Links Between Senior High School Indigenous Attendance, Retention and Engagement: Observations at Two Urban High Schools

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This paper aims to provide some insight into the links between attendance, retention and engagement of Indigenous senior students in an urban environment. A study of 58 students from two urban high schools during the period 2009–14 was undertaken. The study used data from a variety of school records, as well as informal interviews with students. It is argued that while the broader comprehensive statistical studies are useful there is a need to have some more, in depth, localised studies in urban schools. Results of the study support the link between absences and student disengagement. There was a clear positive link between retention to Year 12 and superior attendance. In many individual instances, the links between attendance, retention and engagement were complex. There was also a need to place emphasis on alternative paths for some of the disengaged group rather than just trying to improve attendance. These paths included employment opportunities, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and post school traineeships or apprenticeships. This paper points to the need for further longitudinal studies in urban high schools to study the long-term life outcomes for Indigenous students.

❚ **Keywords:** Indigenous education, school attendance, retention, engagement

Background

This study was initiated as a result of some informal discussions between Norta Norta tutors at two urban New South Wales (NSW) high schools concerning successful schooling with senior Indigenous students. Norta Norta means 'lifelong learning' and is a funded programme which provides senior Indigenous students with individual tutor assistance in Years 11 and 12. The main aim of the senior programme is to increase Indigenous participation and success at the senior school level. These tutors have been involved at the schools since 2009. One school drew students from more affluent suburbs while the second school had a broader socioeconomic range of students.

Literature Review

This paper concentrates on outcomes for senior Indigenous students in an urban school setting so the literature review confines itself to those parameters, except where more general studies are deemed to have applicability. Indigenous people need to have some control over the research areas that affect them. The Indigenous community deemed attendance, retention and engagement as

important research areas (Harslett et al., 1999, p. 36). The importance of these research areas is relevant to Indigenous educational outcomes (Biddle, 2006; Bourke, Rigby, & Burdken 2000; Doyle & Hill 2008, p. 28–31; Helme & Lamb, 2011; Munns, Martin & Craven, 2008).

Attendance statistics are usually measured by days absent or percentage attendance. Overall, Indigenous attendance rates are below those of non-Indigenous students and Indigenous attendance rates decrease in relation to remoteness (see Table 1). Year 11 and 12 attendance rates are approximately 6–12% below those of non-Indigenous students. Given these attendance rates, it is important to isolate the reasons for low attendance; to find strategies that improve attendance; and to find the links between attendance, retention, engagement and educational outcomes.

The evidence from Australian-based programmes to improve Indigenous attendance is not strong (Maynard et al., 2011; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). They found only

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TABLE 1

Secondary School Attendance (a) Age 2006, Remoteness

Age (yrs)	Major cities	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote
			Indigenous		
15	77	77	76	67	53
16	60	58	60	49	34
17	44	38	37	29	16
			Non-Indigenous		
15	90	89	89	88	82
16	82	79	77	75	61
17	68	62	58	52	39

(a) No of persons attending as a percentage of all persons (Purdie & Buckley, 2010, p. 5).

moderate evidence among the many studies and the lack of evidence may be because of the complexity of issues involved in student attendance. The various state Departments of Education have documentation which provides schools with strategies to improve attendance; however, there is little evidence that these strategies work. The Queensland Department of Education study (2013, Performance Insights: School Attendance, p. 29–33) pointed to the decrease in attendance (including Indigenous students) at the secondary level. The attitudes of Aboriginal students towards school attendance and retention is generally positive (Godfrey, Partington, Harslett, & Richer, 2001; Nelson & Hay, 2010). Unfortunately, this does not necessarily result in high Indigenous attendance (see Table 1).

Schwab (1999) indicated that researchers failed to study the successes in Indigenous education. Polesel & Rice (2012) reported to the COAG Reform Council its findings with a paper titled 'Increasing Student Retention in Australia. What Works?' This attempted to partially answer Schwab's findings. The paper traces the historical aspects of governments' attempts to improve retention rates for senior high school students and provides a number of case studies to outline system and local attempts to improve retention. There had been minimal improvement in retention rates until recently. Indigenous participation rates fell about 30% below that of non-Indigenous students (Polesel & Rice, 2012, p. 2). However, the 2015 Prime Minister's 'Closing the Gap' report indicated that the senior retention rate was the only educational target that was met (Closing the Gap, 2015, p. 17). There was still substantial variance between states and regions with remote schools retention still well below regional and urban schools. What has not been explored are the reasons for the improvements, especially as the same report indicated that the literacy and numeracy levels for high school Indigenous students had only marginally improved.

Purdie and Buckley (2010), when analysing research evidence related to Indigenous attendance and retention, indicated that there was little high-quality evaluation literature. This has now been partially addressed through some detailed studies carried out which have looked at the factors affecting educational outcomes, with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These studies have looked at various combinations of community, school and personal factors. The meta analyses study by Hattie (2009) and his follow-up book for teachers (Hattie, 2012), while not specifically related to Indigenous students, provided a basis for others to use these findings to specifically target Indigenous students. Munns, through the 'Fair Go' project and Munns in Craven (2011) outlined the factors that would assist in improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Personal relationships, community links, specific teaching strategies were outlined. Despite the above mentioned studies, there are few studies aimed specifically at senior Indigenous students. The 'Fair Go' project concentrated on primary school aged students, while Nelson and Hay (2010) studied junior secondary students. Hattie's contention is that, when it comes to teaching, most effective strategies work with all age groups. What Hattie's work does not do is provide alternatives when in-school strategies fail. Nelson and Hay (2010, p. 63) indicated that traditional educational pathways need to be challenged. They support a transition across different school and vocational pathways for those students who need alternatives.

Another important document was the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF, 2015) Compendium of Best Practice. This publication outlined best practice for boarding schools enrolling Indigenous students at the high school level. It provided strategies in key areas such as induction practices, relationships, the school environment, mentoring and learning support. It also addresses the challenges of retention, homesickness, behaviour, equity and the challenges in the home community. The importance of this document is that these boarding schools have an overall Indigenous retention rate of approximately 90% which is well above the national results for Indigenous retention. The positive features of Munns' and Hattie's work is that they are concentrating on what occurs in the classroom; more specifically, the relative value of specific school and classroom practices.

There is an abundance of research that indicates the problems relating to attendance, engagement and retention; however, it is only in very recent years that research has started to produce studies that provide school personnel with evidence-based research that relates to specific teaching strategies. This should assist schools to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Despite these advances, there is still a dearth of research that specifically relates to the senior high school cohort.

Study Outline

According to the 2006 census, 2.2% of the NSW population is Aboriginal and of that group 53% live in the

Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong crescent. If we took in the regional towns in excess of 20,000 population, this increases to approximately 80%. This study limited itself to the links between attendance, engagement and retention of senior Indigenous students in urban schools. The study provides a number of specific case studies together with a broader discussion of the total cohort of students in the study.

Information related to attendance, retention and engagement was collected at the school level, from a census of 58 students who had entered Year 11, completed Year 12 or left school during the senior years in the period 2009–14. Statistical data included school attendance records, case study records and information gleaned from record cards. As part of developing individual Pupil Learning Plans (PLP's), students were interviewed and asked about assistance required, post school aspirations, cultural issues and their attitudes towards school. These interviews were informal, allowing students and parents to provide information with interviewers only intervening to prompt students. Information was aggregated and no individual names were used. Students in the four case studies were all over 16 years of age and gave verbal consent for the use of case studies as long as real names were not used. The tutors hold approximately 20 case studies. School permission was gained to collect school-based statistical data.

The following is a summary of the main issues raised by students, teachers and Norta tutors during the period 2009–14. These issues related to students and to school programmes:

- Attendance was a major issue. There were two components to this problem, whole day attendance and partial attendance. Partial attendance relates to students who signed in to school but chose to miss specific lessons during the day, signed in late or left early. Whole day absences were a concern especially when a significant proportion was unexplained.
- Engagement with the school (or education in general) posed serious difficulties for some students.
- Students with seemingly similar socioeconomic and family backgrounds reacted quite differently to the senior high school situation resulting in widely varying outcomes.
- The mentoring aspect was considered important by the students. They reacted positively to mentoring with many students indicating that mentoring helped to maintain them in the school system. The presence of an AEO (Aboriginal Education Officer) and other Indigenous teachers was important in this process.
- In academic terms, there were improvements of between 10–30% for some students in specific subject areas, while other students made no observable academic gains.

- Engagement and motivation were issues and there appeared to be a strong correlation between motivation and academic success.
- There was a clear and consistent set of needs that have been identified by the students. Essay writing, research skills, completion of assignments, explanation of curriculum content and exam techniques were the main identified areas of concern and these were consistent despite wide variations in academic ability and socioeconomic status.
- During the past four years, there has been increasing cooperation between tutors, school careers advisers and outside employment agencies. This has been well received by students, many of whom have gained apprenticeships or traineeships before the completion of Year 12. This appears to be a strategy worth exploring especially as the mandatory leaving age in NSW is now 17.

Case Studies

Tutors hold about 20 case studies. The four outlined in this paper represent a cross-section of the more challenging cases.

Case 1

Two students who were close friends were ready to leave school in Year 11 after some traumatic events in their lives. The AEO and one female tutor talked the students into not giving up on school. Both completed their Higher School Certificate (HSC) and were the first persons in each family to achieve this level of education. When interviewed and asked to review their senior years, both girls pointed to the tutoring, and the mentoring that went with it. Tutoring occurred inside and outside school. There were many very difficult times during these two years and attendance was still an issue, with the girls often on the verge of 'giving up'; however, they persevered. Both had attendance records in the 60–70% in Year 11; however, by Year 12 when they were more engaged this had improved to 80–85%. Without intervention, both girls admitted that they would not have returned to school for their senior years. The individualisation of the intervention stood out as a reason for its success. The mentoring aspect, together with help for the academic side of school, led to success.

Case 2

This student changed school for the senior years because of bad influences (real or perceived) at the previous school. The student found it difficult to find friends, was suspended for a short period and attendance was sporadic. After intervention by the Deputy Principal, a meeting was called that involved the school careers officer, Norta tutor, Deputy Principal, parent and student. It was agreed that the goal was to concentrate on moving the student from school into the workplace. There were many

disappointments; however, the school persevered and eventually the student was placed in a part time traineeship. School attendance was very poor (30–50%); however, attendance at the workplace was 98%. Attendance at tutoring rose to 80% with the Norta tutor supervising the student's business course at the workplace. Even though the student did not complete Year 12 in 2013, the intervention was deemed successful because there was a successful transition from school to the workplace. Here is a typical example where the school was not the appropriate place for the student.

Case 3

This is another case where a student moved school for the senior years because of issues (again, real or perceived) in the previous school. This student did have life aspirations and had ongoing issues within the living situation. The student initially rejected assistance. Attendance, both whole day and part day, was an issue as was completion of assessment tasks. The student accepted assistance when we focussed on student needs and those needs did not relate to school, they related to a need for employment. Again, there was school intervention and the Norta tutor and the school careers advisor worked with the student to find a suitable apprenticeship. The student left school after completing Year11 requirements, and now has an apprenticeship in a chosen field. Again, the individualisation of the intervention was what made it successful. Another feature here was the perseverance of staff. Despite initial rejection staff worked to find a motivating factor and eventually succeeded.

Case 4

This student was in Year 10 and was in receipt of assistance under the junior component of Norta assistance. Attendance was a major issue. The student received major assistance from the school Indigenous unit; however, it became obvious that the school setting was not suitable for the student. There were family issues and in-school issues. The student found the school too confining and, after a number of in-school disciplinary issues, the school accessed a Pathways programme at the local TAFE which was felt would be more suitable. This student has excelled at TAFE and in Nov. 2013 was in receipt of an award from TAFE. She ranked highly in all subjects at TAFE. She was successful in gaining a traineeship in 2014. The student returned to school in 2014 and successfully completed the HSC in 2015. The student will be the first in the family to complete Year 12. It is worth noting that the intervention for this student began in Year 10, before senior school was attempted. This case study was included to show that, in some situations, intervention and alternative pathways may need to be considered before a student reaches senior high school.

These four case studies have some similarities. The similarities are as follows:

- Tutors tailored the intervention to the individual needs as expressed by the student.
- The personal relationship between tutor and student was important. The mentoring aspect was considered beneficial to the student outcomes.
- Acceptable (to the student) options need to be found then a strategy to pursue those options needs to be developed.
- Attendance was still an issue; however, it did not prevent successful outcomes.
- Each student was willing to accept assistance. In some instances, there was coercion or perseverance by school personnel in the initial stages.
- Each of these students had nonschool issues as well as problems in school.
- The issues of attendance and disengagement need to be seen as warning signs; however, they were not necessarily indicators of failure.
- All of these students were the first in their families to attend senior high school.
- Teaching strategies had to be tailored to the individual; however, many strategies appeared to be universal.
- Cooperation between teacher, tutor, student and careers staff was essential.

It is important to outline the types of strategies that worked. In all cases, the first aim was to develop a rapport with each individual student. This took time and it was important to be consistent in the approach. Cooperation with the classroom teacher was essential so that everyone was moving in the same direction. When it came to tutoring, it was possible to plan each lesson to maximise the benefit to the student. For example, most Indigenous students did not ask questions in class unless the teacher sat with them. In a tutoring situation, the lesson can be structured so that the student becomes accustomed to ask questions. If a student had to prepare an essay then the lesson was carefully structured. The first question to the student might be 'How do you plan an essay?' Very often the student will lack confidence and answer with a negative answer. 'I don't know', 'I'm not sure'. At this point, it was important to provide a plan (scaffold) for the student. Most classroom teachers provided scaffolds and the tutors used those scaffolds. The tutoring advantage was the one-to-one or small group nature of the intervention. The lessons could be paced to the individual and extra lessons planned, when required. In the end, the student completed a task, and met a deadline successfully. That was the aim: to provide success. It was the successes that were most likely to re-engage the student. It was important to note that many of the students were low achievers. Two of the tutors had specialist remedial training; however, at no stage was a remedial programme provided. The students were expected to complete the senior course so there were

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Attendance in deciles	No of students/percentage					
	Yr 10		Yr 11		Yr 12	
11–20%						
21–30%			1	2%	1	4%
31–40%			2	4%		
41–50%			2	4%		
51–60%	3	9%	4	8%	1	4%
61–70%	3	9%	10	20%		
71–80%	6	17%	6	12%	4	14%
81–90%	10	29%	10	20%	9	30%
91–100%	13	35%	15	31%	15	50%
Totals	35		51		30	

Totals are not equal as some students did not complete year 12, others transferred while some are still in Year 11 (2014). Percentages are rounded. Some students had incomplete records.

high, but not unrealistic, expectations. In some instances, a school-based programme was not appropriate, and alternative pathways had to be found. This approach was consistent with Nelson and Hay (2010) and Polesel and Rice's (2012) findings.

These case studies were all successful and they were chosen to illustrate that success can occur irrespective of other negative life issues that students face. Some of these difficulties were very serious. It is important to note that not all interventions were successful.

General Discussion

Attendance rates can be measured by percentage attendance or by days absent per annum. Table 1 shows senior Indigenous attendance patterns and points to the fact that Indigenous attendance decreases with remoteness. Bourke et al.'s (2000) study is one of the comprehensive studies that looks at Indigenous attendance and the reasons for daily absences (See Table 5). This table sets out the number of days absent in groupings and compares indigenous and non-Indigenous absences. It clearly shows that, for secondary students, Indigenous students have both a general higher absence rate, and at the 30 days plus absence grouping, it is about three times as high as non-Indigenous students. As Bourke et al. (2000, p.12–16) notes the more remote the school the higher the absence rate. They also try to group the many and varied reasons for absences (Table 5).

Tables 2 and 3 show the Indigenous attendance patterns at one of the study schools. It was useful to compare these results with the national results and try to come up with logical reasons for similarities or differences to the national figures. Indigenous attendance measured by days absent has always been above that of the non-Indigenous popu-

lation and Table 3 certainly shows this trend to be present at one of the study high schools. Even though there are nine occasions in the table where Indigenous attendance is higher than that of the non-Indigenous population, the whole school results for the period 2006–2014 indicate that the average Indigenous attendance was significantly lower than non-Indigenous attendance.

Year 11 attendance rates were significantly worse than the non-Indigenous attendance and this was an area of significant concern. Year 11 results in Table 2 provide a stark contrast to Year 12. Only 51% of Year 11 students have an attendance rate in excess of 80%, whereas 80% of Year 12 students have an attendance rate in excess of 80%. One factor in NSW is that students are required to be at school until they are 17 years old unless they are in full time employment or an alternative education programme. One of the difficulties with this policy is that a significant number of students in Year 11 may not want to be at school so the group may have higher than normal disengagement (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and this is exhibited by increases in both full and partial day absences.

One of the positive results was that Year 12 Indigenous students, in five years out of nine, managed to have attendance rates close to the non-Indigenous cohort.

Most school systems now have computerised attendance records which can indicate the total number of partial absences as well as the particular lessons that are missed. Both schools in this study have this facility and comprehensive interviews have been held with all students who have had attendance issues (see Table 4).

Tables 4 and 5 need to be treated with caution because data collection techniques are quite different. Any comparisons have some limitations. Table 5 is collected from official statistics and research indicates that many aboriginal parents have reservations about 'authority' figures such as Departments of Education or schools. The data collected in Table 4 came from school records and discussions with individual students. Only Indigenous students with poor attendance were interviewed and the interviews were not based on a specific set of questions. Indigenous students provided many of the answers during informal interviews where they were not in any fear of discipline. One could contend that these answers were more likely to be correct; however, the interviews discussed absences in general, not every individual absence. If more than one reason was given, all reasons were tabulated.

There were some clear trends related to student absences. If we look at Table 4, issues 4, 5 and 9 together, there was a picture of disengaged students who did not want to be at school and this points to a clear link between attendance and engagement. It was useful to look at some of the individual successes from this group of students. Of the 25 students with attendance issues (i.e. with less than 80% attendance), six have completed Year 12. Of those who have left before Year 12, three have apprenticeships or traineeships, two have left without employment

TABLE 3

Days Absent — Indigenous Students — One Urban High School

Year		Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9	Yr 10	Yr 11	Yr 12*	Av. days Absent	School	Enrolment Indig	%
2006	School	17.0	21.3	23.4	23.0	19.9	17.1	21.1	1061		
	Indig.	14.9	14.2	35.9	27.0	25.5	16.0	25.4		67	6.3%
2007	School	17.5	21.7	23.1	22.2	20.7	16.0	21.1	991		
	Indig.	32.1	23.7	41.3	32.2	31.2	15.8	31.7		62	6.3%
2008	School	16.3	20.3	22.0	21.7	17.1	18.5	20.1	1036		
	Indig.	31.1	23.4	21.6	29.6	23.5	18.7	25.7		65	6.3%
2009	School	13.9	15.0	20.5	17.4	19.5	17.7	17.5	1001		
	Indig.	22.9	29.1	7.6	28.2	44.7	26.8	26.9		50	5.0%
2010	School	15.0	14.5	19.1	20.6	22.6	16.0	18.4	1005		
	Indig.	22.7	19.0	34.8	9.2	33.7	26.0	26.1		55	5.5%
2011	School	14.5	20.3	19.3	27.3	21.9	19.0	21.1	1026		
	Indig.	11.0	40.9	29.5	65.7	26.5	19.1	38.7		51	5.0%
2012	School	15.9	18.3	24.6	22.0	31.1	16.9	21.8	1000		
	Indig.	31.0	50.8	35.4	45.5	56.4	21.6	42.5		46	4.6%
2013	School	19.8	25.5	29.5	35.6	32.0	18.3	27.3	968		
	Indig.	36.3	63.0	95.2	37.3	59.4	13.8	49.0		57	5.9%
2014	School	13.8	18.6	26.6	29.4	25.2	17.3	21.8	1079		
	Indig.	21.4	41.5	58.9	64.1	47.8	36.0	45.0		66	6.1%

<u>NB</u> *Av. enrolment worked on av. of Terms 1, 2, 3 (Year 12 not counted in term 4).
**Av. days absent worked on total data for the 4 terms.
*** 2013–14 includes a Junior campus (Years 9–10) for students requiring an alternative school structure.

TABLE 4

Reasons for Absences as Provided by Senior Students* — One Urban HS

	(a) Whole day	(b) Partial
Issue mentioned by student	%	%
(1) Sick	88	65
(2) Ongoing physical or mental health issue	35	35
(3) Slept-in	35	35
(4) Negative reaction to school (specific or general)	59	59
(5) Negative reaction to particular subjects/teachers	76	65
(6) Carer role in the home	29	12
(7) No specific reason/don't know	29	12
(8) Visiting relatives out of town	18	0
(9) Avoiding discipline issue at school	53	24
(10) Bullying or lack of social contacts at school	12	6
(11) Issues at home	53	24

*Only senior students who have had attendance issues have been mentioned in this table (17 students) — students who left school before Year 11 have not been counted.

or enrolling in further education, four have enrolled in TAFE, five will be in Year 12 in 2015, one transferred and one left for full time employment and three left school without explanation. In Table 5, this disengaged grouping is not mentioned. One could raise the argument that it is unlikely that a student or parent is likely to give the reason for an absence 'did not want to go to school' or a related explanation as this would be a negative for the family. The disengaged was the most significant grouping when students were interviewed informally without the threat of a sanction.

When we look at partial absences two trends were apparent. Of the students who got to school late 'slept in' was a common excuse as were excuses relating to missing morning assembly or health issues. Of the students who left early, excuses related to disengagement were most

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Reason	Non-Indigenous students		Indigenous students	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
	%	%	%	%
Illness (doctor)	2.3	1.8	1.0	0.7
Illness (parent)	42.5	40.1	15.9	16.4
Family/Social	19.2	19.2	18.4	18.3
Unexplained	36.0	38.9	64.7	64.6

(Bourke et al., 2000, p. 15).

prominent, while excuses related to attending a medical appointment or caring for family members were mentioned in a minority of cases.

To provide a contrast, 31 senior students in both schools who did not have attendance issues were monitored. Twenty eight have completed Year 12, two left to take up employment opportunities and one enrolled in TAFE. To put it in statistical terms, 100% of that cohort remained in the education system or moved into employment. These figures certainly support the oft noted concept that attendance is a significant factor in the likelihood of students completing senior high school. More broadly, however, the whole concept of completing Year 12 needs to be questioned. As we have seen above, many students who do not complete Year 12 go on to further education or employment so these students shouldn't necessarily be seen as failures.

Another set of factors were the family issues (Table 4: Issues 6 and 8). This is also mentioned as Family/Social in Table 5. Interviews with students indicated the importance of family ties to indigenous families. Many families return to their home for sorry business. These absences are often extended (7 days plus) and it is rare that the students attend any school during this time.

One observation that could be made relates to parental involvement and the effect that parental involvement has on improving attendance. Records were analysed to find out what involvement of parents occurred when attendance was an issue. Only senior students were studied so these observations should not be used as a generalisation for all students. In all cases, there were attempts by Head Teacher Administration, the AEO or tutors to contact parents. In extreme cases, there was involvement of Regional Office personnel. Contact was by phone, face to face meetings or discussions with the student. None of these interventions led to a positive **long-term** change in behaviour by **senior** students. On some occasions, there was a short-term positive effect but students soon reverted to previous attendance patterns. This brings into question the value of time consuming meetings to try to improve attendance as it may not be attendance *per se*, that is the problem. In some instances, senior students did not want

to be at school and the school would be better advised to seek some alternative pathways outside school for these students. Alternatively, the school needs to look at ways to re-engage the student in the schooling process.

From the above discussion, it should be apparent that, when looking at school attendance, we need to delve into the complexities outlined, if we are to improve the present situation. It would be useful to have some longitudinal studies that map Indigenous students' attendance and their post school education or employment so that we can better understand the role that attendance plays in determining successful outcomes outside of school. A successful outcome cannot just be measured by Year 12 completion statistics. It is a much more complex issue which may require some broad strategies that target the organisational level (Government, Education Departments) combined with some localised strategies that schools can use. Despite all of the strategies and programmes used over the past 40 years to improve attendance indigenous attendance at school is still below non-Indigenous attendance (see Table 1).

In the study schools retention from Year 10 to 11 was 86%. If we look at completion of Year 12, then 56% of the Year 10 cohort completed Year 12. Even though attendance is a major factor why students do not complete high school, the individual results from Tables 3 and 4 are not all negative. Despite poor attendance, some students have furthered their education or taken up employment or furthered their education at TAFE. We followed three students who have very poor attendance records. All three students now have an apprenticeship or traineeship. One has 98% attendance at her traineeship, while another has 100% attendance at the apprenticeship. Re-engage and attendance improves although it may be that the re-engagement occurs outside the school situation.

The issue for researchers and school authorities is that we need to be careful about suggesting that completing Year 12 is the aim for everyone. It clearly is not. It can be argued that forcing disengaged students to remain at school through legislation or community pressure is unwise. More cooperation between the school, parents, employing agencies and further education institutions to map pathways for individual students might be more productive. Again, it is doubtful that there is a single answer. The work of Hattie and Munns mentioned earlier indicate that re-engagement can also occur with changes to teaching practices. Successful strategies are likely to be varied and answers tailored to the individual situation might be a preferred option. Polesel and Rice's (2012, p. 14) state:

> Overall, then, increasing retention rates in Australia is likely to require a combination of system level approaches with school-level changes. In addition, specific programs tailored to the needs of the most at-risk students will be necessary to ensure the best outcomes for young people. From the students in the study, eleven indicated that they would have left school except for the intervention of the AEO and/or tutors.

This is an indication that mentoring had a positive effect on retention. Of those eleven students, seven completed Year 12, three left during their Year 11 to take up full time employment, and one left school without full time employment. The mentoring aspect of intervention, and tailoring a post school plan for each individual, was considered important. The use of the school careers officer and outside employment agencies was also an important part of the process.

Over the period 2009–14, all students have been interviewed as part of developing a PLP. This process allowed the AEO, teachers, the student and parents/carers to participate if they wished. Interviews included the following topics:

- Student aspirations (further education — employment opportunities).
- Choice of subjects.
- Assistance required from AEO or tutors.
- Any specific issues that concerned the parent or student.
- Cultural issues.

Essay writing, research skills, completion of assessment or homework tasks, revision of curriculum content and developing exam techniques were the areas of need identified by students. The pertinent point is that despite the two schools drawing students from quite different socioeconomic areas the identified needs of students were consistent across socioeconomic status and academic differences. Time was spent in evaluating various teaching techniques and trialling a variety of strategies. One of the most effective strategies used was that of scaffolding as this technique appeared to work with most students and across many curriculum areas (e.g. English, Geography, History, Art theory and Maths). Munns (in Craven, 2011) indicated the effectiveness of the technique. One observation of the students in classroom situations was that a majority did not engage with the teacher by asking or answering questions; however, most engaged with the teacher on a one to one basis, that is, when the teacher sat with the student. Tutors used this knowledge to engage individual students, ensuring that curriculum content was reviewed. Munns (in Craven, 2011, p. 253–55) Students were positive towards this intervention. Approximately 75% of students did not do any schoolwork at home. Rather than try to intervene in the home situation, tutors used student study periods or out of school time to assist students to complete homework and assessment tasks. One school had a homework centre and this was used effectively. Most (but not all) were amenable to this intervention. In a minority of cases, tutors went to the classroom with the student if that student was comfortable with this strategy. The aim was to assist the student to engage in the classroom situation and then the tutor would gradually withdraw. This strategy had mixed results.

Mentoring was one strategy that had an almost universal acceptance by students. Without mentoring, it is likely that many students would have been lost to the school system. From 2015, each Indigenous student in the study schools will have a mentor of their choice. This is as a result of student requests. There were several features that interviewers noticed when comparing the answers from students with poor attendance and those with attendance over 90%. Of those with attendance issues 53% indicated they disliked school ('I hate school', 'I don't want to be here', 'school sucks'). They usually intensely disliked certain subjects and almost all disliked some of their teachers. Approximately 40% had no apparent life ambitions ('I don't know what I want to do', 'I haven't ever had a job', 'Nothing interests me', 'I'm bored'). It was noticeable that few of these students had ever had a part time job. The feature that stood out was the general apathy of these students. Not only did they have little interest in school but they had little interest in nonschool activities. When asked what they did at weekends, night or holidays, the answer we consistently got was 'Nothing'. While this answer may have been an exaggeration on the part of students, it did point to the fact that schools, the family and the community need to work with these students to try to motivate them. They appeared to be poorly motivated in school and in general life issues. We did not carry out a detailed study and, at best, our findings are observations.

If we look at the period 2009–15, there was a noticeable shift in the way that Norta tutors worked with senior students because of the observations they made. There were really two student cohorts, one that wished to complete Year 12 and another that wanted to leave school as soon as possible. It was obvious by 2010 that the disengaged group required different strategies. The focus moved away from attendance. Re-engagement became the priority. Disengagement and attendance issues were accepted as a problem and there was acceptance that the solutions lay within or outside the school depending on the students' goals. The four case study summaries provide some ideas that may be useful to other schools when looking at disengaged students. They point to different outcomes for students and the advantages of finding pathways that re-engage students.

Schwab (1999, p. 57) discusses Indigenous retention in late secondary school and points to some successful programmes. He emphasises that there needs to be rigorous evaluation of these programmes. Purdie and Buckley (2010, p. 18) support this contention and indicate there is little supporting evidence for many of the claims about what works in Indigenous education. Another question that might be raised is whether we should be looking at a broad programme approach, or should we be tailoring intervention to individual situations. While this is a much more complex approach, the case studies above indicate that some success is possible using an individualised approach. Schwab (1999, p. 58) argues that there needs to be much more research focus on the

successful students to try to understand the reasons for different outcomes for students who have, seemingly, similar backgrounds. Our study results would support this conclusion.

Concluding Comments

This paper concentrates on Indigenous students in two senior high schools in an urban setting and any conclusions should be confined to those parameters. They may or may not be transferable to other situations. Nelson and Hay (2010) studied junior secondary Indigenous students and their case studies did have some similarities to those mentioned in this study. With senior high school retention rates for Indigenous students improving as outlined in the Prime Minister's report (Closing the Gap, 2015, p. 17), one needs to ascertain whether the types of approaches outlined in this study can be transferred to other situations. Further, are these approaches partial answers as to why senior retention rates have improved?

Attendance, engagement and retention are certainly linked; however, those links are complex and the factors linking them can vary significantly. The following are the main findings from this study:

- Students with attendance issues and who are disengaged, are more likely to leave during Year 11 and therefore fail to complete Year 12. However, many of these students who leave school during Year 11 are not lost to education or employment. If we can tap into their needs and find motivating factors then there can be success. Further education opportunities and/or employment strategies can assist in developing a successful path for some of these students and this supports Nelson and Hay's (2010, p. 63) conclusions.

- With regard to senior students' attendance, this study found that attempting to re-engage with students was more likely to improve attendance of some students. The more formal approaches involving school personnel and parents was found to be ineffective with senior students. This finding should confined to senior students. It may or may not be relevant to younger students.

- Those students who chose to complete Year 12 had higher attendance rates than Year 11 students. They were also more highly motivated.

- Re-engaging students was a priority and strategies had to be tailored to the individual. Re-engagement led to improved outcomes for a significant proportion of students.

- Transitioning from school to further education or employment was a successful strategy for some students.

- Retention rates in the study schools improved over time and in 2014, at both study schools, 100% of students were retained in the senior school. Perseverance, men-

toring and use of proven teaching strategies assisted in this improvement. This supports the work of Munns (in Craven, 2011, p. 249–52).

- At the senior level, there was a concentration on academic results. It was imperative to provide students with early success as this improved engagement.

- Mentoring students was found to be a successful strategy. The mutual personal respect between student and mentor assisted in the retention of some students. With others, it assisted a smooth transition to further study or employment.

- Student areas of concern were essay writing, research skills, completion of assignments, explanation of curriculum content and exam technique. These concerns were irrespective of academic ability or socioeconomic status.

- The teaching strategies used were of paramount importance. Techniques like scaffolding, close questioning, backtracking and teaching exam strategy provided students with the tools to complete set tasks successfully. This generally supports the findings of Hattie (2009) and Munns et al. (2006).

This paper has several objectives. The first is to point to the advantages and disadvantages of research initiatives. There is a place for the broader studies like Bourke et al. (2000), Purdie and Buckley (2010), Munns et al. (2006) and Hattie (2009) as these studies point to national or state trends. However, more localised studies like Nelson and Hay (2010) and this study may be more useful to schools as it is likely to be the individual school or school groups that make a difference.

Second, the paper points to the dearth of research which relates to senior Indigenous students in an urban school setting. Further to this point is the fact that urban schools have, statistically, the best results for Indigenous students. We need to find reasons for success and replicate successful approaches. There should be a note of caution here. Many programmes appear to have short-term success. We need to find long-term solutions and one way to do this is to develop some longitudinal studies that follow senior Indigenous students over a significant time period. Third, we need to study the links between attendance, engagement and retention. In this paper, we have looked at some of the factors linking attendance, retention and engagement. This is a complex area for study as has been shown by the case studies mentioned in this paper. Before we put forward programmes to resolve these three issues, we need research data which accurately portrays the various linkages so that we take a holistic approach to problem solving. Trying to find solutions to these problems by treating each area discretely will be fraught with danger. An integrated approach is required. This paper raises more questions than it answers; however, it is hoped that it encourages more research into the successes in Indigenous education,

more specifically senior high school successes. Finally, if we move forward 20 years, will the present problems still be apparent or will we have made substantial progress? That will be the measure of success in the educational outcomes for our Indigenous students.

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