

School Attendance and Retention of Indigenous Australian Students


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Assumptions

- School completion is good
- Staying at school is good



Reasons for non-attendance and non-completion

- Parents and carers
- Society
- Schools
- The government
- Students
- Education systems
- Local economy
- Cultural
- Research

from Reid, 2008



Consequences of non-attendance and non-completion

- Poor school achievement
- Fewer post school options
- Unemployment
- Criminal activity

A student who misses more than one full day per week on average loses two years of education over 10 years.



Sources of data/information

- Schools, Australia (ABS)
- National Report on Schooling (MCEEDYA)

Methods of assessing levels of attendance and engagement are imprecise so attendance and retention figures should be interpreted with care.



Attendance

- 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 NT and WA, the difference was well over 10 percentage points across all years, rising to over 20 percentage points by Year 10.



Retention

- Retention rates increasing, but still lower than for non-Indigenous students.
- In 2009, apparent retention rate for Indigenous students from their first year of secondary school through to Year 12 was 45% compared with 77% for non-Indigenous students.
- From 1999, the apparent retention rate to Year 12 increased by 10 percentage points for Indigenous students and 4 percentage points for non-Indigenous students.



The nature of evidence

1. Systematic reviews (meta-analyses) of multiple randomised trials
2. High quality randomised trials
3. Systematic reviews (meta-analyses) of natural experiments and before-after studies
4. Natural experiments (quasi-experiments) using techniques such as differences-in-differences, regression discontinuity, matching, or multiple regression
5. Before-after (pre-post) studies
6. Expert opinion and theoretical conjecture

All else equal, studies preferred if published in high-quality journals, if they use Australian data, if they are published more recently, and if they are more similar to the policy under consideration.

- Robust evidence-based research with a prominent Indigenous component is contentious. The term 'research' has a poor reputation among many Indigenous people and communities 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 worldviews of Indigenous peoples and communities.

What has been tried?

- Categorisation by source, type
- Scholarships, financial support & support structures
- Sanctions
- Hooks, incentives and rewards
- Cultural relevance
- System based
- School based
- Other



What works?

- Although there is a substantial body of national and international literature that has helped build our understanding of the issues, much of it is not based on what would normally be taken as credible evidence.
- No simple answer; real change occurs over time.
- A complex issue requiring particular inputs from the individual, the family, the community, and the school.
- Some programs take account of the full range of factors implicated in the participation and engagement of Indigenous students in school. Other programs focus on just one or a small number of factors.



Implications for policy and practice

- Continue small, contextualised investigations, but more large scale research needed
- Interagency partnerships that go beyond the educational arena should be encouraged
- Clear guidelines for the evaluation of attendance and retention initiatives should be developed
- National attendance and retention data collection procedures should be improved; need consist methods across states and territories for identification of trends, and evaluation of whether targets are being met

- Must be able to disaggregate data according to location and other contextual factors to allow identification of what works for specific contexts.
- Non-enrolment in school is just as important as non-attendance. Need to identify non-enrolled children and work with their families and communities to support them to engage with schooling.
- Practitioners and policy makers need to be well versed in the importance of cultural factors in schooling. They must continue to develop policy and programs that take account of Indigenous cultures and history, and they must develop expanded understandings of what it means to participate and engage in education.