An investigation into the attendance and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Research and theory about what works

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Stephanie Armstrong is a Gamilaraay woman from northern New South Wales, from a large extended family. She has been committed to working within Aboriginal education all of her working life. She has had opportunities to teach across all sectors, from universities, TAFE to early dhildhood directorates in a number of states.

Stephanie is currently working at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) within the Policy Analysis Program. A key part of her role at ACER is to provide leadership to projects focusing on Aboriginal education, and to provide knowledge and guidance on a wide range of Aboriginal issues to her colleagues.

Teaching in schools for over 20 years in rural, remote and major centres has provided Stephanie with skills and experiences that she has used in recent consultancy work. During the last eight years, she spent five years as a curriculum consultant. During this time she built relationships with key players to support agencies of change in schools in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Key focus areas were Literacy and Numeracy and community engagement to improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

From 2007 to August 2010, Stephanie worked as a consultant with the national project, Dare to Lead (DTL). DTL is a project that aims to improve the outcomes for Indigenous children in Literacy and Numeracy, and to support reconciliation. With 28 years of experience in Indigenous education, Stephanie brings many skills and considerable insight into best practice, and an understanding of the disadvantages and layered effect of barriers in education for Indigenous children.

Sarah Buckley,

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Dr Sarah Buckley is a Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). During her time at ACER, Sarah has been involved with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Sarah was second author on the 2010 Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues paper *Indigenous School Attendance and Retention* with Nola Purdie and recently co-authored a discussion paper for the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC). In early 2011, Sarah was part of an ACER team commissioned by the COAG Reform Council to investigate Year 12 attainment rates for Indigenous students.

Prior to working at ACER, Sarah completed her PhD in psychology at the University of Melbourne, investigating the effects of peer relationships on adolescents' academic motivation using contemporary social network modelling. Sarah has presented at national and international conferences and in 2008 won first prize in the Australian Association for Research in Education's annual student travel awards. In addition to this experience, Sarah has been a guest lecturer at the University of Melbourne in the education department, a data analyst for the education department at Monash University and a research assistant in the psychology department at the University of Melbourne.

Abstract

This presentation is based on an Issues paper commissioned by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (Purdie & Buckley, 2010). This paper was designed to inform policy makers and service providers in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' school attendance and retention. During the presentation, we will highlight issues in analysing school attendance and retention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; the gap in school attendance and retention and the causes of this gap; and the success or otherwise of the various programs and initiatives designed to reduce the gap. Issues in the quality of the data and research will also be considered. The presentation will incorporate an opportunity for audience members to reflect on and discuss the issues presented.

Introduction

Engagement or participation in education is a key factor affecting the life chances of all Australians, and it is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who overall have a lower level of participation in education than non-Aboriginal Australians. Higher levels of educational attainment improve employment opportunities, are associated with higher income and promote participation in all societal activities. The current presentation is based on an Issues paper commissioned by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. This Issues paper, written by Nola Purdie and Sarah Buckley, and published in September 2010, was designed to inform policy makers and service providers in the area of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander1 students' school attendance and retention. During this presentation we will summarise this paper and elaborate on initiatives and programs seeking to increase participation and engagement with education.

Methodology

For the construction of this paper, data and information were collected via an initial literature search conducted using several key databases: Family and Society, Australian Education Index (AEI), Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), American Psychological Association database (PsychINFO), SocINDEX Database (SocINDEX). Key search terms included: school attendance, school retention, school participation, school readiness, educational participation, educational aspirations, absenteeism, truancy, attendance patterns, dropouts, and school holding power.

Through the database search, relevant Australian and international literature published in the last ten years was identified. This core literature was supplemented with literature identified through internet searches and reference lists within the initial publications consulted. The identified literature included reports of large-scale data collections and interpretations thereof, as well as single case studies that were essentially qualitative in nature, and which may have adopted an action-research approach. In addition, relevant personnel in state and territory education jurisdictions and independent organisations/foundations

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1   Throughout this report, the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' are used when referring to Australia's First Nations people. When the term 'Indigenous' is used it is from an excerpt from the previous paper for the Closing Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, which uses the term to refer to Australia's First people.

were contacted to seek material that was not publicly available but which documented strategies, programs and practices that had been implemented, and potentially evaluated.

This presentation will highlight the issues in analysing school attendance and retention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including the reasons and potential consequences of non-attendance and non-completion. A combination of home, school and individual factors are involved in students' decisions to miss school, although the causes of non-attendance are contested. While parents and students tend to stress school-related factors as the main cause, staff in education jurisdictions and teachers tend to believe that parental attitudes and the home environment are more influential (Gray & Partington, 2003; Malcolm et al., 2003). School non-attendance has significant consequences, with children who regularly miss school more likely to experience significant disruption to their education. A student who misses more than one full day per week on average would lose two years of education over a ten-year period (Western Australia: Office of the Auditor General, 2009). Many reports highlight the importance of regular school attendance in order to achieve core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and note that achieving adequate levels of education is one of the key contributors to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Measures of school attendance and retention

The difficulties in collecting, collating and comparing information on school attendance and retention at a national level have been well documented (Boulden, 2006; Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; Gray & Partington, 2003). Reasons for this difficulty, especially as it relates to attendance information, revolve around the different ways in

which student attendance/absenteeism is recorded in the different states and territories and across the different education jurisdictions. More detailed information on the broader concepts of participation and engagement is even harder to locate.

There are sufficient data from sources like the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to indicate a gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous school attendance rates, although the data are insufficient to demonstrate if the gap has increased or decreased over time. In 2008, Indigenous students attended school at lower rates than non-Indigenous students, with a difference of up to 10 percentage points common in all States and Territories, and a tendency to rise in the later years of schooling. However, in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, the difference was well over 10 percentage points across all years, rising to over 20 percentage points by Year 10.

Similarly, although Indigenous student retention rates are increasing, they are still lower than those of non-Indigenous students. In 2009, 45 per cent of Indigenous students were recorded continuing on from the beginning of secondary school to the end of Year 12 compared with 77 per cent of non-Indigenous students (ABS, 2010). This rate of apparent retention through secondary school had increased by 11 percentage points from the 1999 rate for Indigenous students compared with 4 percentage points for non-Indigenous students (ABS, 2010). It should be noted also that apart from statistics that indicate, on average, the gaps in attendance and retention are greater in remote locations, the data are insufficient to show if there are pockets where gaps are less pronounced or non-existent. Issue like

this and others relating to the quality of available data will be discussed in this presentation. These issues include the impact of migration on student attendance and retention, in particular in smaller jurisdictions, which can lead to misleading data.

What has been tried?

The presentation will present examples of initiatives or programs that aim to increase the attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students in schooling, including the sources and types of initiatives. For example, these initiatives include those which are government-based that have been developed in response to broader policy consideration around social inclusion, or school-based approaches. Categorisation of programs into 'types' is difficult because the various components of programs can be targeted individually or they can be combined in different ways. Many schools use 'hooks', which are incentives and rewards to target a particular interest to improve Indigenous student's attendance and engagement. For example, sport can be used as the 'hook' to connect with some students' interest. There are numerous sporting programs that are widely used across Australia that are now under the auspices of the Sporting Chance Program.

Recognising the pivotal role that culture and pride in identity play in these programs is also another approach that is widely used. Whether it is a school-based program or a high profile festival like *Vibe Alive*, the importance of cultural identity and its celebration is used to engage and motivate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Two national initiatives that have broad objectives of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are *What Works* and *Dare to Lead*. They are aimed at raising the awareness of educators about actions and the planning that is required to achieve successful educational outcomes.

What works?

A key question for researchers and policy makers seeking to address the Indigenous disadvantage in education (indeed, in any area of Indigenous disadvantage, including health, housing and employment) is: What constitutes reliable evidence to evaluate programs and initiatives so that good policy and actions can be formulated to effect change? A key purpose of the presentation will be to evaluate the quality of available evidence regarding strategies for improving school attendance, with particular weight attributed to research that is higher up the evidence hierarchy. Evidence hierarchies reflect the relative authority of various types of research. The best evidence for policy recommendations is based on studies that draw on a strong conceptual framework, and valid sampling and methodologies (Daly et al., 2007). These studies can be used to understand processes operating across multiple contexts.

The consensus of both national and international research is clearly that non-attendance and non-completion of school causes harm (Reid, 2008; Zubrick et al., 2006) and it is important to implement policy and practice that will work to minimise this harm. Most harm is to the non-attenders themselves, but there can also be an adverse effect on teachers who become demoralised, attending students who receive less attention when non-attendees re-enter the classroom and require extra help, jurisdiction personnel who face the increased costs and time related to dealing with the consequences of non-attendance, and families and communities who face the stigma of deficit.

What does the evidence show?

Although reasons for non-attendance are complex and contextual, the national and international literature commonly cites four contributing factors: the individual, the family, the community and the school.

Implications for policy and research

Robust evidence-based research with a prominent Indigenous component is particularly contentious. The term 'research' has a poor reputation among many Indigenous people and communities, not least because much of it has been conducted from an etic (outsider) perspective rather than from an emic (insider) perspective. Regardless of who has conducted the research and what methodologies have been used, the appropriateness of policy recommendations drawn from research must adequately reflect the experiences and world views of Indigenous peoples and communities (Martin, 2003).

According to Patterson (2006), research and practice indicate a number of key components for increasing engagement in learning and therefore school retention over the longer term. These components include those that are specifically school focused, those that are community focused, and those that are inter-agency focused. In this presentation recommendations of ways to improve attendance will be proposed. Particular emphasis will be given to strategies that acknowledge the complexity of the area and understand the importance of a whole school/whole community approach (for instance, inter-agency partnerships that go beyond the educational arena) (e.g. Bourke, Rigby & Boulden, 2000; Boulden, 2006). The importance of factors like health and housing will be considered, as will the need to

appreciate early childhood development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children when aiming for successful educational development.

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