schools. However, there are indirect strategies that can contribute to family support. For example, having local staff employed at school can draw on the strengths of families and encourage them to support their children.

Teachers can use the stories and experiences of family members in the classroom by engaging parents and elders to share cultural knowledge (e.g., in two-way science). If parents are interested in learning content, and involved in co-teaching, there is potential to be role models for their children. They can also integrate community issues into schools' teaching and learning opportunities as part of a broader community engagement strategy as noted by Lowe, Harrison et al. (2019) in the literature. Inviting parents into a non-threatening school space (e.g., community barbecues) may build connections that allow parents and family members to engage in children's learning. Strong local school governance could draw families into school activities, too. We witnessed examples where the school was a hub for community activities and meetings, including with government services. While the examples given are perhaps loosely connected to retention, it is clear from the literature that a positive, culturally safe and welcoming school environment is foundational for better engagement and retention. School–community relationships and partnerships are also critical (Halsey, 2018; Lowe, Harrison et al. 2019; Miller & Armour, 2021). We could reasonably expect that an engaged community, possibly reflected in strong local school governance, will influence the direction of schools to better meet the needs of students and their families (Lowe, Harrison et al., 2019).

Careers and pathways planning

There is considerable evidence that preparing students for work and life beyond school is what parents and community members want, and what students need (Osborne et al., 2022; Oliver et al., 2013; Rutherford et al., 2019). Workplace experience and hands-on training can facilitate this, provided they are combined with explicit teaching of what "work" means (McRae-Williams, 2008, Osborne et al., 2022).

Schools need to reconsider curriculum priorities to ensure that the Australian Curriculum's English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learning progressions are applied, rather than limiting teaching to mainstream year level requirements (Rutherford et al., 2019). Curricula and pedagogies that adapt to the local contexts, cultures, languages and student identities are likely to be more effective in engaging students (Sarra, 2011; Miller & Armour, 2021). In doing this they could, for example, use needs-based approaches which respond to everyday issues such as how to talk when engaging with police, attaining a driver licence or obtaining identification documents (Oliver et al., 2013). Additionally, real-world practical mathematics and literacy tasks could be used to engage students (e.g., doing banking, changing tyres, car maintenance tasks).

Schools can foster partnerships with industry and employers in their communities, using existing employment opportunities (e.g., mining, pastoral, land and sea management, tourism and hospitality). In so doing, they can determine where skills shortages are and where it is difficult to find workers or apprentices, identifying pathways into construction, conservation and land management, automotive and other trades (see, for example, Osborne et al., 2022). They can invite employers and industry representatives to engage with classrooms teaching and learning. They can also offer enterprise training for young people (e.g., drawing on Indigenous businesses in bush foods and tourism). Such initiatives allow school leaders and teachers to think beyond the curriculum, and the immediate goal of year 12 completion, and enhance the relevance of school for students.

Student wellbeing and motivation

Participants discussed the importance of creating a safe space and school environments that were welcoming, caring and supportive. There is now considerable literature that supports the idea of culturally nourishing schools (Lowe et al., 2021) where language and culture are intentionally incorporated into classroom and on country learning activities (Guenther, Rigney et al., 2023; Osborne et al., 2022; Osborne et al., 2020). Learning on country was particularly important for remote schools where access to learning opportunities is limited, particularly compared to urban schools. We found evidence to suggest that many young people want to stay on country to study and learn, and then to work.

We also found evidence that boarding schools may work against student wellbeing, with one respondent likening boarding, to "another stolen generation". The evidence for boarding is mixed, and the risks identified by our respondents are mirrored elsewhere in the literature (O'Bryan, 2021; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Nevertheless, if boarding is not the default secondary schooling option, then resourcing for community-based options is required.

Remote teaching considerations

Teachers can and do make a difference, not only for retention, but for engagement more generally (Lowe, Bub-Connor, & Ball, 2019; Lowe, Harrison et al., 2019; Schulz, 2014). Initial teacher education must offer courses and experiences that support cultural learning and development to support students (e.g., doing practicums in remote communities). Non-local teachers also need to continue to learn how to effectively

work together with local First Nations staff, such as through team-teaching approaches (Angelo et al., 2022; Corrie, 2021; Poetsch, 2020). There is also a clear need for opportunities to support the growth in the number of First Nations teachers in all schools, particularly those in remote and very remote locations.

Access to senior secondary education

We are conscious that the number of very remote schools that offer senior secondary education options is small (as noted in the Introduction); just half of the 174 very remote schools with greater than 80% First Nations students offer year 12. Of these, just one in seven achieves secondary completions, and one in 11 achieves secondary certificates. While lack of access did not emerge as a significant finding, this is probably due to our engagement with schools that either had senior secondary programs or had clear pathways beyond the primary years to all students to go on to and complete high school. This is perhaps where the greatest opportunity exists for Closing the Gap in very remote communities.

Conclusions

This article has provided evidence from remote school stakeholders—parents, teachers, principals and students—that demonstrates what affects retention in remote schools for First Nations students, and how school retention can be improved.

This research gave students and community members a voice. The use of community-based researchers ensured that the perspectives of young people, their families and other community members were prioritised.

Notwithstanding the reality that only a small number of schools offer year 12, schools can adopt a range of strategies to support young people to complete. While these strategies are somewhat dependent on funding, they also depend on a range of factors including governance, leadership, local employment and local context.

Our findings highlight the importance of family support for students. While this might not be something schools have direct control over, there are several actions that will create an environment where families can support their children. For example, local staff can be role models and exemplify post-school employment opportunities in remote contexts. They can also support parents and make school engagement easier and culturally safe.

Student motivation is another factor that influences retention. Young people who have a clear picture of what they want to do beyond school are more likely to complete their education. Schools can support student aspirations by providing meaningful and quality learning experiences, encouraging them to see what may be possible for their futures. Those quality learning experiences include work experience and vocational training. School staff have an important role in introducing young people to potential employers and training providers.

Motivation is related to wellbeing. If students feel confident about themselves in the learning environment, they will be more likely to engage and stay at school. In very remote contexts, learning on country is critical for engagement in culturally relevant ways. Learning language and learning with and through language (both home language and English) can improve students' confidence and self-esteem. Respondents discussed the pros and cons of boarding schools, noting that they do provide opportunities for learning that do not exist in many communities. However, they were also conscious of the wellbeing

risks associated with boarding. Hence, a bigger impact on year 12 completion will be achieved by increasing the number of schools that offer senior secondary education on country.

Teachers, of course, play an important role, not only in what and how they teach, but in how they relate to students and community members. Teachers who encourage and support young people with their aspirations will have a positive influence helping young people to stay at school.

These strategies might not come as a surprise to those who have experience working in remote schools. However, we heard many examples from respondents that suggested many of these strategies are not currently being adopted in remote schools where retention remains a problem; the question that begs to be answered is why not.

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John Guenther is a researcher with 25 years' experience working in overlapping fields of social inquiry. In the last 15 years he has more intentionally focused on issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote parts of Australia. He led the Remote Education Systems project under the CRC for Remote Economic Participation (2011–2016) and is currently the Research Leader for Education and Training with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, based in Darwin, Northern Territory. John is a leading academic in the field of remote education and has published widely on his findings, often under the banner of "red dirt thinking".

Robyn Ober is a Mamu/Djirribal woman from the rainforest region of North Queensland. She recently completed her PhD thesis titled *Aboriginal English as a Social and Cultural Identity Marker in an Indigenous Tertiary Educational Context*. She has a strong interest in philosophy and practice of both-ways education, educational leadership and Indigenous Australian languages, in particular, Aboriginal English. Robyn has undertaken several research projects focusing on these topics and has published papers in educational and linguistic journals, both nationally and internationally.

Rhonda Oliver has been undertaking research in schools for more than 30 years, including in various remote Aboriginal schools in Western Australia. She has undertaken several projects in Indigenous education, including examining the needs of Aboriginal students in schools and higher education. She recently completed a study at a remote Aboriginal boarding school where the students were trained to become co-researchers, undertaking the interviews and analysis related to the experiences of past students.

Catherine Holmes has been working and researching in remote Western Australia schools for the past 12 years. She recently completed a PhD in Ngaanyatjarra and Pintupi early years children's practices to assist in the transition from home to school. The project was in collaboration with seven community-based researchers. Catherine has worked in the research and evaluation team at Children's Ground, co-designing and carrying out action research projects with First Nations educators and elders. More recently, she has joined Batchelor Institute as a research specialist, based in Alice Springs.

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