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Please cite this case as: Staines, Z. (2021). From the ground up: developing the Cape York Girl Academy school to re-engage young women and mums from remote Australia. Australia and New Zealand School of Government John L. Alford Case Library: Canberra

From the ground up: developing the Cape York Girl Academy School to re-engage young women and mums from remote Australia

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Keywords: Indigenous education; Indigenous policy; Young mothers; School disengagement; Cape York; remote community

Related Articles:

Staines, Z. and Jose, F. (2018). *Overcoming social disadvantage by investing in Indigenous teenage mothers. Solutions Journal*, 9(2).

Staines, Z. and Moran, M. (2019). *Complexity and hybrid effects in the delivery and evaluation of youth programmes in a remote Indigenous community. Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 79(1): 3-25.

Teaching note: This case has a Teaching Note associated with it. To access a copy, please email caselibrary@anzsog.edu.au with a request and citing the title.

Abstract

Differences in school attendance and completion between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (from herein, 'Indigenous') and non-Indigenous students have been well documented (DPM&C, 2020). Multiple strategies have been developed at the state and federal levels to improve school attendance and completion for students in remote Australia, but many of these have been focused on individual behaviours rather than structural barriers to educational engagement and, thus, have had varied and generally limited results.

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This case study describes a different response, developed from the ground up by Indigenous Cape York women. The response moves beyond the individual behaviours of students and their families (e.g. choosing whether to attend school or not) to identify and address structural barriers, such as the suitability of educational environments for Indigenous students, and the non-educational supports needed to scaffold (re)engagement with school. The experience of designing and implementing this response re-emphasised the necessity for greater empowerment of Indigenous peoples and communities to design policies in ways that are strengths-based, and which value and are responsive to their own needs and aspirations. It also demonstrated the specific challenges of ground-up policy design, particularly where there are conflicts between grassroots-level solutions and top-down frameworks.

Case study

The challenge: low school attendance for Indigenous students in remote Australia

For some time, there has been strong community concern about the rate at which young, predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (from herein 'Indigenous') people across remote Cape York, in Far North Queensland, disengage from school. This reflects wider patterns of lower school attendance, including lower Year 12 completion, for Indigenous Australian students (DPM&C, 2020; ABS, 2016).

The state and federal governments have developed multiple strategies to improve school attendance and completion for students in remote Australia. Recently, these have involved recruitment of local attendance officers who work with families to encourage attendance, or reductions to or management of social security payments (e.g. unemployment benefits, family benefits) as a penalty for non-attendance (e.g. see NIAA, 2020; Goldstein and Hiscox, 2018; Scott et al., 2018). However, these approaches have had limited results (NIAA, 2019; Goldstein and Hiscox, 2018). A possible reason is that they do not grapple with complex structural barriers for Indigenous students who wish to attend school, such as relatively severe experiences of social disadvantage linked to the trauma and ongoing effects of colonialism, and the (related) fact that schools are sometimes unwelcoming places for Indigenous students (Nakata, 2007; Moodie, 2018). Even though state and federal governments have sought to address these structures to some degree (e.g. Department of Education, 2020a, 2020b), remote Australian students' attendance and completion has nevertheless remained relatively low.

In our conversations with Indigenous leaders and community members from across Cape York during 2013–2015, the need for Indigenous-led responses to low school attendance and completion was frequently raised. People were particularly worried about young Indigenous women. Repeatedly, we heard: "There are options for our young men, but what about our young women?" Many of the leaders and community members who were saying this were also quick to connect the challenge of school disengagement to experiences of teenage pregnancy, whether it was that young women disengaged and then fell pregnant or fell pregnant and then disengaged. Community members were firm in their belief that young women needed targeted support so that they too could choose to stick with and/or re-engage with their schooling, regardless of whether they became mothers in their teenage years. Our conversations also pointed to the need for an option that would be Indigenous led, culturally appropriate and thus, supportive of, rather than jarring to, young Indigenous women wanting to re-attend school.

We needed to decide a pathway forward, including:

- 1) How ground-up policy design might be undertaken, with Indigenous Cape York women leading the way to propose a different strategy that would improve school attendance and outcomes for young Indigenous women and mothers, and
- 2) Whether a ground-up approach might pose specific challenges for policy design and implementation, and how we might overcome those challenges.

Reflection activity: Take a moment to pause and think. Imagine you are a policy advisor in a not-for-profit organisation and are faced with deciding the pathway forward from here. What approach would you take and why? Write down a list of options for strategies you might pursue.

Developing ideas for a new approach, with decisions driven from the ground

Our initial conversations triggered a two-year-long intensive and iterative research and consultation process, where we sought to identify the supports already available to young women on the Cape, identify best-practice approaches in Australia and internationally, and understand the different options that might be best suited to the Cape context. We (that is, myself as part of a team employed within a not-for-profit Indigenous organisation, under the leadership of an Indigenous female CEO from Cape York) visited Indigenous schools and flexible learning centres in Queensland, Victoria and the Northern Territory to understand their own approaches to engaging young Indigenous students; particularly young women who were also teenage mothers. We spent time in Cape York communities talking to community members, service providers, and education staff about methods that were most and least successful. We also engaged with researchers from universities in Australia and the United States to discuss models of educational and wellbeing support for young mothers and their children that could set them up for success across their lives.

The policy design was led from the ground up; at the heart of the approach was a strong commitment to ensuring it was Cape York Indigenous women's voices that were guiding the policy design. Through an Indigenous women's steering group and via ongoing community consultation, we continually brought ideas back for iterative testing and development. The Indigenous women involved provided crucial leadership around how research-informed practice might translate to the local context, what challenges might crop up, and what resolutions might be found. They were the decision makers about how the strategy would and would not look; it was these conversations that planted the seed for the policy design, and which continued to nurture it into existence.

Mapping out a pathway forward

It was decided that the strategy needed to provide a meaningful and comprehensive alternative — it couldn't be a second-rate option that put students at any disadvantage to their peers in the mainstream system. It was ultimately decided that the strategy would take the form of a proposal for a new Indigenous school, designed to intensively support young Indigenous women from the Cape and beyond to: 1) re-engage with their secondary schooling in a welcoming and safe environment that celebrated their Indigenous culture, languages and heritage, 2) improve their own general health and wellbeing as well as that of their child/ren — including through (re)connection with culture, and 3) support mothering students' knowledge-building regarding early-childhood development and learning needs for their babies/children. The School would need to have a comfortable boarding facility with the option of girls living on site with their child/ren, but also with the ability to accommodate visits from female family and kin.

The proposal for a school aligned with the desire for the option to be a real and genuine chance for Indigenous students to pursue their studies in a way that did not disadvantage them. However, it also meant that the strategy had to be fitted into an existing and relatively rigid policy framework, so that it could pass through the non-state schools accreditation process and receive approval to operate. This involved the preparation of a significant accreditation application, presentations to state authorities, and applications for capital works funding to prepare the proposed school site, which was located at Wangetti Beach, about a one-hour drive north of Cairns. It also involved liaising with a range of health and wellbeing professionals and services (many of which were also not-for-profit Indigenous organisations), to determine how the School might also draw on and integrate their support to create a comprehensive wellbeing model.

The plan was to start the school small, with an initial cap of 20 students, to enable testing and iterative improvements to be made. Once accreditation approval was received, we started a recruitment drive across Cape York, sending out flyers, relying on word-of-mouth networks, and also circulating short videos via social media and other channels. The School subsequently received expressions of interest to attend from Indigenous students across a variety of remote communities.

Opening a new School and tracking some promising early outcomes

The School opened in early 2016 under the name 'The Cape York Girl Academy'. It had three core elements: 1) an accredited curriculum for both junior (years 7–10) and senior (years 11–12) high-school students; 2) a wraparound health and wellbeing program; and 3) specific programming for mums and children to support positive attachment.

Click [here](#) to hear students talk about their own experiences at the School.



[6:01]

The health and wellbeing programme has since evolved to incorporate a range of practices and services, including: morning circle practice (Dadirri), meditative yoga, music song lines, life skills, culture circles and more (CYP, 2020). In these (and other) ways, students' heritage and culture are embedded in their everyday school experiences; at its core, the school seeks to celebrate students' identities as strong Indigenous women and mothers. For mothering students, on-site early childhood education and care, as well as support with understanding and building positive attachment, is interwoven with daily learning.

So far, the school has seen excellent outcomes for its students, including dramatic improvements in school attendance. For the first cohort of students, attendance rates went from an average of ~15% before coming to the School, to an average of ~70% after the first year. In Semester 1 2020, the 22 students who were enrolled had an average attendance rate of 86% (CYP, 2020).

Nevertheless, there has also been attrition along the way, with some students making the choice not to return due to different factors (e.g. changes in family circumstances). For many, being at the Girl Academy — even for a short time — provides an opportunity to receive sustained healthcare, which is often otherwise less available in the students' (mainly remote) home communities. This can also be supportive of school attendance; for example, diagnosis and treatment of a profound hearing impairment made one student's engagement with school much easier and, as a result, their attendance improved from 0% in the year prior to attending the School to 93% during their first year at the School. Mothering students have also seen improvements in the health and wellbeing of their child/ren and babies (Staines and Jose, 2018; Personal communication with Cape York Girl Academy).

Improved school attendance has also resulted in improved educational achievement, including school completions. The School has now seen multiple students graduate their Year 12 studies; at least two of the School's graduates from previous years had 0% attendance for years before joining the School, both having also experienced complex histories of disadvantage. This year, five further Year 12 students have also graduated; of these, three were previously expelled from other schools and one had not attended school for at least three years before joining the Girl Academy (Personal communication with Cape York Girl Academy).

Where bottom up meets top down: negotiating hurdles along the way

Any successes of the Girl Academy model are a direct result of its responsiveness to the express desires of the Indigenous peoples it was designed by and for — something that has continued to be embedded in its design through the leadership of Indigenous staff and management, including via the School Board. At the same time, however, the School's ultimate design means it needs to also comply with and be guided by state-imposed (and often rigid) guidelines and frameworks. While this ensures that the School provides an accredited educational option for students, it also poses some challenges.

Many students attending the Girl Academy have experienced severe circumstances of disadvantage and have diverse and complex health and wellbeing needs. They come to the Girl Academy because these needs have not been met in the mainstream schooling system, nor beyond school (which can be a symptom of poorer overall availability of services in remote Australia, but also disproportionate rates of socio-economic disadvantage still experienced by Indigenous Australians) (AIHW, 2018). More generally, the literature recognises that multi-layered and intensive support is a key factor for successfully re-engaging young women and teenage mothers in their schooling (Hoffman and Vidal, 2017; Kalb, Le and Leung, 2015; Smith, Skinner and Fenwick, 2011; Boulden, 2010). Nevertheless, this poses some specific challenges regarding alignment with mainstream school funding mechanisms (Staines and Jose, 2018; Personal communication with Cape York Girl Academy).

For some students, 'soft entry' learning trajectories can be helpful in ensuring they receive individualised and intensive case-managed health and wellbeing support before they can deeply engage and learn. These allow students' educational engagement to be gradually increased over time as they become more familiar with school routines and are supported to address other learning barriers. Because The Girl Academy is registered as a 'Special Assistance School' (SAS) it has greater flexibility than mainstream schools, but to be considered a full-time student (and to trigger 100% funding entitlement and curriculum compliance), students need to do 'catch-up' studies to cover any time

they are not in class (for example, including time spent in health/wellbeing activities). Otherwise, students can be deemed part time, which can result in the School receiving reduced funding for the student, even though they still live at the School and participate full-time in the Girl Academy program. The catch-22 is that for some students, not being able to engage in this additional scaffolded support may lead them to disengage with the School altogether.

Ultimately, providing students who have diverse needs with appropriate wraparound support and services requires a certain amount of flexibility and agility that is often not catered for in mainstream schooling systems and frameworks.

The funding options for embedding wraparound health and wellbeing support in the first place are also challenging. As described above, these are a key aspect of the School model and enable students to achieve outcomes they might not otherwise be able to. However, funding for these services is not widely available via mainstream student recurrent funding mechanisms. As a result, the School often needs to rely on its ability to attract funding support from elsewhere — for example, via philanthropy or other government grant schemes — to support students' health/wellbeing needs, even though it is a core ingredient of the School's success in (re)engaging students.

In a more general sense, the above funding scenarios illustrate the challenges that are sometimes faced when ground-up, community-led programs need to be fitted into top-down frameworks that tend to be decided upon by predominantly non-Indigenous policymakers. Where misalignment occurs, it is often the community that must find workarounds (such as procuring philanthropy to fund much-needed health/wellbeing services in the Girl Academy) rather than the policy frameworks that shift. Consistency of approach across the schooling system is a means of ensuring basic standards are met and avoiding the potential risk that local-level experimentation will fail. However, the fact that the mainstream system, which overwhelmingly embeds and reflects non-Indigenous (settler) social norms, so regularly fails Indigenous students and is frequently experienced as alien and unsafe (Rahman, 2013; Nakata, 2007) means that there is good justification for local-level, Indigenous-led experimentation in Indigenous schooling. More than this, though, it also signals a need for broader structural change so that the mainstream 'norm' is not unsafe for Indigenous students.

At a more general level, these quandaries tap into ongoing debates about Indigenous input into, and leadership over, policy making and implementation (Davis, 2017). While challenges around public participation in policymaking are not new, the case for Indigenous Australians is a particularly special one; as a three per cent minority in a political system that still fails to recognise their never ceded sovereignty, a greater say in shaping the policies that directly affect Indigenous peoples' lives is not a significant ask. And as the Girl Academy example shows (alongside countless others), policies that are designed by and for Indigenous peoples to address the needs of Indigenous communities are likely to achieve success.

Looking to the future

In 2019, the Girl Academy received a National Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia award for Excellence in the Provision of Indigenous Student Health and Wellbeing. It was also recognised as a best practice approach in a recent State Government Inquiry (YSVA Steering Committee, 2017: 30). However, it is only a small school operating in one part of Australia. In contrast, the challenges addressed by the School are more widespread (Hoffman et al. 2019).

There is a continued need for additional comprehensive solutions for young parents to (re)engage with their schooling; for Indigenous students, these options also need to be culturally appropriate and respond to community wishes and desires. The continued development of an evidence base around this (and other) approaches will be important in tracking towards better outcomes overall. However, the broader lesson from the Girl Academy experience is also that when Indigenous peoples, communities and organisations are empowered to design policies and programs to meet their own specific needs, these are likely to achieve success. In turn, this speaks to broader ongoing debates about the need to empower Indigenous Australians to have greater input into national policymaking — something that has been repeatedly recognised and is long overdue.

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Endnotes

¹ For example, overall attendance was 82% for Indigenous students versus 92% for non-Indigenous students in 2019 — a ‘gap’ of roughly 9% during primary school, but which widens to about 17% during high school. Year 12 completion is also still lower for Indigenous students. Although this has improved by 21 percentage points between 2008 and 2018–19, the gains were mainly seen in urban areas with major cities having an average Year 12 attainment rate of 85% versus 38% for very remote Australia in 2019. (DPM&C, 2020).

¹ In 2016, 49.5% of all individuals aged 15+ years across Cape York had not completed schooling past Year 11, compared with only 24.9% across Queensland (ABS, 2016).

¹ The ‘options for young men’ being referred to tended to include educational re-engagement programs that focused on sporting (e.g. bringing predominantly young males back to school through intensive football (and other) training pathways).

¹ This connection between teenage pregnancy and school disengagement has also been found in other studies (e.g. Evans, 2004).

¹ For an example of one video used, see here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06of-RQIOi8&feature=emb_logo Also see here for a more recent promotional videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIS_p_pRJTw and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BVhPyE94JQ&feature=emb_rel_pause

¹ *Dadirri* is a word and practice arising from the Ngan’gikurunggurr and Ngen’giwumirri Aboriginal languages from the Daly River Region (Northern Territory). The practice involves “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness” (Cape York Partnership, 2020).

¹ When students stop attending, the School seeks to maintain contact with them and their families, with the aim of eventual re-engagement (Personal communication with Cape York Institute and Cape York Girl Academy).

¹ See here: <https://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/our-people/board-members/>

¹ For instance, under the SAS model, students can complete their two (equivalent) years of senior schooling over three years.

¹ One avenue is to tap into the Queensland Government’s Education Adjustment Program (EAP), which was designed to provide top-up funding to support students with specific health needs, but the information gathering, documentation and verification process can be burdensome and there is no up-front funding to support schools to undertake this.

¹ While engaging students from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances to ensure ‘every student succeeds’ is a key priority of the Queensland Department of Education’s Strategic Plan (2020–2024), and the Australian Government has also committed to Closing the Gap on school attendance and outcomes for Indigenous students, these kinds of barriers remain key challenges for the Girl Academy and likely also for other schools targeting cohorts of students who experience disproportionate levels of social disadvantage.

¹ See here: <http://www.ieba.com.au/cape-york-girl-academy-wins-excellence-in-the-provision-of-indigenous-student-health-and-wellbeing/>

¹ Culminating, for example, in the Uluru Statement from the Heart proposal (which follows decades of persistent requests and demands by Indigenous peoples across Australia for greater input into and leadership over national policymaking).

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