

Issues Impacting Education of Remote Cape York Indigenous Students

A response to articles published by The Conversation¹ on Australian Indigenous education.

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¹ See <https://theconversation.com/au>. For a full list of referenced articles from The Conversation, see page 10 of this paper.

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Introduction

This year a series of mainstream articles on Indigenous education was published by The Conversation; it is good to see the beginnings of a real unpacking of failure to improve Indigenous education outcomes. Factors affecting outcomes are complex, and it is gratifying that analysis of systemic issues is underway rather than attributing fault solely to students and their communities. However, while acknowledging the hard work put into analysis thus far, we note some gaps.

Six years of education-related close community engagement with several remote Indigenous Cape York communities brings to our attention issues both previously largely un-noticed and/or well-known but willfully ignored by politics and bureaucracy. We are concerned that neglecting to appropriately address, resource, and factor these issues into action plans, further taxpayer resources will be wasted on programs that are poorly informed and effectively set up to fail. We briefly address some of these issues here.

The issues covered in this paper include:

1. NAPLAN realities: using NAPLAN results to understand and address the problem.
2. Remoteness: considering the systemic institutional issues contributing to problems.
3. Embracing Indigeneity: bringing Indigeneity into remote classrooms improves outcomes.
4. ABSTUDY: reflecting on equity of education for all Australian children.

1. NAPLAN realities

a. Minimum standards – setting the bar low

In discussing NAPLAN, it is crucial to recall that the test is not an academic knowledge test. It is a literacy and numeracy skills test that provides parents and teachers with information they need to support a child's growth and learning.

The federal government's Closing the Gap education goal is for Indigenous students to attain minimum NAPLAN standards across assessed skills. It is well known that Indigenous students' NAPLAN scores are well below non-Indigenous students at all NAPLAN levels and in all skill areas.

Less well understood, however, is that the minimum standards themselves are set so low that, by Year 9, a student may, according to his/her NAPLAN results, be in the approved academic year level, but have the literacy and numeracy skills of Year 5 students. See Figure 1 below.

² Ibid.

Band	Year 3 skill band levels	Year 5 skill band levels	Year 7 skill band levels	Year 9 skill band levels
9				High skills Band 9
8			High skills Band 8	Sound skills Band 8
7		High skills Band 7	Sound skills Band 7	Basic skills Band 7
6		Sound skills Band 6 ←	Basic skills Band 6	→ Minimum standard skills Band 6
5	High skills Band 5	Basic skills Band 5	Minimum standard skills Band 5	
4	Sound skills Band 4	Minimum standard skills Band 4		
3	Basic skills Band 3			
2	Minimum standard skills Band 2			

Figure 1: NAPLAN year levels and band levels: NAPLAN results are categorized into one of 10 “bands”. Each band approximately coincides with a corresponding year level and describes the level of skills a student has. For example, in this figure, we can see how Band Level 6 is considered a “sound” skill for Year 5 students and a “minimum standard skill” for Year 9 Students. In other words, students in the appropriate age group who have the skills of a Year 5 student can be a Year 9 student. How well will these students do in Year 9 compared to their peers who have a “sound” band level 8 or higher? Shouldn’t the Year 9 “sound skills” band (ie. Band 8) be the minimum standard?

Given that many Indigenous students fail to reach even the minimum standard band of their enrolled year level, it is obvious basic skills are not being adequately developed, and advancing students to higher grades without consolidated skills is counterproductive. Lowering the bar, while allowing educational institutions to notionally meet performance requirements, sets up students to fail throughout life, as they may not even develop the basic literacy skills required to navigate life autonomously. Certainly they will not develop the basic academic knowledge to do so.

In our view, using the minimum NAPLAN score standards as measures of success in any child’s education engenders a false sense of accomplishment, undermines their futures and condemns current students to a life in the welfare system.

b. Spontaneous “improvement” in Year 9 NAPLAN scores

Data in The Conversation article *Infographic: Are we making progress on Indigenous education?* show Indigenous students’ NAPLAN scores far below non-Indigenous students up to Year 9,

when the gap suddenly narrows. No explanation is offered, but it seems unlikely a spontaneous improvement in skills occurs across the board. We have identified several factors that may contribute to skewed NAPLAN results.

Year 9 Indigenous students: a self-selecting cohort

Year 9 Indigenous students (particularly those at boarding school) are a largely self-selecting cohort. Therefore those whose poor skills would bring down the mean NAPLAN scores are absent from assessments; those who stay are able to cope with secondary academic demands due to relatively high skill levels or personal traits or support systems that help them overcome educational deficits. As a result, the mean NAPLAN score of Year 9 Indigenous students jumps, implying skill-levels have increased and that the skills gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has narrowed.

The following points support this:

i. Set up to fail - exiting the education system early

Across all four remote communities in which we worked the majority of secondary students are sent to boarding school because their local state school does not offer teaching beyond Year 6 or Year 10. Bear in mind that even the top Year 7 students from remote communities are likely to have **at best** skills equivalent to mainstream non-Indigenous Year 5 students – and individual school NAPLAN results indicate their skills are in fact closer to Year 3 levels. Unaware of this, remote-based twelve year old children start secondary school under the impression they are on a par with everyone else. Their substandard primary education is immediately revealed.

To reiterate: most remote Indigenous students entering Year 7 have at best Year 5 academic skills.

The shame and realization of the enormity of their skill gap is a shock; to them it seems futile to even try to keep up. For many, this compounds the additional stresses of culture shock, first experiences of racism, the realisation of their low socio-economic status, and adjusting to life without usual family support networks. The result is deterioration of motivation and behavior (consciously or subconsciously). Eventually they either leave voluntarily or are expelled. Returning to their home communities, they usually do not re-enroll in secondary education due to unavailability or understandable unwillingness to re-engage.

Education authorities do not track or follow up students who leave schools and do not re-enroll elsewhere; definitive numbers are not available regarding students who “fall through the cracks”.

ii. Non-participation by enrolled students

In addition to early school leavers being excluded from assessment, not all enrolled students participate in assessment, particularly disengaged students who are likely to have low literacy and numeracy skills. This effectively eliminates the lowest-skilled students from the assessment pool, artificially inflating averages.

iii. Aggregated results

The average NAPLAN scores include those of Indigenous students from all environments, not just remote communities, and are thus likely to create a false (ie. inflated) impression of remote students' NAPLAN scores.

2. Remoteness

Poor Indigenous education outcomes are often correlated to community remoteness. However, while geographical remoteness certainly compounds difficulties, it may not in itself be the issue; rather, systemic attitudes to both geographical remoteness and the people who live and work in geographically remote communities may be more significant.

a. Low expectations

Expectations of remote schools are low. Despite the rhetoric of Closing the Gap policies, schools and staff are for the most part not expected or supported to achieve better outcomes than reaching the minimum NAPLAN scores. They are effectively put in the 'too hard' basket. Teachers, parents and students relate that classes are continually diverted by behaviour management issues and are not consistent and beneficial learning environments. Success is often measured by increased attendance, which may be accomplished through reward for attendance, whether or not any constructive learning activity takes place.

This institutional attitude can easily be interpreted to represent a generalized view that Indigenous people in remote communities either are not capable of higher performance, or do not matter enough to invest in effective education frameworks.

b. Under-supported teachers and schools

Whatever the reason for low expectations, it also manifests as little formal recognition of the true demands on remote teachers. There is very little preparation for the realities of living and teaching in remote Indigenous communities, and little personal or professional support for staff on the ground. Teachers in remote Indigenous communities are routinely placed in positions in which effectiveness requires far higher levels of experience, training and employer support than they possess. Like the students, they too are largely set up to fail.

Teachers in remote Indigenous communities are commonly young with limited life experience to draw on, inexperienced in teaching, inexperienced in remote living, inexperienced in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), and have limited understanding of Indigenous cultures and historical context. Compounding this is a lack of support structures and often inadequate telecommunications infrastructure complicating or preventing access to their own personal support systems.

Working and living under such circumstances is extremely stressful and results in burnout; it is unsurprising that turnover is high. The lack of continuity of teaching staff results in student and community reluctance to engage or invest in relationships with teachers, creating a vicious circle of disconnection between teaching staff, students and the community. Comprehensive preparation and support of teachers is likely to significantly increase staff retention and effectiveness.

c. Paying to access compulsory education

When students from remote communities reach secondary school, they are obliged in either Year 7 or Year 11 to attend boarding school due to further education being unavailable in their home community. Not only do parents have to send their child away, they are often compelled to pay substantial amounts of money for their child to be able to attend school. It seems inequitable that people living in a community with a free state primary school are then required to pay to access **compulsory** secondary education. It is clearly not a matter of choice such as an urban parent might make in deciding on a private school rather than the local, free, public secondary school.

Due to low literacy and numeracy skills, many Indigenous parents are ill-informed and have poor comprehension of the contractual obligations involved in such matters. Informed or not, there is little choice but to enter into onerous financial arrangements they do not fully understand and cannot practically afford.

Additionally, those “fortunate” enough to have been awarded scholarships for their children’s education may be effectively penalized. Apart from being obliged to pay for items not covered under scholarship terms (and the list can be considerable), the scholarship value is deemed **income** for the parents, which affects any social security payments they receive. This may result in reduction or abolition of Family Tax Benefit payments for children still living at home, causing further financial hardship.

Unfortunately, despite parents’ best intentions and aspirations for their child, it is not uncommon for students to be withdrawn from secondary school due to financial stress on the family.

d. Adult illiteracy vs adult education

Our experience in remote communities demonstrates many students’ parents have had an unsatisfactory education resulting in poor literacy and numeracy skills. Having failed in the same deficient education system their children are currently in, they often see little point in their children focusing on school. After all, they think, what good did it do them?

As a result of academic failure, traumatic and/or demoralizing schooling experiences, and lack of meaningful work opportunities, many parents see sending their children to school as a pointless and harmful exercise, and do not expect or support their children’s education.

The Conversation article of 9/6/17 by Boughton and Beetson, *To lift literacy levels amongst Indigenous children, their parents’ literacy skills must be improved first*, promotes adult literacy as a key to children’s literacy. Our own observation supports part of this supposition; we would like to refine the finding by saying parents with **higher academic skills** tend to have children who perform better in school.

There is an urgent need to acknowledge it is not simply literacy that makes the difference to the support parents provide to their children. Literacy is but the foundation for broader education in contemporary times. Parents with a good education themselves know that schooling imparts knowledge about the world we are part of – history, government, citizenship, economics, science, technology, geography, health, language – knowledge that is critical to gainful and meaningful employment, independence and the ability to support families and the growth of the economy and nation.

We strongly support any moves to improve adult literacy, but more importantly feel recognition of the role of well-educated parents should provide impetus for establishing strong education programs for adults. Unfortunately there are few opportunities for comprehensive adult education in remote areas.

Although our proposals for offering adult education to remote Indigenous people have not been funded, we were awarded grants to offer workshops that assist parents to unpack education's value and improve their understanding of the education system. Our results show an increased active parental support of children's education, even amongst parents with poor literacy and numeracy skills. It also resulted in parents wishing to improve their own skills, suggesting that adult and child literacy improvement can occur in tandem. Despite these encouraging results, the funded workshops still do not address the long term needs of children to have parents who have the knowledge and skills to assist and support them throughout their school years.

Considering the economics of the direct and indirect benefits of a well-educated adult, continuing to neglect this factor is likely to prove a false economy. Lamb and Huo in their 16/6/17 *The Conversation* article, *Leaving school early means you're likely never to return to study and training in adult life*, report the combined fiscal and social lifetime cost of an individual early school leaver is \$950,000. They report the estimated cost for the entire early leaver cohort over a lifetime is \$35.8 billion at current monetary value.

Investment in high quality education at all school levels and in tertiary education is likely to have substantial economic and social payoffs, on top of diverting life trajectories of despair and stemming the loss of human capital.

3. Embracing Indigeneity

In the Introduction to the *2017 Closing the Gap Report*, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull observes that to successfully provide a quality education to Indigenous Australians, "We must also recognize culture as paramount to finding solutions that respect, acknowledge, and support identity."

Awareness and respect of culture and language is suggested as a potential key to improving education outcomes in *The Conversation* article of 7/6/17, *Infographic: Are we making progress on Indigenous education?* The article represents mean Indigenous classroom content in minutes per week, implying a link between more Indigenous course content and positive Indigenous academic outcomes; however this may be only part of the reality. Our observations and experiences suggest the following factors are likely to contribute.

a. Cultural safety and relatable education frameworks

"Cultural safety" is a term used to identify a sense of recognition of, acceptance of and respect for difference. To be a culturally safe person, you must demonstrate: you do not devalue a person because of their cultural background or practice; that you are aware of differences in worldviews, personal approaches and communication styles, to name but a few factors. If you are considered a culturally safe person, it further implies that people of other cultures are safe expressing their cultural values and behaviours without fear of being judged or penalized. Being a culturally safe person indicates respect for people of other cultures **as they are when they are not required to adapt their behavior to another (usually dominant) paradigm.**

The Australian education system is on the whole, unfortunately, far from a culturally safe institution. To date it has revolved around Western hegemonies, values, experiences and norms. Obfuscation or outright denial of Indigenous history and experience is inherent to the system. This has the effect, as related in The Conversation article of 8/6/17, *Is policy on Indigenous education deliberately being stalled?*, of institutional whitewashing of education. Such a system negates Indigenous students' own worlds and values, and affects their sense of self-worth and perception of the value of education.

Teaching academic subjects within contexts unfamiliar to Indigenous children is another symptom of whitewashing education and the institutional lack of cultural safety. Doing so demonstrates that non-Indigenous frameworks are assumed to be the default, and therefore "correct" or "normal", context. In reality, all subjects taught in urban schools can be taught within the familiar environment, systems, and social structures in which Indigenous children operate on a daily basis, and to which they can easily relate.

The reported improved outcomes and awareness and respect of culture and language may result from students positively responding to the welcoming environment created by acceptance and validation of Indigeneity – that is, students are responding to a culturally safe environment. It stands to reason that apart from studying Indigenous topics, the classroom environment itself, in actively embracing Indigenous life experience rather than being dismissive of it, is more culturally safe and conducive to Indigenous students' participation and improved learning outcomes. Making the entire education experience a culturally safe one is likely to have significant ongoing impacts.

b. The role of relationships

It is likely that teachers who create classroom environments welcoming to Indigenous students demonstrate a genuine awareness and respect of culture, language and students' life experience. In remote communities, such teachers tend to more actively engage with students and the Indigenous community, and are likely to be well received by and form genuine relationships with students and the community, further promoting positive education outcomes. As is repeatedly and strongly documented, relationships are a key factor in successful engagement in Indigenous communities. This cannot be underestimated, and mechanisms promoting increased engagement between teachers, students and communities have significant potential to improve education outcomes of remote Indigenous students.

4. ABSTUDY

System complexity

The ABSTUDY program is a complex system of numerous circumstance-dependent payments and supplements that in our experience even university-educated people are hard-pressed to negotiate. Even the task of determining the amount one might be entitled to under the ABSTUDY program is a complicated exercise. To expect sub-literate people from remote communities to easily navigate the bureaucratic maze and comprehend their entitlements and responsibilities is unreasonable. Our experience indicates that many people may be missing out on entitlements through lack of knowledge, and/or deficient service by relevant actors.

Families of students in the ABSTUDY system would be better served by a streamlined payments system, and intensive and focused individual case management.

ABSTUDY as a quality control measure

Although the complex and user-unfriendly ABSTUDY program has proven essential to furthering the education of Indigenous children, our analysis of it leads us to several conclusions about how it could be better utilised to:

- improve Indigenous primary, secondary and tertiary education success rates
- reduce drop-out rates
- reduce the current cost-shifting between state and federal systems that occurs when under-educated students of the state education systems are absorbed into the federal entitlements system on entering high school.

a. Secondary schooling

Currently, the ABSTUDY program does not put performance criteria on children or schools before agreeing to provide funding for a child for further study outside the child's remote community. As a result, children are sent off with substandard skills that set them up for failure in an academic environment that they are not prepared for.

Three relatively simple steps could address this problem and, at the same time, make ABSTUDY a more effective program for Indigenous children and a better investment for Australian taxpayers:

1. Requiring proof of ability to undertake the coursework (eg. via school performance records, NAPLAN records and/or academic testing).
2. Requiring students to reapply annually and fulfil performance criteria before advancing to the next year level.
3. Monitoring schools receiving funding for students via ABSTUDY to ensure appropriate academic standards are being met by their ABSTUDY students, and denying ABSTUDY funding to schools whose standards are found deficient.

These measures would ensure that students are not expected to perform at levels far higher than their primary school education has prepared them for. It effectively puts the onus back on schools to nurture relevant and useful skill levels, ensuring students are not churned through the system regardless of their demonstrated skill level. This in turn reduces the likelihood of students leaving school early with feelings of futility and hopelessness, and is likely to promote better life outcomes.

Schools will be held accountable on an ongoing basis for the standard of education they provide. This will encourage schools to reassess their methods and approaches, and adopt more effective and successful frameworks. The result will be all students having a realistic and achievable opportunity to gain a useful academic grounding, giving them the best chance for a life outside the welfare system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper acknowledges the quality and insights of the online publications of The Conversation assessing Indigenous education in Australia. This paper also addresses several issues ill-addressed within the current education system.

1. *Minimum NAPLAN standards: setting the bar low*

The NAPLAN Year 9 minimum skill standards equal the NAPLAN Year 5 sound skill standards (see Fig. 1). This has implications not only for remote Indigenous students, but for all Australian children; Year 9 students with Year 5 skills are unlikely to succeed academically. Required minimum skill levels **must** empower students to capably and confidently take part in the further learning required of them.

Required action: NAPLAN minimum standards need to be raised for all Australian students.

2. *Low expectations: setting students up to fail*

Lowered standards of primary education set up students to fail in secondary education and for life. Remote Indigenous parents and students are largely unaware the standards remote Indigenous students are held to are below par until children go to secondary boarding school. Unfortunately, catching up academically is very difficult so late in the education process. Prevention is much easier than cure.

Required action: no Australian student should be allowed to progress to the next year of study unless they have the knowledge and skills required to participate successfully in that school year of study.

3. *Remoteness: out of sight, out of mind*

Remoteness is often associated with poor education outcomes largely due to systemic attitudes to remote residents, low expectations and disregard for appropriate levels of preparation, experience and support in regard to teachers. Education systems are systemically compromised, with inadequate support and training for teaching staff, and inherent institutional cultural bias. Active promotion of relatable course content and culturally safe learning environments that embrace Indigeneity are likely have positive impacts on learning outcomes and increase cohesion between teaching staff, students and their communities.

Action required: multiple actions are required including:

- *Improved preparation of teachers to understand the community, culture and life experience of students.*
- *Improved support systems for teachers living in remote communities.*
- *Improved input from the community on the selection of teachers, local frameworks, and community resources.*

4. *Inequity: what the system has already wrought*

Parents are obliged to pay to access compulsory secondary schooling, unlike non-remote citizens. A product of the existing system, their own poor education means they are largely uninformed about the onerous financial obligations they undertake for their children's education. Financial hardship, which may be exacerbated by scholarship grants, causes further student withdrawal from secondary education.

Action required: several actions are required including:

- *The inequities between regional/urban vs remote opportunities for free access to education beyond Year 6 need to be resolved. Remote families should not have to bear a financial burden to access compulsory schooling.*
- *Independent educational financial counselling needs to be available to parents until the inequities of the system are resolved.*

5. *Literacy/numeracy skills vs knowledge*

NAPLAN measures literacy and numeracy skills only. As the foundations to further knowledge they are vital, but education as a whole provides the foundation knowledge we need to navigate, support and refine the systems that govern us and the choices we make. We must ensure well-rounded educations and knowledges are nurtured to ensure children have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and to be autonomous, effective and informed people.

Action required: State education bodies must hold accountable every school that receives any kind of national or state funding; schools must be required to successfully teach and measure student outcomes according to the Australian National Curriculum.

6. *Availability of education to adults*

Parents' literacy is often poor, but is not necessarily a barrier to supporting their children's education; informing parents increases motivation to improve their own literacy and numeracy skills, but almost no adult education increasing academic knowledge is available in remote areas. The few LLN programs offered are generally ineffective due to shortness (often only 2-3 weeks in length). As a result, students rarely feel they have improved their skills or knowledge from such courses.

Action required: education (rather than training) is required for individuals who do not have the equivalent of a Year 10 knowledge and skill base. Once individuals have this knowledge and skill base, the government has programs to help them progress on through tertiary studies.

7. *ABSTUDY: an education quality control mechanism*

ABSTUDY has potential to act as a gatekeeper to secondary and tertiary education systems. Education institutions should be required by ABSTUDY and Education Departments to maintain quality control standards. Measures could be established to ensure students are realistically capable of completing coursework; this would ensure students are not set up to fail, and is likely to reduce attrition rates.

Action required: the role of ABSTUDY needs to be revised to act as a gatekeeper to secondary and tertiary education systems.

Failure to sufficiently address the issues presented in this paper is likely to result in ineffective programs that perpetuate poor Indigenous education outcomes and waste taxpayer resources.

Evidence demonstrates that changing institutional culture can bring about positive results. In Western Australia, several mining companies adjusted their Human Resources and Management policies and practices to be more responsive to Indigenous cultures. Those companies discovered that changing their policies and practices impacted positively not only on the Indigenous staff, but on all staff from all backgrounds. This demonstrates that institutions willing to adapt, embrace change and practice cultural safety can have significant impacts.

We strongly urge that the above discussed issues be taken into consideration in providing education programs and systems for Indigenous people. It is very likely raising educational minimum standards, supporting teachers fully in their many diverse roles, embracing the cultures and life experience of students in the classroom, and providing equal access to and quality of education for all children will impact positively not only on Indigenous children, but on all Australian children across our great nation.

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