



Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research  
The Australian National University

Education, Training and Indigenous Futures  
CAEPR Policy Research: 1990-2007

## Research Summaries

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## Reference No. 47

Summarising: Fordham (2007), *Resourcing Indigenous Primary Education*

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990-2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

The MCEETYA report and associated research summaries are available at <[www.anu.edu.au/caepr/education.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/education.php)>.

**Title of Research:**

Resourcing Indigenous Primary Education

**Research Publication:**

CAEPR Work-in Progress Seminar Presentation, September 2007

**Name of Researcher(s):**

A. Fordham

**Time period:**

2006-2007

**Geographic location:**

Urban, regional and remote Australia

**Methodology:**

Using a sample of 14 primary schools, with significant Indigenous enrolments, ranging from:

- 100% in a small remote community school; to
- 44% down to 16% in large urban primary schools.

Information about resources, staff and curricula was gathered and more intensive study of ten of the primary schools undertaken. In addition discussions were held with senior staff responsible for the delivery of Indigenous education.

Note that this work is still underway but the study and its findings to date have been included in the report due to their relevance to Domain 2: Quality Teaching.

**Aims:**

This paper describes the major resourcing issues facing primary school Indigenous education, identified by principals and staff (in the above sample of primary schools).

**Selected findings and insights:**

The study confirmed the **low socio-economic family backgrounds** for most Indigenous students enrolled in these schools. In almost all of the schools, there were significant numbers of students living in families where there was domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse, serious health and nutrition issues, involvement with the justice system and lack of parental supervision at night. These characteristics tended to occur as a cluster of behaviours, and not occur in isolation of each other.

- Primary schools were a focal point for addressing many of these types of issues rather than government welfare agencies who, it was argued, held prime responsibility.

Features of **Indigenous family life**, such as large extended families and high transiency, even in urban settings, impacted on learning:

- The low level of literacy, numeracy and general education among many parents and carers limited the extent to which they could assist their children's learning;

- Overcrowding and lack of learning materials in the home limited the opportunity for home study;
- Low income levels resulted in larger than normal numbers of students without learning materials and needing to be supported by either the school or individual teachers; and
- The large degree of autonomy given to children resulted in reduced capacity of parents or carers to encourage school attendance.

Nevertheless Indigenous parents tended to **value their children's education** in most of the schools visited, especially in regard to literacy and numeracy acquisition.

Schools located in remote areas of Australia present **substantial establishment and maintenance issues** and therefore require high levels of infrastructure expenditure. Not only do such infrastructure costs relate to normal school buildings but in many instances they also include houses for teacher accommodation.

**Recruitment and/or retention of suitable teachers** was a major challenge:

- In small, very remote schools where there was often little competition among applicants for teaching positions and even for principal positions; lack of competition for teacher positions also applies to primary schools in large town centres.
- Few if any newly recruited teachers had had adequate preparation in the teaching of Indigenous students;
- The recruitment of **Indigenous teachers** was not seen as a priority issue for principals, nor Indigenous teachers into leadership positions, due to lack of availability and quality training.

**Indigenous teacher aides** assisted in literacy programs, promoting cultural inclusivity within curricula, community and family liaison, behaviour management and creating cultural awareness among other staff.

- Generally, availability was limited and recruitment of Indigenous teacher aides seemed quite 'informal', often reliant upon family connections already established with the school. They tended not to have any formal qualifications and often had quite low levels of educational attainment such as, at best, completion of Year 10.
- Whilst almost all principals agreed on their positive contribution, some teachers did not, questioning the reliability and skills of the Indigenous aides with whom they worked, as well as the manner in which they tended to 'group together'.

Regarding the **curriculum**, several principals noted a perceived need for increasing the educational aspirations of Indigenous students and to minimise their belief that they could not achieve in literacy, numeracy and in other curriculum areas.

- All schools placed a priority on **literacy programs** for Indigenous students, both as part of their core teaching allocation and also with additional assistance from either specialist teachers or ITAS tutors.
- **Cultural appropriateness** of school curricula and the extent to which curricula, and pedagogy are **aligned** with cultural values and aspirations was a topic where opinions varied widely across the schools.

**School attendance** among Indigenous students was, or recently had been, of concern.

- there were some students who attended school very infrequently. There was also a group of students where their attendance was highly irregular. This latter group of students might attend for a period of a couple of weeks and then not attend for a several weeks or more. As a result there might only be left a core of regular attendees.

A wide range of strategies were being used to **improve school attendance** but as one school pointed out:

- a whole of school strategy was required that involved school-community relations and involvement, behavioural management and student welfare and consideration of the appropriateness of curriculum and pedagogy.

Principals generally did not support linking school attendance to other issues such as welfare payments or additional resources and facilities through policies such as **Shared Responsibility Agreements** without consideration being given to social welfare factors impacting upon Indigenous families, as well as cultural issues.

The **transition from primary to secondary** schooling presented significant difficulties for some students. Whilst the primary schools were able to provide a more stable learning environment for the students, the subject-based secondary schooling, involving many teachers and teaching styles, did not provide such stability and support.

- This often led to misbehaviour, absenteeism and general school alienation on entry to secondary schooling for some students.

Since the abolition of **Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA)** Committees, the **level of parental engagement** with schools had decreased, leading principals in some schools to develop new approaches to involving parents in school affairs – such as in an advisory capacity or active involvement in decision-making.

**Factors inhibiting community involvement** in school governance or less formal arrangements such as information evenings were identified by principals:

- *Value placed on education and parental responsibility*, where parents felt that they did not hold any responsibility for their children's education – that was the school's job.
- *Experiences as a child with 'western' schooling*. There were a considerable number of adults whose experiences with schooling and institutions were such that they could not attend a school meeting – it was too distressful an experience, reminding them of their own childhood.
- *Recognising cultural differences*. Several non-Indigenous senior staff and Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) pointed out that to increase parental involvement in schooling, schools had to be more adaptive. For example,
  - Recognise the rich oral tradition of Indigenous peoples and spend more time in developing ideas;
  - Realise that much school language is alien to many Indigenous peoples, that notions of benchmarks, assessment, accountability and western pedagogy are not understood. As one AEW emphasised – be careful not to bring more stress into their already stressed lives; and
  - Spend time with communities in their space and, in turn, create a 'comfortable' space for Indigenous adults within the school.

The amount of time (and hence **resources**) spent by principals in strengthening school-community involvement **should not underestimated**. And in several schools it must be acknowledged that this did not bring substantial positive results.

The extent to which elders were involved with the school generally varied from no involvement to some involvement on special occasions. At no schools visited were they significantly involved in school governance

or in a significant advisory capacity, although in one school an elder held significant responsibility within a cultural program and in another was a key person in liaising with elements of the community.

- A difficulty was identifying those elders who held responsibility and, who could speak on behalf of the community, especially in a 'governance' sense.

#### **Educational implications:**

This study has a wide range of educational implications dealing with:

- the welfare-related pressures placed upon schools which takes resources away from their educational responsibilities;
- how best school principals might approach the task of increasing parent/carer engagement and developing educational partnership agreements;
- the difficulties of staff recruitment in remote areas and the role of Indigenous Education Workers;
- strategies to improve school attendance; and
- general resourcing issues which impact on primary schools, especially those costs associated with remote localities. [policy] [quality teaching] [school leadership] [at risk students]

#### **Relevance:**

*Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life*

*Domain 2: School and Community Educational Partnerships*

Cross-cultural understanding of purposes and value of education

Use and negotiation of educational partnership agreements between schools and communities

*Domain 3: School Leadership*

*Domain 4: Quality Teaching*

Significance of curriculum

Cultural understanding

Adoption of pedagogies to develop high expectations and outcomes

Explicit teaching of English literacy and Standard Australian English

Attracting and retaining high quality teachers for classes with Indigenous students, especially in remote areas