



Confronting Indigenous educational disadvantage: A Kimberley perspective

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Analysis Paper 20

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Introduction

High quality education opens doors for Australian children — yet, this promise seems out of reach for many in majority-Indigenous remote communities. To a casual observer, the path to school may be a short walk, but the metaphorical distance these children need to traverse to the classroom is immense, littered with potholes, and often misunderstood by outsiders. And when children in remote communities do reach the classroom, the staff who greet them must be nothing short of exemplary teachers and administrators.

The best intentions and resourcing for decades haven't always translated into higher quality instruction or significant improvement in broader education outcomes. But results are being achieved with a program that prioritises:

- high impact instruction;
- a focus on attendance;
- pre-school programs for zero to three year olds; and
- community engagement.

This scalable model includes professional learning and instructional coaching for 24 schools in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia and is the basis of my experience working in majority-Indigenous remote communities.

This paper discusses observations during school visits and professional learning, interactions with educators and community, and explores what is — and isn't — working.

The Kimberley region

Indigenous Australians comprise approximately 3% of the Australian population. Over one third (36%) of the Indigenous population are aged under 15 years old, compared with 18% of non-Indigenous Australians.¹

Contrary to popular belief, most Indigenous people do not live in remote parts of Australia. Of the 20% living in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, only a quarter of all Indigenous people live in remote and very remote communities. The majority live in cities

and regional areas in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.²

The Kimberley region is Western Australia's most northern and most sparsely populated region. Approximately 36,000 people live in the region, half of whom are Indigenous. Broome accounts for almost half this total population, while less than 10% live in remote Halls Creek; where the 83% Indigenous community can choose between two schools: Catholic and government. In contrast, Djugerari Remote Community school is 110km over dirt roads from Fitzroy Crossing, the nearest town and school enrolments rarely exceed 14 students from Kindergarten to Year 6.³

The region encompasses an area of around 420,000 square kilometres (one person every 12 km²). For context, Victoria is 227,444 km² and has about 6.4 million people (28 people every km²). The Kimberley is almost twice the size of Victoria and three times that of the United Kingdom. It includes major population centres such as Broome, Kununurra, Derby, Halls Creek, Wyndham and Fitzroy Crossing as well as over 250 remote Aboriginal communities representing more than 30 language groups.⁴

In recent times, the Federal Government has identified some communities in the region, with both non-Indigenous and Indigenous residents, as suffering from major economic and social dysfunction. This has led to strategies such as the Cashless Debit Card to reduce welfare spending on alcohol, drugs and gambling in Kununurra, Wyndham, and surrounding communities in the East Kimberley region.

Schooling in the Kimberley

School students in the Kimberley are considerably more socio-educationally disadvantaged than the average Western Australian student. They are also far more likely to belong to an Indigenous heritage and to attend school where most of their peers also have an Indigenous background. They attend fewer days of school, with the majority missing more than 10% of school days (or one day every two weeks).

Table 1: Characteristics of students in Kimberley schools vs average Western Australian school.

	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)	% of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background	Attendance Rate (%)	Attendance Level (%)
Kimberley Region	738	82	68.6	29.2
Western Australia	1001	13	89.2	67.9

Notes to Table 1: ICSEA provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students. Attendance Rate = number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students in Years 1-10 in Semester 1 as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended in Semester 1. Attendance Level = proportion of full time students in Years 1-10 whose attendance rate in Semester 1 is equal to or greater than 90%

Table 2: School characteristics of the average school in the Kimberley region vs Western Australia.

	FTE students	FTE teachers	FTE support staff	Student-teacher ratio	Student-support staff ratio
Kimberley Region	158	15.0	12.3	8.3	10.9
Western Australia	397	28.1	16.9	13.5	24.0

The average school in the Kimberley is less than 40% of the size of the average Western Australian school. After adjusting for the number of students in schools, there are more teachers and support staff per student in Kimberley schools —reflecting the expanded demand on education service delivery common in majority-Indigenous remote communities.

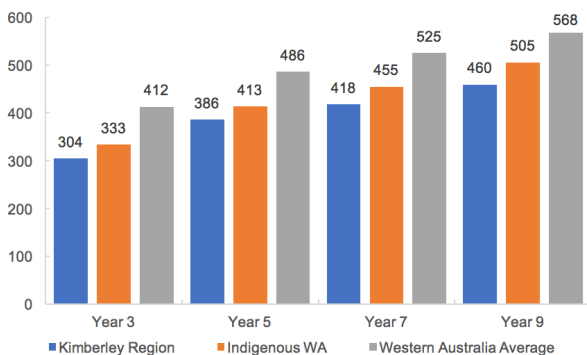
Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) play a critical role in majority-Indigenous schools as the conduit between the classroom and the community. They support student attendance, wellbeing and class participation. Some also teach languages and local culture and provide small group literacy and numeracy intervention under teaching staff direction. Given the turnover of administrators and teachers, many AIEOs are the most-established staff in schools.

Figure 1 shows the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) achievement in the Kimberley compared to the average Indigenous student and average Western Australian student. Relative under-achievement starts early and is exacerbated over time; amplifying the need for early intervention.

Of the many developmental vulnerabilities experienced by children in the Kimberley, early language development impacts directly on learning to read — which subsequently affects all aspects of school, including reading and maths.

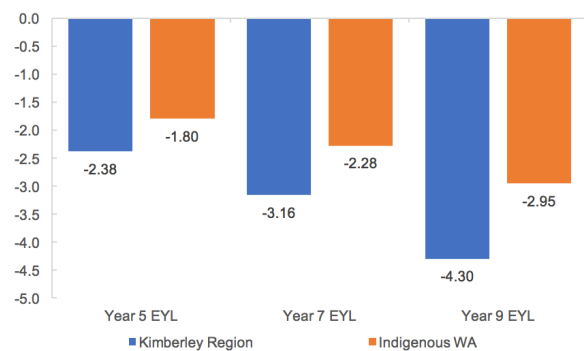
Attendance rates are a perennial concern, but are starting to show improvement under the Kimberley Schools Project — particularly in some that have long suffered from very low attendance.

Figure 1: Relative achievement in 2019 NAPLAN (averaged across domains).



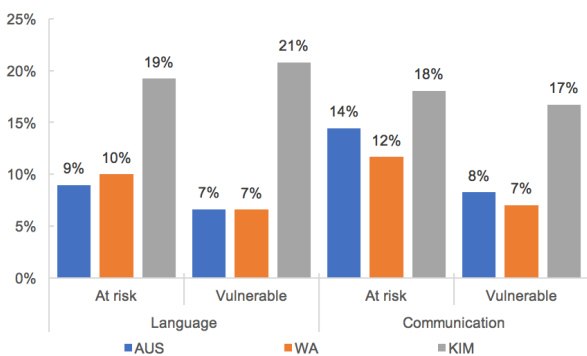
Source: ACARA MySchool website.

Figure 2: Achievement gap in 2019 NAPLAN (based on equivalent year levels¹⁵), relative to average Western Australian Indigenous student (averaged across NAPLAN domains).



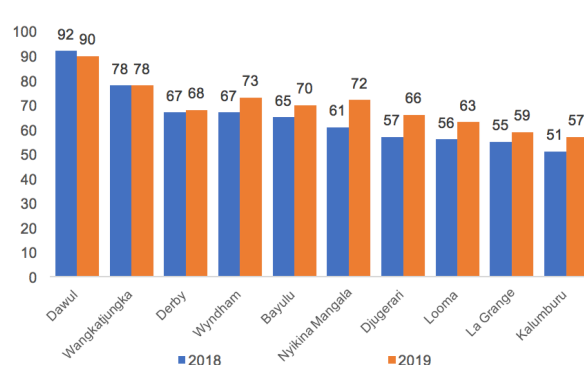
Source: ACARA MySchool website.

Figure 3: Proportion of children faced with language and communication vulnerabilities in Kimberley, Western Australia, and Australia.



Source: Australian Early Development Census 2018 data.

Figure 4: Average attendance rates of schools in Kimberley schools, 2018 and 2019.



Source: ACARA MySchool website.

The Kimberley Schools Project

The Kimberley Schools Project is an initiative of the Western Australian Government designed for schools in all sectors: independent, Catholic and government. As part of the Project, since 2017, I've been visiting, and working directly with staff and students at 24 remote community Kimberley schools that serve majority-Indigenous cohorts.

The Project aims to raise the quality of teaching, as it is well recognised that what teachers know and do in school is the single biggest influence on student engagement and outcomes. My role is to improve

literacy achievement in the early years through professional learning and coaching, and the Project is underpinned by the assumption that a 'high tide raises all ships'.

Turn-around in literacy can be achieved by adopting a simple yet effective formula: examine the student data, align teacher's practice with the right amount and intensity of daily evidence-based literacy instruction, provide coaching, and have high expectations of students. Improved student achievement inevitably follows.

Indigenous educational disadvantage in the classroom

My research, experience and observations in the Kimberley reveal there is no difference between effective instructional practices for majority-Indigenous classes compared to other disadvantaged classrooms; it's the dosage and intensity that needs to be higher.

There are many variables teachers cannot control, and are significant barriers to student learning in the Kimberley; diverting professional attention away from instruction. However, within teachers' control is what and how they teach — from the moment students enter the classroom to when they leave six hours later.

The capacity to form strong trusting relationships is the foundation of teaching, and particularly so in majority-Indigenous schools. However, research shows it is the instructional choices that teachers make that are the main source of positive influences on student achievement.⁵

This means being clear about what they want their students to learn and privileging evidence-based teaching strategies. To elaborate, teachers who control the learning environment through instructional design and practices begin by analysing the strategy, rule or knowledge to be taught, teaching the precursor skills directly and to mastery, while providing frequent opportunities for practice and checking for student understanding.⁶

Putting the focus on instruction first, rather than appealing to students' interests, context and

differences, swims upstream of the beliefs of some educators who assume catering for individuality is the key to motivating children to learn. The Kimberley project shows that students who feel competent and successful learners are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage with the increasingly complex demands of the classroom. Student engagement is a positive result of teacher effectiveness.⁷

For example, a Year 4/5 class at one majority-Indigenous Kimberley school were explicitly taught sentence structure and punctuation, vocabulary and figurative writing devices such as metaphor, simile and personification. When a visiting Poet-in-Residence asked the students to describe a 'lure', something associated with their chosen poetry topic of fishing, he was surprised to hear them say "luminous" and "enticing" — words their teacher had systematically taught. These students were so engaged they stayed back after school each week for a poetry writing club. They learned Tennyson's 'The Eagle' for an assembly item — and then recited it when their football team won the grand final 12 months later.

Effective and engaging teaching is very possible in remote communities. Research conducted on Australia's top-performing disadvantaged schools that have overcome the odds shows that high-quality instruction and school leadership is the best educational defence against disadvantage.⁸

The imperative to teach more in less time

To catch up to their city peers, students in majority-Indigenous remote schools need to learn more in less time. This means the same daily 'gold standard' instruction delivered to socially disadvantaged students must be increased in terms of the time remote children spend learning to read and write.

Put differently, teachers don't need to use different methods to what works in metropolitan disadvantaged schools. However, students in remote community schools need a more intense version to counter low attendance and pre-existing educational vulnerability that is the consequence of additive and amplified factors of social disadvantage.

On a recent school visit, I observed a teacher's Year 2 class demonstrate exactly the kind of higher intensity demanded in these conditions. He maintains a fast pace, instructional language and enthusiasm in order to minimise off-task behaviour; ensuring students are busy responding to prompts. Teachers don't keep up this pace all day, but during morning literacy and numeracy blocks, it's standard practice.

For any children learning to read, repeated opportunities to break words into sounds, revise letter-sound relationships and decode words builds automaticity through practice. Plus, for some students, who may ordinarily choose not to respond or

only speak when called upon, unison oral responding ensures participation. As children are never asked to do anything not already modelled by the teacher, errors are low and children's confidence and skills develop.

Teachers also need to carry out regular monitoring of student achievement that identifies those not progressing, and this smaller group of students need extra opportunities to learn. Providing small group intervention lessons, in addition to classroom teaching, increases the opportunities for practice and concentrates the focus of the teacher or AIEOs — who attend professional learning and receive the same coaching opportunities as teachers — on children who need the most support.

Any teachers will tell you they are time-poor in implementing the Australian Curriculum, and this pressure is certainly felt in remote community schools. Instructional time is precious and there is not enough time to cover everything, so Kimberley schools take a pragmatic view and timetable core foundational literacy and numeracy in the morning; when interruptions can be minimised, and students are most attentive. All learning areas are covered, but additional opportunities for reading and writing are never missed throughout the school day.

Redressing poor literacy can be achieved with the right methods

In the Kimberley, most children in remote communities speak Aboriginal English, a dialect of Standard Australian English. Some children also speak one or more local languages that may also be taught at school. Students from low-print/low-verbal homes, where the language they are learning to read is not spoken, need a strong emphasis on teaching oral language skills alongside teaching the precursor skills to reading. This includes reading to children, asking and answering questions, conversations about experiences, as well as learning new vocabulary. Children being able to say and understand words they will eventually encounter in books is a critical part of translating printed words to speech.

English is one of the most complex orthographies, with 26 letters and 44 sounds. Beginning readers need to learn this code and how it works. Children with poorly developed spoken language require properly-taught precursor reading skills to develop a conscious awareness of the sounds of English, learn how to say words, and understand their meaning.

It's not that teachers don't want the best for their students, they do; but many don't have the right tools or understand the need for the kind of rigorous teacher-led instruction needed to reduce adverse effects of student disadvantage on learning to read. Unfortunately, too many are trained or encouraged to employ discredited approaches to teach reading, such as 'Balanced Literacy' and 'Whole Language'. These approaches de-emphasise directly teaching phoneme awareness, letter-sound knowledge and systematic decoding. Instead, they favour using pictures, context or guessing to identify words.

Doing so is ineffective and inefficient in any context, but is especially so when working with children in remote communities — particularly when applied in trying to play 'catch up'.

On a recent visit, I observed a Year 1 teacher deliver an engaging reading lesson where she taught the precursor skills of phonological awareness, letter-sounds and systematic decoding instruction using clear instructional language. Students responded over

100 times in the 15-minute instructional sequence reading words and sentences, and the teacher coaxed a particularly reluctant student to also respond.

There is no question that students who are unable to read are a daunting prospect for any teacher, but many graduates and experienced teachers are ill-equipped to provide instruction to address this. When

I asked a teacher in a remote community about her students' reading skills she said: "They can't read, and they won't ever learn, so we work on the veggie garden."

However, young people can learn to read at any age; there's more to catch up on if they are older students — but giving up is not the answer.

Impact of otitis media

Some children's learning is also undermined by otitis media — a middle ear inflammation that can result in a hearing impairment. Commonly experienced by young children globally, inordinately high rates are found among Australian Indigenous children in rural and remote areas. Recent research indicates that Aboriginal children with a history of otitis media leading to hearing impairment are at higher risk of poorer auditory processing skills, attention, behaviour, speech and language, that can lead to poorer academic achievement in Year 3 of primary school.⁹

As learning to read depends on the ability to perceive speech sounds and differentiate between them, the impact of poor auditory processing caused by hearing loss means remote school teachers must devote significant time to teaching phonological awareness explicitly. Children who know the meaning of, and can say, simple words like *map* and *mat* must turn their

attention to their phonemic composition — that *map* and *mat* are comprised of three speech sounds and only the final phoneme (speech sound) is different — to apply the alphabetic code to read and spell these words.

In remote majority-Indigenous schools, sound amplification systems are standard and teachers wear microphones, but this isn't enough. The efficacy of literacy instruction essentially boils down to the methods used in teaching reading and writing. Without instruction that is explicit, intense and aligned to research findings, schools in socially-disadvantaged communities can find themselves applying band-aids to rapidly worsening problems as children slip further and further behind — resulting in many exiting primary school without the literacy skills to meet their needs.

Direct and explicit instruction is key to securing student learning

Precursor reading skills — such as identifying sounds in words, learning letter-sound correspondences and systematically decoding words by blending letter-sounds together — need to be practised. The most efficient and effective way to do this is through direct and explicit instruction.

This means teachers break down content in manageable units, use unambiguous language, provide multiple opportunities for practice, teach to mastery and regularly check for student understanding. When beginning readers respond at least 8 to 10 times per minute during an explicit lesson, teachers maximise children's opportunity to remember and learn. Further, teaching at pace minimises off-task behaviour, as children are busy responding.

Instructional models such as explicit instruction/direct instruction (unscripted) and Direct Instruction¹⁰

(scripted) have been consistently found to be effective.¹¹ Yet there is still opposition, despite five decades of evidence proving effectiveness of this teacher-directed approach regardless of student population (i.e., general education, special education, English language learners, rural, economically disadvantaged, primary, and secondary) or content area (i.e., reading, math, language, writing).

Those who eschew teacher-directed instruction put their 'feelings' about how they think children learn ahead of what the research proves. A common complaint is that because Direct Instruction and explicit instruction follow a predictable sequence, and require students to respond regularly and in unison, they stifle student creativity and teacher autonomy and impact negatively on teacher-student relationships. On the contrary, Hattie refers to scripted commercial programs and the work of Rosenshine, on

which explicit instruction is based, in this observation: “the rejection of direct instruction is a classic case of an immature profession, one that lacks a solid scientific base and has less respect for evidence than for opinion and ideology”.¹² Direct instruction (scripted and unscripted) produces superior results, and for majority-Indigenous community schools to not include this pedagogy is a tragic waste of instructional energy.

Regular attendance is precursor for any learning

It’s well established that consistent attendance at school is essential for learning. However, attendance rates in remote schools — particularly for Indigenous students — lag well behind the rest of the country and are either static or deteriorating. For some students, this is a matter of distance and transportation barriers. For others, regular school attendance is undermined by complex factors at home: trauma and transiency; family and cultural commitments; and extended and regular funerals.

Another factor is that Aboriginal children are brought up with a far greater sense of autonomy, so without pressure from home to go to school, attendance can initially depend on the qualities of the teacher who greets them at the classroom door.

To put the impact of truancy in perspective, 80% school attendance is the equivalent of missing one day a week per year that over the primary years equates to missing 1.5 years of school. Even being five minutes late per lesson quickly adds up to 25 minutes per day, 1,250 minutes per term and 84 hours per year.

Schools are keenly aware of the critical role they can play in encouraging students to regularly attend. There are many enticements to come to school that include special reward excursions and canteen vouchers. Schools strive to be as open, appealing and as positive as they can.

Discipline

In any school, in any part of Australia, discipline is about teaching children how to behave so that they and their peers can learn effectively, and this is no

different in majority-Indigenous remote schools. Trauma has no postcode, but the signs of anger, attention-seeking and withdrawal are often more visible in children from remote and regional schools because school staff live and work in the same communities where more children are affected. The same consistent rules that apply in any classroom are established to create a positive learning environment that is structured and orderly. But rather than assume children are choosing not to comply, teachers in remote schools are adept at recognising that the causes of poor behaviour are often a lack of appropriate social and emotional skills that in the absence of formal modelling outside of school, need to be taught like academic skills.

However, there is a lot of room for flexibility — without reducing expectations — when teaching children who have experienced trauma. For example, when I observe a reading lesson, I often see children facing away from the teacher or pulling a hoodie over their head. Rather than break the flow of instruction, and draw attention to the student, staff keep teaching and observe that the student may be withdrawing into themselves as a coping mechanism. Interestingly, the students often continue responding with their peers and, over time, when the teacher responds in a calm and compassionate way, these same children sit appropriately, facing the teacher.

High expectations

Children often grow up to mimic the behaviour, beliefs and attitudes of their parents. In remote communities, parents sometimes have a different view about education, so it is schools who set high expectations for students and communicate this to families. Through individualised programs and actions that show teachers genuinely care, students are more likely to feel capable and competent.

And while long-term goal setting is part of the vision schools communicate to students and their families, children in majority-Indigenous schools may not see that far ahead. Instead, low expectations are countered in a way students understand. Before NAPLAN testing, I heard a teacher encourage his class: “Come on, let’s show that mob in Canberra who wear ties that we are as good as anyone else.”

Indigenous educational disadvantage in the school

In certain respects, remote majority-Indigenous schools can have much in common with those in the cities, but in other ways they can be completely foreign. These schools may be smaller versions of their suburban counterparts, but they are just as well-resourced. Classrooms have the latest technology and materials and offer cool respite from the relentless heat and humidity of the wet season.

When my pre-service teacher students at university see video of the classroom instruction in remote community schools, their preconceived notions of remote schools are challenged when they see how engaged the students are, how rigorous the instruction is and how competent the students are. And as one insightful student commented:

At the start of my university course, we were shown a PISA graph (Programme for International Student Assessment) of where Australia was ranked compared to other countries. I found it ironic that we didn't then go on to learn much about the instructional approaches from the countries who outranked Australia, like Hong Kong and Singapore. Instead, constructivism and other child-centred practices like collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning dominated my training. And then I saw explicit instruction in action in a video from one of the remotest classrooms in Western Australia being delivered by an expert teacher and I thought "that's the teacher I want to be".

The truth is that the challenges facing majority-Indigenous remote schools mostly boil down to human — rather than physical — infrastructure. It's not about the technology in classrooms or the new buildings, it's about what goes on inside and this means employing teachers with great relationships who can deliver high impact pedagogy.

Staff workload and expectations

Staff in remote majority-Indigenous schools provide many ancillary services to support students' needs. There is only so much time in the day, and even with the support of committed staff, there is much that falls on schools to deliver.

While providing breakfast is increasingly common in Australian schools, in majority-Indigenous schools staff often prepare hot lunches in addition to laundering school uniforms. Staff are mindful not to inadvertently replace the role of families and promote a culture of dependence, but children who are hungry cannot learn. Then there are the administrative tasks unique to remote community schools, that are as varied as writing bushfire plans, inspecting teachers' accommodation, driving to the nearest major centre to collect the mail and groceries to run breakfast and

lunch programs and picking up new staff from an airport up to four hours away.

Learning time is precious, so too much school time devoted to eating breakfast, getting changed into uniforms and completing teeth brushing and nose-blowing routines (to address recurring ear infections) encroaches on classroom instruction. When students enter the classroom, learning should begin. By contrast, when morning routines are slow and interruptions to teaching are frequent, learning suffers. Maximising learning means getting students into class and keeping them on task; which takes the co-ordinated efforts of teachers and AIEOs.

In fact, you can set your watch to the instructional routines of the teachers and AIEOs of the four youngest classes of students in one remote community school. As I walked by the Kindy and Foundation classrooms to observe the Year 1 teacher, I saw engaged students regularly doing something: pointing at a whiteboard, saying sounds, reading words, singing and talking to their partners on the mat before turning back to face the teacher. A student who arrived late was immediately shepherded into the room and onto the mat by the AIEO. Compared to my first visit to this school — where I noticed that classroom doors had latches high on the inside to prevent children leaving the room unexpectedly — the level of student engagement has changed dramatically.

School leadership really counts

While the principal of any school must be able to manage students and staff, curriculum and financial resources, much more is expected of leaders in remote community schools, for which there is limited training. (And some circumstances for which there is no training: I saw a principal chase a kangaroo out of the early childhood playground and another find a python in a toybox.)

Because teachers in remote communities often don't have families with them, principals must provide social and emotional support, which blurs the lines between the start and finish of the school day.

Many of the most effective principals begin as teachers in remote schools and develop their skills in different remote contexts before stepping up as leaders. Others learn on the job, and some don't last. Sadly, high turnover of principals can be disruptive for schools, students, and entire communities. In one remote community, there have been 9 principals and 26 administrators filling five senior roles in the past four years.

Unlike metropolitan schools, where parents may have never met the school administration, in remote

schools, it really matters. Principals are more than educational leaders, most help community members to connect to government support, others assist with tax returns and when the community gathers for a funeral, the school usually provides chairs and any printed materials.

This is why Aboriginal communities really care about principals, particularly those who build relationships and stay. Leadership is everything in remote schools because — beyond being an instructional leader, understanding curriculum and striving for high academic outcomes — if the local Aboriginal community doesn't trust you to create a safe and welcoming environment for their children, it's an uphill battle.

Getting and keeping the best teachers

Attracting and retaining highly motivated and capable teachers is a challenge in all schools; but this is compounded in remote majority-Indigenous schools.

In addition to the qualities expected of all teachers — ability to develop relationships, patient and caring personality, knowledge of learners, dedication to teaching and capacity to effectively engage students — other qualities are needed in remote schools. Will this person take a genuine interest in the community and give something of themselves whether through sport, art or music that makes them more than a teacher? And will they stay? These factors largely determine whether children choose to come to school.

While a stereotype, there is some truth in the vernacular classification of remote teachers as either 'missionaries, mercenaries and misfits'. Mercenaries are focused only on their pay; missionaries are motivated by humanitarian convictions that may be at odds with local culture or apologists for problematic conduct that is tolerated by communities and normalised to children such as misogyny or violence against women; and misfits are ineffective teachers who are unable to function productively in any classroom.

If the wrong teacher is employed, the effects can be devastating. When a new kindergarten teacher was appointed in one remote community school, attendance dropped by 50 per cent.

This means that selecting the right teachers is critical, but further complicated because not everyone wants to work in a remote community. Environmental conditions — including heat, humidity and cyclones — are a part of life in the Kimberley. Amenities vary between communities and while some have a store, others are over 150 kilometres away from the nearest petrol station, or can be cut off from medical, dental and social services for weeks after weather events. There's no McDonalds and in some dry communities, nowhere to have a drink. Some remote community

schools struggle to keep teachers for a year and some face an annual turnover of new staff.

And there are other challenges working in a remote community. One teacher shrugged off being broken into the morning I turned up to her classroom to observe her teach. During her morning swim at the pool was enough time for intruders to turn her house and belongings upside down. "They only took food. It was probably kids looking for a feed." Every time I visit this remote community, a teacher tells me about a break-in. While burglary can occur in any suburb, it appears staff must be willing to accept behaviours that have been normalised in the community

Non-government remote schools in the Kimberley experience similar turnover. In one, four principals have come and gone over three years. The most recent achieved success but was then relocated after nine months. In contrast, one of her predecessors was a secondary art specialist, who admitted that he struggled to know what good reading instruction looked like — and left a term later.

Conditions are better for teachers in government remote schools than in non-government ones. Government staff are paid more and enjoy better conditions, receiving one term's paid leave for completing a three-year contract or six months paid leave for completing four years. As the non-government school principal observed: "It's harder for our system to attract teachers, but for many it's a calling."

Improving teacher preparation, training and development

Some beginner teachers find it difficult to adjust to remote schools. Education sectors and their administrators are aware of these challenges and provide induction programs, but some teachers underestimate the challenge of moving away from familiar routines, supports and social networks.

In addition, there are required skills that many pre-service teachers unfortunately aren't equipped with during their training. As is true elsewhere, principals describe the professional learning provided to graduate teachers as 'variable' in quality. But the stakes are higher when it comes to teachers in remote majority-Indigenous schools needing the best possible preparation for the job.

Remote schools don't have the luxury of teachers choosing from a pedagogical buffet of approaches; they need to align their practice with methods that have been demonstrated to work.

While most support the teacher-led approach we advocate in the Kimberley Schools Project, others actively discourage it in favour of more constructivist approaches. As one principal noted: "There needs to

be a consistent message. I cannot have graduates questioning the way we teach because someone who has never worked in a remote school tells them otherwise.”

Many teachers turn to professional development to plug gaps in their knowledge — but this training can sometimes reinforce approaches ill-suited to the conditions they work in. A graduate noted the disconnect: “I spent my entire weekend doing professional learning where the focus was on inquiry-based learning. In fact, the presenter specifically mentioned problem-based learning as his favourite approach to teach maths because it involved co-operative learning. I have a class of 10 and 11 year olds who can barely read the problem let alone do the math required to solve it. There was a token mention of teaching maths directly.”

Another graduate, who attended a different session offered a similar reflection: “In the time I have been teaching I have not consciously referred to anything I learnt during this training. I remember sitting in the module with one of the graduates from my school and we both just said to each other “Do they even know about Explicit Instruction?” The strategies that were suggested for implementation in the classroom included KWL charts, T-Charts, Fish-Bone, and Placemat. The only one that was Explicit Instruction focused was “Think-Pair-Share” but that was just randomly suggested, rather than part of a teacher-led instructional model. I thought at the time, this presenter has never worked in my context.”

Recent changes to how Australian universities must prepare pre-service teachers to teach early reading are a significant shift towards equipping graduates with the skills they need to teach any child to read. This now requires a stronger focus on teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension according to research. However, this will take time and ‘retrofitting’ an education system that presently has teachers who do not feel confident teaching reading according to evidence-based practice will continue to have a negative impact in all schools.

Unfortunately, ideological beliefs about how to teach reading dominate discussions on Indigenous education, and it is ironic that some of the most vociferous critics have never taught in remote communities.

In addition to inconsistency in broader teacher training, the compulsory Indigenous education units universities offer also vary in quality and relevance. Remote principals note that the focus is often weighted on history and culture that is general in nature, and antiquated ideas about learning styles where it is assumed that the preferred way to teach Aboriginal students is outside, through story telling or ‘hands on learning’. While all children are schooled in ways of learning in the culture of the communities

they grow up in, this is context-specific and children should not be pigeonholed into a racially-defined pedagogy.

Rather, effective beginning teachers need to be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of all their students — including Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and believing — but still hold high academic expectations for those they teach. AITSL Standards 1.4 and 2.4 must be delivered across all teaching units and assessed on teacher practicums if we are to see teachers graduating that can better prepare to understand the Aboriginal context. Because of delayed speech and language development and the deleterious impact of social disadvantage, many Aboriginal children start school behind their non-Aboriginal peers. To enable these children to catch their peers, there needs to be a sense of urgency and intensity in the delivery of instruction. Anything less is pedagogical racism.

Early childhood care

Children in Western Australia can attend four-year-old Kindergarten for two and a half days each week and in some remote communities five morning sessions are offered. As well as providing opportunities for sensorimotor exploration, social interactions with peers and adults, language and cognitive development, children and their families learn to feel safe, supported and welcome at school.

While such early experiences are not a guarantee against later difficulties, pre-school is also the time when school behaviours and morning routines become habitual. Appointing the right early years teacher is an investment in children’s school readiness and patterns of attendance that often predict subsequent school attendance.

Access to child care or ‘zero to three’ programs can be both a convenient luxury in the cities, but in remote communities it is critical to the developmental nurturing of young children. Early intervention is substantially more effective than intervening later in life with education programs. The opportunity for young children to explore activities that may not be available in the home, is also an opportunity to normalise healthy parent-child interactions and increase parents’ skills and confidence.

Culture, language, and place

Every community in the Kimberley is unique, and so is the culture of each school. Some have one language group, and some have up to five. Some do not want ceremonies performed at the school, others do. Some want the Aboriginal flag flown, some don’t. It’s the responsibility of the principal to know, and engage with, the community’s culture — not least so students can see it, and themselves, reflected in the

school culture. A strong leader who builds positive relationships, and commits to high expectations and improved academic outcomes, establishes the foundation of an effective school.

Effective leaders in remote schools see their role through a lens that seeks to understand and respect the cultural values, attitudes and behaviours of their context.

This can mean that interactions between educators and community are more nuanced; underpinned first by an awareness of the complexity of children's lives, then the requirement to attend school. Contrast the principal I overheard greeting a student who had returned after a long absence — "How good is it that you've come in. What have you been up to? I've been missing you." — with a response that reprimands and judges. By opening the door to a conversation about what's going on in the young person's life, this principal responds with understanding.

Being culturally responsive is also about telling the family things are going well. For many Aboriginal families there's nothing historically positive about the arrival of a government car, but when it is an AIEO visiting to commend a student after school, it builds relationships. As one grandmother noted: "You're paid

to be in this relationship, I'm not. So you coming here in your own time shows me you care."

The use of Aboriginal language in schools brings Aboriginal parents and grandparents into classrooms and draw the community and school closer. Many schools support AIEO training to teach Aboriginal language. Children in remote communities may speak one or more Aboriginal languages, Kriol, Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English. As English is likely to be a second language, school can be like having to speak and read a foreign language for six hours a day. Schools are sensitive to this and respect and celebrate Aboriginal language.

Remote Community Schools teach Aboriginal language — often more than one — depending on the availability of community members who speak it. Some schools follow the direction of the community schools and teach 'two-way' bilingual programs where children learn to read and write in their first language alongside English; however many schools are asked to teach in Standard Australian English. While there's a broad consensus that Indigenous students need to be taught English to fully participate in society, everyone agrees Indigenous languages need to be preserved. As an AIEO told me: "We want our children to walk in both worlds."

Indigenous educational disadvantage in the home

While parental unemployment and low wages, family violence, alcohol and substance abuse, overcrowded houses, trauma, malnutrition and preventable health problems such as gastroenteritis and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder can be found in any socially-disadvantaged suburb in Australia, in majority-Indigenous remote communities in the Kimberley, these factors are additive and amplified. Like the weather, their impact is oppressive and pervasive. Unlike the weather, they are not seasonal.

The common denominator in remote majority-Indigenous schools is poverty. Not always, but far too often, children from low income households are educationally vulnerable before they start school. Limited exposure to books, poor vocabulary and underdeveloped spoken language conspire within a fragile family structure where hunger, poor health and unstable households can have a deleterious impact on school attendance and learning.

Supportive educational conditions in the home are undeniably critical to improving outcomes, but

teachers are sensitive about expectations that involve parents' confidence in literacy and numeracy; such as reading to children or helping with schoolwork.

Home study environment

Without a quiet place to study at home, doing homework or other recreational education — reading books or watching documentaries — is simply impossible.

Crowding and inadequate housing are linked to poor physical and mental health. Overcrowding not only impedes children's ability to do homework and get adequate sleep but can result in higher rates of infectious diseases such as rheumatic fever and eye and ear infections, emotional stress and conflict in the home. When children's living conditions are neither healthy nor safe, the work of schools cannot be fully effective.

Compounding many Indigenous students' ability to undertake homework and other educational activities

at home is a contested demand on their time, including cultural commitments such as caring for siblings or the elderly, attending to lore and grieving rituals.

Parental engagement

Students are more likely to succeed educationally if their family and caregivers encourage them to attend school and are involved in their learning. In remote communities, this early influence from home is often shaped by the attitudes of older siblings and adults towards school. This means positive parental engagement can range from taking an interest in what happens at school and participating in decisions that affect their child's education to volunteering as a parent helper in the classroom.

This will not happen without the trust and support of local AIEOs, who are the constants in some community schools. These staff — often women — juggle the demands of family responsibility with work and are the social conduits between home and school. A respected AIEO can do more to navigate the challenge of starting over with a new principal and

teaching staff by engaging with the local community members, than any individual staff member on their own.

Family dysfunction and social breakdown

Unfortunately, some families are unable to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children because their own lives have been marred by the effects of intergenerational trauma, which — together with social, economic and cultural inequality — have led to chronic drug and alcohol abuse.

Sadly, many children, families and educators have become desensitised to family dysfunction, violence and abuse.

A teacher from a remote community told me that during a school assembly a parent decided to settle a dispute by lashing out at another mother. Had this occurred at a city school, counsellors would have been deployed to manage the aftermath of shock. In many remote communities, aggressive behaviour is commonplace, and many children witness parental relationships that are characterised by abuse and domestic violence.

What needs to be addressed to overcome Indigenous disadvantage

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children attending majority-Indigenous remote community schools, are far more reliant on the instructional choices made by schools and teachers in order to be academically successful. Indeed, what works best for the most disadvantaged students in Australia, works best for all. However, antiquated ideas about how best to teach Indigenous students, coupled by the dominance of constructivist methodologies, may unintentionally create a culture of low expectations. No teacher I have ever met sets out to teach in a way that isn't the best, but without the right tools, teachers will keep 'doing their best' until they know better.

In 2017, eight schools joined the Kimberley Schools Project, and through professional development and in-situ coaching implemented an approach to teaching literacy based on explicit instruction that was supplemented with Direct Instruction curricula such as *Spelling Mastery*. The teachers changed the way they taught beginning reading to align their practice with current research on the most efficient and effective way to teach core literacy precursor skills like phoneme awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

By 2020, eight grew to 24 schools, the largest number in one Australian jurisdiction to implement an evidence-based approach to teach literacy. This means when children and teachers move from school to school they are not met with different approaches and programs, but rather a consistent and effective pedagogy that teaches first, breaks content into manageable parts and provides regular opportunities for practice.

Teachers of four to eight year olds are given a scope and sequence and daily lessons to teach phonological awareness and systematic decoding instruction and along with their colleagues who teach Years three to six, coaching and sample materials to support teaching reading fluency, comprehension, spelling, vocabulary and writing. By standardising the instructional approach, less is left to chance. The pedagogy also minimises off task behaviour and reduces the likelihood that students will be cold-called to respond to a question that they may not be able to answer. Finally, the instruction is fast-paced, engaging and enjoyable.

And while there is great scope for individuality in terms of personality and style, the teaching

remains relentlessly instructive across all schools. For some new graduates, who admit they do not feel confident teaching reading and other aspects of literacy, the professional development and coaching support provided by the Kimberley Schools Project is welcomed.

Failure to confront some of the misconceptions graduates have about effective teaching in general, and specifically teaching Indigenous students, threatens our ability to overcome educational

disadvantage. The tried and tested methods described in this paper are not always privileged in initial teacher education, despite what the research reports.

Addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage is possible and in some ways it's similar to what's shown to work in other disadvantaged education contexts, and in other ways there are additional efforts needed. What's similar is the pedagogy; but with greater dosage and intensity, despite ideological beliefs which sabotage the effort of educators.

Conclusion

While Indigeneity confers social and economic disadvantages on children who attend remote community schools, ineffective teaching shouldn't be an added burden. There must also be a greater sense of urgency about redressing possible language vulnerability in early years, particularly if English is not spoken at home.

Leading schools is demanding but rewarding. The work is diverse, including closer relationships with community and with teams in schools, and there are many successful leaders setting the pace and standards. We just need more of them.

Graduate teachers, unlike graduate lawyers and doctors, continue to serve an apprenticeship or residency in their first years of employment, mindful that they are still developing the skills their profession requires. Teachers are required to be experts from the beginning, particularly in remote schools, and as the Kimberley Schools Project has demonstrated, there is a need for targeted professional development and coaching that makes graduates more job ready.

Endnotes

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- 10 When denoted with initial capital letters, the term Direct Instruction (DI), refers specifically to the suite of commercially available scripted teaching resources by Engelmann and colleagues, whereas lower case 'direct instruction' and 'explicit instruction' are terms used to describe particular techniques that emphasise the teacher's role in breaking tasks down, maximising the time students are actually engaged, and actively participating, in learning and that therefore result in higher student achievement (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986).
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Lorraine is the President of Learning Difficulties Australia and the Chair, Deputy Chair and Board Member of three high-performing WA schools. Since 2017, she has developed and presented professional learning on evidence-based literacy strategies for the Kimberley Schools Project in the north of WA in remote community schools. In 2021, she commenced work in a similar project with Catholic Education, Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn. In 2019, Lorraine received an Order of Australia (AM) for her significant contribution to tertiary education and the community.



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