Western Australian Aboriginal young women and community representatives identify barriers to school attendance and solutions to school non-attendance

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The barriers to school attendance that affect young Aboriginal people in Australia are diverse, immense and well documented; however, except for a handful of studies, Aboriginal students' voices receive no platform for policy makers to hear them. In this paper, we present results from yarning circles about barriers to school attendance conducted with young Aboriginal women that participate in an education engagement program called Shooting Stars at Narrogin Senior High School. Yarning circles were facilitated, analysed and discussed within a framework of relatedness, with the researchers embracing their own standpoint, and the standpoint of the Shooting Stars participants, as Indigenous women. The results from these participant yarning circles were discussed with the Shooting Stars Narrogin localised steering committee, and this discussion is presented here, alongside the outcomes, both achieved and projected, to which committee stakeholders have committed. For the most part, the participants and the steering committee discussed racism, teacher–student relationships, and peer connectedness, and how these were related to participant attendance and engagement at school. This paper showcases the power of the yarning circle as a tool for collaboration in that it provides a space to create cohesion through conversation, through contention and through sharing.

Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, school attendance, yarning circles, Indigenous methods, student voice

Introduction

First, it is right that we introduce ourselves. We, the authors, are all Indigenous women: LBB (Nyoongar, Yamatji), HO (Bardi-Jawi, Nyoongar), and LC (Kungarakan, Paperbark Peoples, Finniss River Northern Territory) are all Aboriginal Australian, and RW is New Zealand Māori (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Mamoe, Waitaha) and Pākehā (New Zealand European). We all work, or have worked, for the Shooting Stars program from which we receive financial remuneration. We are heavily invested in the Shooting Stars program and our participants' success. This paper is not an evaluation of either the Shooting Stars program or Narrogin Senior High School. We offer this paper as a case study in collaboration between an education program, a school, students and community. Narrogin Senior High School has chosen to remain named in this paper, and we honour the school community's courage and honesty in our journey toward reconciliation.

Shooting Stars, an initiative of Glass Jar Australia and Netball Western Australia, uses sport, art (visual and performing), and other incentives as rewards to encourage Aboriginal girls and young women to improve their school attendance, while promoting their health and wellbeing. The Shooting Stars program is site specific, with staff adapting a key set of deliverables to the requirements and interests of the host school, community and students (Figure 1). The six main program activities drive the five key outcomes of the program, which are evaluated through collation of attendance data from the Department of Education, participant case studies and yarning circles. Yarning circles provide a culturally safe, democratic method by which our local communities, represented by a steering committee, and program participants themselves can drive the direction and content of their local program while providing qualitative feedback regarding the program's effectiveness (Whitau & Ockerby, 2019). The yarning circle method is both a program activity and an evaluation tool because, as this paper will demonstrate, it provides a space for collaboration and community engagement through conversation, contention and sharing.

Figure 1. Shooting Stars logic model, by Ferdinand Handojo

Recent statistics show a very real difference in school attendance between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (henceforth Aboriginal) and non-Aboriginal students in Australia. In 2017, school attendance decreased each subsequent year level for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cohorts; however, the drop was greater for Aboriginal students, particularly in the senior levels of high school (Commonwealth of

Australia, 2018). Additionally, in 2017 the level of consistent high attendance was below half for Aboriginal students in Australia, with only 48.8% of Aboriginal students attending school 90% of the time or more, and marked decreases were observed coincident with increasing remoteness, for example, 58.5% in Inner Regional Areas versus 21.2% in Very Remote Areas (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). In 2018, Australia's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal school attendance rates for years 1–10 were 82.3% and 92.5% respectively, with a marked increase in this gap in Western Australia, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal school attendance rates were 76.5% and 93.0% respectively (ACARA, 2019).

This attendance gap and its pronouncement are not novel. Since the 1980s, various inquiries and policy frameworks have highlighted the high rate of school non-attendance for Aboriginal students, particularly those in remote and regional contexts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018; Harris, 1990; Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Northern Territory Department of Education, 1986; 1999; Wilson, 2014). Low school attendance is a component of a broader conversation around under-achievement of Aboriginal students in Australian schools that has been the subject of research and statistical evaluation for decades (Commonwealth of Australia, 1985; 1995; Fitzgerald, 1976; NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & NSW Department of Education & Training, 2004; Robinson and Tyler, 2020; Thomson et al., 2013; Walter et al., 2017), where poor attendance has been identified as a contributing factor to lower educational outcomes for Aboriginal students (Bourke et al., 2000; Commonwealth of Australia, 1995).

The barriers to school attendance that affect young Aboriginal people in Australia are diverse, immense, and well documented (Harris, 1990; Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Lowe et al., 2019; Moodie et al., 2019; Northern Territory Department of Education, 1986; 1999; Watts & Gallacher, 1964; Wilson, 2014). Aboriginal students are often the object of research, yet their voices receive no platform for policy makers to hear them. Donovan (2015) and Rogers (2017) provide notable exceptions to this exclusion, conducting yarning circles (Donovan, 2015) and developing photoyarn (Rogers, 2017) with Aboriginal students in order to honour their perspectives on their own education. The aims of this study are to understand what Shooting Stars program participants consider to be barriers to attending school, how they think those barriers could best be overcome, and to tailor program delivery accordingly, with support from the Shooting Stars steering committee and Narrogin Senior High School. With this paper we also aim to provide a more extensive platform for our participants' voices, and to demonstrate how yarning circles can be used as a tool for collaborative change.

Case study: Narrogin Senior High School

Narrogin is in Wiilmen Nyoongar country, in the Wheatbelt agricultural region of Western Australia, 193 kilometres south-east of Perth. According to the 2016 census, Narrogin had a population of 4,272 people, 51.9% of whom identified as female and 7.7% of whom identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, which is higher than the Australian national average (3.3%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Narrogin Senior High School is a comprehensive educational facility, with an extensive enrolment catchment as the only senior high school for 100 kilometres in every direction. Table 1 presents the percentage of Aboriginal female students within the total female student population and the percentage of Aboriginal students from the total student population by year group across semesters one and two at Narrogin Senior High School in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Table 1. Percentage of Aboriginal female students and total Aboriginal students at Narrogin Senior High School 2019–2021

Year group	Semester	Aboriginal female students (% from total female students)			Aboriginal students (% from total students)		
		2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Year 7	1	17.1	13.6	28.1	22.6	16.4	21.3
	2	18.3	15.0	26.3	21.1	16.7	21.2
Year 8	1	18.0	15.9	20.0	15.3	18.6	16.4
	2	16.4	13.6	20.7	15.4	17.4	17.9
Year 9	1	19.7	14.1	17.5	10.1	13.7	18.5
	2	19.7	12.9	17.8	14.1	10.8	18.9
Year 10	1	8.5	16.2	16.9	10.2	14.1	16.7
	2	12.5	17.4	14.3	11.5	13.3	16.7
Year 11	1	8.8	10.6	12.7	9.8	11.9	12.4
	2	6.5	12.2	10.6	7.1	14.3	11.5
Year 12	1	18.6	5.7	15.8	15.4	6.3	16.7
	2	12.8	7.7	15.8	10.1	7.6	16.7

The Shooting Stars program commenced at Narrogin Senior High School in term 2 2018, with one permanent staff member on site in the role of Program Coordinator (LBB) and 24 Aboriginal girls between years 7–9 enrolled in the program. In 2019, LBB was promoted to the role of Shooting Stars Regional Manager for Greater Western Australia, and three new staff were employed to run the Narrogin Shooting Stars program, including two young local Nyoongar women. In term 3 2019, the Shooting Stars program expanded to Narrogin Primary School, and, by term 4 2019, 60 Aboriginal girls were registered in the program across the three Narrogin sites.

Methods

Yarning with the Stars research project

Relatedness (Martin, 2003), which provides an inclusive, subjective space for people to relate to each other and for everyone's ways of knowing, being, and doing to be privileged, was selected as a methodological framework. The central tenet of the Shooting Stars program is the relationships connecting individuals and communities, with staff already embedded within the communities where

this research will be conducted. HO has conceptualised our understanding of relatedness and the framework that it provides in Figure 2 (following Martin, 2003; 2008). The figure depicts circular lines which signify water holes, or water flowing, and women symbols. The circular patterns are important because, like women, water means life. Circles also show that we are always giving back and feeding into each other to create more positive journeys. The first circle shows women sitting around having a yarn; these women are Shooting Stars staff, who help the lives of many young women. The second circle represents the program participants, who are having many conversations. The hands symbolise that the participants hold the answers in their own way from viewing the world with their own eyes. The third circle represents conversations with the steering committees and communities, with all three circles linked together via relatedness to create the journey. Each conversation is a journey which builds on the previous conversation, creating relatedness and collaboration. Our relationships with our participants and communities are not simply an advantage over an external researcher, who must spend a large quantity of time building rapport with their participants (e.g., Sharif, 2001); it is through these relationships, and our relatedness, that we are truly able to decolonise our program's theorisation, policy, practice and evaluation (Whitau & Ockerby, 2019).

Figure 2. Shooting Stars yarning relatedness, by Helen Ockerby

The Yarning with the Stars project began in September 2016 across existing program sites and commenced in Narrogin at the end of 2018. The Yarning with the Stars research project uses yarning circles to collect qualitative data from participants and their communities (Whitau & Ockerby, 2019), which provides a culturally responsive research space in which information can be collected and relationships can be built (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). The project is structured to ensure that the three groups of research participant (Shooting Stars staff, steering committee members, program participants) can contribute both to the research process and to the development of program delivery (Figure 3), following Indigenous research protocols (Eldridge, 2008; Kovach, 2010b; Rigney, 1999; Rogers, 2017; Smith, 1999). For a full discussion of Shooting Stars yarning circle process and methodology, please see Whitau and Ockerby (2019).

Figure 3. Shooting Stars yarning flow, by Ashton Murphy
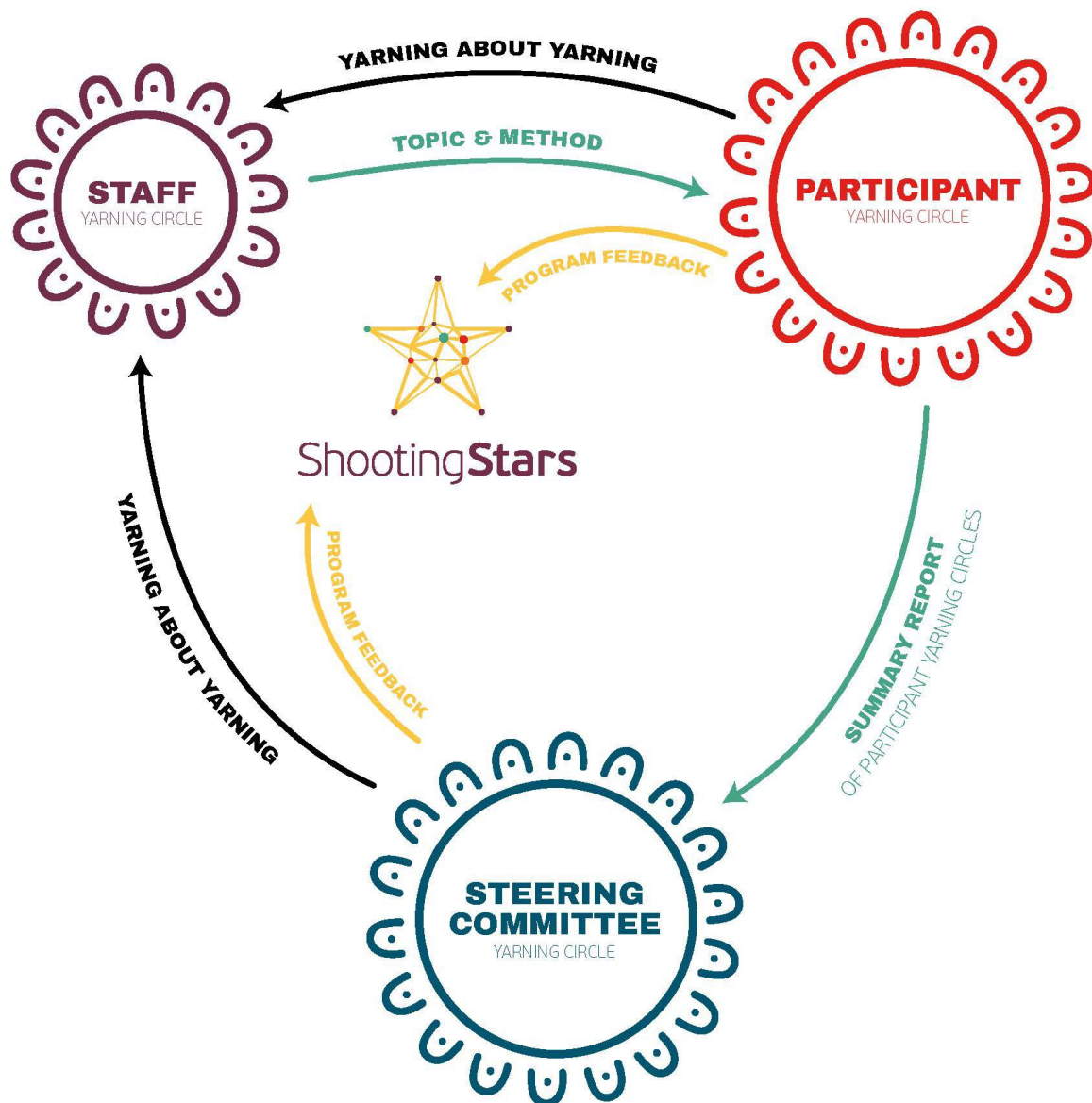
In this paper we present results and discussion from four yarning circles which LBB facilitated. LBB is a Narrogin Senior High School alumna, a local Nyoongar woman whom the Shooting Stars participants call "Aunty" and mother to one Shooting Stars program high school participant. With her pre-existing, familial relationships with yarn participants, and her role working with participants and the steering committee for Shooting Stars, LBB did not need to spend time building rapport with any of the yarning circle participants specifically for the research, but was able to connect with all yarning circle participants through their relatedness (Figures 2 and 3). In term 4 2018, LBB facilitated three separate Shooting Stars participant yarning circles with year 7, year 8 and year 9 participants. The participants yarned around three main topics: barriers to school attendance, barriers to staying in class and solutions to these two issues. The participant yarns were audio-recorded and transcribed.

As Indigenous women working with Indigenous girls, we honour and embrace our standpoint as Indigenous women (Foley, 2003; Green, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). The transcripts were analysed from a position of critical Indigenous inquiry, which defines and nurtures knowledge as an artefact of relationality (Andrews, 2020; Kovach, 2010a; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) and demands that Indigenous persons are represented honestly (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Green, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). RW manually coded the participant yarning circle transcripts by clause, sorting participant comments into three broad categories: barriers to attendance, barriers to staying in class and solutions. RW produced a draft summary report based on these broad categories, which LBB and other Narrogin staff provided feedback on to ensure that it represented the participant yarning circles accurately. The report, which is foremost a platform for participant voice, focused on presenting participant narratives rather than an interpretation of the narratives (Bird et al., 2009). Once approved by the Narrogin team, the summary report was provided to steering committee members two weeks prior to the steering committee yarn in term 4 2019 (Figure 3). Printed copies of the report, including a one-page summary, were also provided to committee members during the yarning circle.

The steering committee yarn was audio-recorded and transcribed. RW manually coded the steering committee yarning circle in the same broad fashion as the participant transcripts, before adding these to the initial summary report. For this paper, RW and HO coded each of the transcripts again, working collaboratively to develop subcategories within the initial broader categories. These subcategories, informed by steering committee analysis of the participant yarns, evolved thematically as the process was repeated four times to ensure rigour. Both the summary report and a draft version of this paper were provided to the steering committee for their assessment in term 2 2020. During this meeting, the committee confirmed the accuracy of both the report and this paper and added several outputs.

Results and discussion

Racism

In this study, the year 7 and year 8 participants discuss experiences of overt and covert racism from students and school staff. While the year 9 participants do not directly refer to experiences of racism or discrimination, the steering committee (henceforth committee) talk at length about the institutional racism within the school creating and created by a lack of social cohesion. Within the classroom, the year 7 and year 8 groups discuss preferential treatment of white students in terms of support and discipline, for example:

> Because sometimes when I ask them [teachers] – when I ask them for help they – and then I would line up for – and ask them for help, then there's a white kid behind me and they just go straight to them not to me. I, like, I get annoyed and I, like, I'll, like, I'll swear at them.

Additionally, while both the year 7 and year 8 participants talked about being hit by boys, the year 8s expressed a lack of confidence in school staff for correcting the behaviour because "we're black and they're not going to listen":

> If we need something … [from] student services, like, if, like, the Aboriginal boys, like, if they hit us, like, we'll tell them and then they don't do, like, nothing about it. They said they will but they don't … They only, like, tell them to, like, leave us alone. Then when – when we're by ourselves they always catch us, like, with no teachers around.

Throughout these discussions of inconsistent, unfair treatment, the year 7 and year 8 participants talked about feeling "out of place", for example: "We come to school every day and still get treated like nothing."

Their experiences of racism are alienating and exclusionary, preventing them from feeling connected with peers and the broader school community (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010). For the year 7 and year 8 participants, racism is manifest in the lack of clarity and consistency around rules and reporting that they receive from teachers and administration. This manifestation potentially supports earlier work by Aldridge and McChesney (2018), who found that students' perceptions of school safety structures (rule clarity, reporting and seeking help) were predictive of their sense of ethnic identity.

The year 7 and year 8 participants also experienced racism from their peers in the form of racist comments. One Narrogin year 8 participant talked about threats she had received: "In some classes, like, I'll get, messages from people saying I should kill myself."

The year 7 participants noted that some students make racist comments on purpose, while others make racist comments unintentionally from ignorance: "There are people that don't know if they're actually doing it and people that do are doing it on purpose. That's when people exaggerate and they get the – the person that's being racist gets the reaction."

The year 7 participants also talked about how discriminatory comments came from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students: "It's white students, but then also dark Aboriginal students that do – are racist to white people. So it's going back – back and forth between both of the cultures."

The Narrogin year 8 participants did not like being in classes when there were no other Nyoongar kids, because "there's, like, us on this side, and then there's, like, all the other kids on the white side". The committee defined this comment as a symptom of the lack of social cohesion within the school, the culture of which was described as unconsciously racist. The committee yarned about how the school was not a "whole unit", unlike at the primary school.

The current experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in Australian schools must be considered within the context of the ongoing, intergenerational impacts of racist government policies and dominant racial attitudes (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Gray & Beresford, 2002). Racism has the potential to affect Aboriginal students across individual, institutional, societal and civilisational levels (Scheurich & Young, 1997), with impacts that are both harmful and far-reaching (De Maio et al., 2005; Zubrick et al., 2005), from physical, bodily harm (Martino, 2003; Simpson et al., 2001), to identity

formation (Sanderson & Allard, 2003). Of course, school grounds are not islands, but exist within communities, and as such reflect elements of community cohesion and division; however, schools have the capacity to establish cultural frames of reference that foster and insist upon inclusive, accepting interactions between students (Nassar-McMillan et al., 2009). Education systems have the power to create, perpetuate and dismantle inequalities such as racism, whether inadvertently or intentionally (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). In terms of solutions, the year 8 group discussed improving school staff's understanding of family reasons and respecting their privacy, rather than requesting reasons for lateness or absence. The year 7 participants identified education of the entire student population as a solution for racist behaviours, since "people need to know, like, what they're saying".

The committee supported participant-identified solutions, calling for a whole-of-school "no to racism" program to be delivered alongside a "cultural project" which would aim to increase teacher and student awareness of local Nyoongar culture, in conjunction with increasing pride in, and visibility of, Nyoongar culture on school grounds, including among parents and community. This solution was drawn in contrast with the primary school. Additionally, the committee linked the low self-confidence of some girls with a lack of pride in their Aboriginality and a lack of understanding of their history:

> We need to build up their own … not only their self-esteem, but their being Aboriginal, or proud … We do Aboriginal studies but … the kids wouldn't even know where the reserves are. This used to be a trading place. They used to travel out the back here. I think we need to look in our own backyards here, what we've got in our own country and bring in the Elders and yarning.

In conjunction with the cultural project the committee also suggested that Shooting Stars work with participants, particularly in health and wellbeing sessions, to help participants to develop more confidence and strengthen their cultural identity, connection and pride.

Teacher–student relationships

A predominant theme across each of the yarning circles was teacher–student relationships, or the perceptions of teaching practices that support students academically and socially (Cohen et al., 2009). Each of the participant groups talked about certain teachers either not providing adequate academic support, or not knowing their academic level. For example:

> They don't explain the work properly and when it's too hard they expect us to do it when they didn't explain it properly and it gets on my nerves.

> They [teachers] make us work too fast and then it puts too much pressure on me and then I don't end up doing my work.

> If you're not with the teacher you want to be or if that teacher isn't doing the right thing for you, you want to be – you just want to go. You don't want to be in that class.

> I don't like how patronising the other students and teachers can be. So, like, I – so, like, if I got moved down to a lower class, like, that teacher would automatically think that I'm an idiot and that, like, I need to – that I need to, like, just do a puzzle or something … I just think because they think I'm in that area that I need to do something really simple.

From a social support perspective, the participants talked about teachers not understanding them, teachers having bad days and unfair treatment, with teacher–student relationships often linked with individual and institutional racism. For example:

> Either the teachers aren't, like, aware of how you feel about that class or how the work makes you feel, or the teachers aren't aware of what the students do in that class, which annoys me.

> They [other Aboriginal girls] might not want to be in the class because some teachers might be having a bad day and they might take it out on the students and they're, like, having, like, you know, when they're a bit naughty or something.

> Like, in some classes, like, all of the classes like being loud and all that. But, like, there's only, like, they only pick, like, me and my, like, other Aboriginal friends up. Then, like, when people – it's, like, white people in particular, when they keep going, like, it's just, like, they let them go.

The committee discussed the demands on teachers to both address the required curriculum and to ensure that all students have reached a suitable level of understanding on a subject. The committee acknowledged that it is difficult for high school teachers, who see many students in different classes throughout the day to build strong relationships with students. They also acknowledged that while some teachers do well at building strong, caring relationships with students, providing both academic and social support, that other teachers are less willing to develop relationships, or have negative attitudes toward students until the students' circumstances are explained by other staff. For example:

> There is a couple of good teachers here the kids like. You can see that. There's a lot they don't like but there's some that see some teachers that they want to … they need to go out into the playground with them, in the yard, and interact a bit more. You don't see them having a yarn with the kids, just talk to them.

> It's sad that we have to get to a point that a teacher will change their attitude towards a student because of when we tell them the circumstances that the kid is going through … You shouldn't have to wait on what the circumstance or whatever situation this kid is in. You need to have compassion regardless of what they're going through.

Participant-identified barriers and solutions support many other studies that demonstrate the significance that students place on teachers' readiness and commitment to listen, show concern, and provide support for students personal and academic lives (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Egeberg & McConney, 2018; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Garrett et al., 2009; Garza et al., 2010). This significance is potentially even more so for Aboriginal students, whose worldview demands a more authentic, family-like relationship than their non-Aboriginal peers, where the teacher acknowledges, honours and values the student's culture and cultural identity (Donovan, 2015). The complexity of the teacher–student relationship can be observed with the participants' ideas for improvement. The year 7s talked about improving teacher–student relationships through better communication and compromise on both sides, for example:

> I also think maybe making sure you talk to the teacher and compromising with the teacher type thing and make – and the teacher really needs to, like, check up on you, like, all the time. Like, not all the time but if they see something unusual, like, or you're not in your normal,

like, compromising with you and just, like, checking up with your type thing and making sure the teacher knows type thing.

The year 9s put the onus on teachers, asking them to be "just a bit kinder" and to treat people fairly, while the year 8s did not want to build better relationships with teachers, they liked the teachers that already made an effort with them and they did not have any time for the others: "Connect; no, I don't want them to connect". Instead, the year 8s suggested employing more Aboriginal aides and teachers: "They need to employ more aides so that when there's an Aboriginal in the class they can help them out and work at their own pace."

The committee decided to prioritise teacher–student relationship building for 2020, with a consensus reached from the following member's comment:

> Student and staff relationships. That'd be my area of concerns. I think until the relationships are built and are strong, then nothing else can be … that getting in a class. If they've got stronger relationships with the teacher and the kids have strong relationships, you're going to go to class. That's where they've been identified as something, a reason why the kids don't want to go to some of their classes.

The committee focused on broader, whole-school initiatives to improve teacher–student relationships and build cross-cultural understanding (see Implementation in 2020 section below). They also acknowledged the reluctance of certain teachers and students, as demonstrated by the year 8s, suggesting that unpopular teachers be invited on a Shooting Stars reward trip where teachers could interact with participants in a safe, mediated environment, so that the participants might say, "Hey this teacher's not really bad", and the teacher might say, "The kids are not what I've envisioned this whole time."

Peer connectedness

The social environment of the school and peer relationships were discussed by all four groups. Peer relationships were the predominant issue for the year 7s, particularly "drama" within their friendship groups and disruptive behaviours in class, for example:

> They [boys] try and distract us and get annoying and try to trigger us, that's the word, and they might get physical and hit us or they just might – or they just might spread, like, yeah, people just spread rumours. That's the people that get us angry and not motivated.

The year 8s and year 9s only mentioned negative peer interactions briefly, focusing on disruptive classroom behaviours. For example, "Sometimes, like, some people you just really don't want to see and just don't want to come to school … like, they might throw stuff in class or shouting and just plain horrible."

The year 7 and year 9 participants linked disruptive, noisy classrooms with the teacher's ability to manage the class, for example:

> So, like, my house class; my teacher, [name], she has been trying to get the class to be quiet for all year, but none of her, like, plans have succeeded. To this day they, like, my whole class they pick on specific kids … my friend [name] and I just find it really annoying.

The year 8s linked disruptive classroom behaviours with unfair, racist treatment from teachers; discussing how teachers who consider themselves the "top dogs" will reprimand them, the year 8 participants, over other students who are engaging in similar behaviours. Each participant group linked classroom disruption with classroom management, supporting previous research where students defined "good teachers" as those who are able to maintain control and order without being too punitive (Egeberg & McConney, 2018; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). However, in this study the participants do not put the responsibility solely on the teacher, with both the year 7s and year 9s suggesting that the best way to reduce disruption would be to remove certain individuals or split classes, with split classes already proving successful in year 7 maths:

> Like, in my maths class personally there's no work been happening and there's just screaming and screaming around with all the other students and it's so annoying when you want to learn and you can't learn because all them other people are, like, stopping your education. But there's already something being happening, like, the whole of maths has introduced a new behavioural structure type thing. All the kids that do annoying are split into another class with Miss [name] or Miss [name] to try get their work done, and it's way better.

The year 7 and year 9 participants see disruptive behaviours as the result of both the students causing the disruption and the teacher's ability to manage the disruption.

The year 7 group yarned at length about peer relationships and how they impacted their learning experiences, particularly within their own friendship groups. Their solution was to remove themselves, to "stop engaging with the bad behaviour and all that", and to report the behaviour to a teacher. Interestingly, the term "bullying" was only mentioned three times, twice in the year 7 yarning circle in relation to others, and once in the year 8 yarning circle in relation to how the new rule that they cannot go to the bathroom during class could mean that if they had an accident, they would be bullied. The participants did not identify themselves as victims of bullying; bullying was something experienced by others, or hypothetical, even though some of the experiences they described could be defined as bullying (Olweus, 2013). The committee identified the girls as victims of bullying, discussing how bullying behaviours from boys were a response to the boys feeling left out now that the girls have the Shooting Stars program. Future research is needed to explore if participants did not define themselves as victims of bullying because other barriers were more significant to them, because of their definition of bullying, or in a deliberate act of omission: from embarrassment, self-preservation or resistance (e.g., resistance to racism, Moodie et al., 2019).

Other barriers and solutions

All the Narrogin year 8 barriers and solutions could be coded within the three predominant themes of racism, teacher–student relationships and peer connectedness. The Narrogin year 7 participants also identified tiredness, family reasons/funerals and being sick as reasons not to come to school. One Narrogin year 9 participant stated that sometimes she doesn't want to come to school because it's raining, and she doesn't have an umbrella. The committee discussed three other barriers and their related solutions which do not fit neatly into the predominant themes. First, the steering committee briefly yarned about how family health, particularly mental health issues, prevents students from attending school. Second, peer pressure from popular students was spoken about in depth, with the committee focusing on solutions: building girls' confidence so that they can make the right decisions for themselves and targeting the popular students' school attendance so that the other students will follow:

> You've got to make your own choices and if it's wrong, it's wrong … build the confidence of that person up, to make those choices … [if] she feels intimidated, she's going to make the wrong decision.

> But I think one of the things that we could target is making the popular kids into the avenue to get all the kids in the class. So, if we can crack the popular kids and get them to go to class, then they're the ones that are affected by that peer pressure, then go … because then they're going to go with them anyway.

Third, the committee yarned about the relationship between Aboriginal parents and the school, discussing that the parent's relationship to the school is related to their child's relationship with the school. The committee's key solution was to provide a support person for Aboriginal parents coming to meetings at the school. While the committee did not specify this support person's ethnicity, evidence from studies conducted elsewhere in Australia demonstrates how local Aboriginal staff have successfully worked as a bridge between the school, families and community, much like the Narrogin Shooting Stars team do (Guenther et al., 2015; 2019).

Implementation in 2020

Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 outbreak, plans for implementation of some of these strategies were curtailed. However, in term 1 2020, Shooting Stars initiated "Sausage Sizzle with the Stars", which comprised a fortnightly shared lunch of sausage sizzle and team-building activities held in the Shooting Stars room. Various teachers, staff and Shooting Stars participants attended throughout the term. Young Shooting Stars leaders thrived by taking on hosting and service roles and leading during team-building activities. This initiative provided opportunities for both teachers and participants to engage in positive activities in a safe space and build the necessary relationships that will empower the girls to attend school and succeed in their education. Shooting Stars also delivered health and wellbeing sessions on Shooting Stars core values (pride, respect, success), which incorporated respect for your parents/carers, your culture and yourself, and pride in Aboriginality; the sessions on bullying included discussions around peer pressure and making the right decisions for yourself.

Narrogin Senior High School's administration team have embraced the initiative of increasing Aboriginal visibility and pride of culture in the school. Student Services and Shooting Stars now have regular meetings to discuss both strategic and operational outcomes for Aboriginal students and whole-school cohesion. For the first time, Reconciliation Week and Sorry Day were added to the school calendar, with the school taking responsibility for many of the events and activities. In term 3, Narrogin Senior High School also ran a series of activities around "Unity Day" to promote whole-school cohesion.

Limitations

Like all tools that gather qualitative data, the yarning circle is imperfect. Participants who may not be confident to speak might not have their voices heard. Strong personalities may dominate the yarn. Relationships and politics might also influence what participants feel comfortable to say in front of each other; however, each of the participant groups stated that they felt heard. During the steering committee meeting where this paper was judged and assessed, one school representative noted that they had never received feedback of this length and quality, and that they frequently refer to the report—which presents the participants voices—in their planning.

The study is limited to the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal young women and members of the steering committee. Several factors associated with improved outcomes for Aboriginal students, such as a culturally safe space for Aboriginal students (Donovan, 2015) and pedagogies that support Indigenous ontologies (Etherington, 2006; Fogarty, 2010), were not suggested in this study. The Shooting Stars program provides participants with both a culturally safe space and health and wellbeing sessions that are grounded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing, and delivered by local Aboriginal women, which could explain why these factors were not suggested as solutions. At the time of writing, there was no similar program for the Aboriginal boys at the school. The perspectives of the Aboriginal young men, and non-Aboriginal young people, would provide a more complete picture of school and peer connectedness. Similarly, the perspectives and experiences of teachers would consolidate our understanding of teacher–student relationships.

Conclusions

In this study, barriers to school attendance and solutions to school non-attendance were located within the school context, and situated within three predominant themes: racism, teacher–student relationships and peer connectedness. While racism is at the root of the barriers, impacting and prohibiting certain relationships throughout the school community, relationship building is at the heart of the solutions, with the steering committee focusing on initiatives that will, hopefully, create a more cohesive and inclusive school environment. The steering committee's response is layered, from health and wellbeing sessions that aim to strengthen the cultural identity of individuals, to the implementation of a whole-of-school "no to racism" program. In time, we will evaluate the success of these approaches with yarning circles.

The barriers and solutions presented here are not novel or comprehensive. Solutions such as improving teacher–student relationships and creating cohesive school climates which affirm diversity and celebrate minority cultures have been identified elsewhere (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Donovan, 2015; Guenther et al., 2019). However, the solutions presented here are specific to the Aboriginal young women who attend Narrogin Senior High School, and, in some instances, are group specific—as the participants in this study have demonstrated, not all solutions will work for all groups. While the year 7s and year 9s were open to building stronger relationships with teachers, the year 8s were not. The steering committee identified that some relationships would improve with change at the institutional level, but others would require a more hands-on approach, such as the Shooting Stars reward camp where unpopular teachers would be invited to attend so that students and teachers can (re)build stronger, positive relationships in a safe space. In the future, we hope to compare the barriers and solutions presented here with those discussed by the participants, communities and steering committees of other Shooting Stars sites, which are located across regional and remote Western Australia in towns of varying demographics.

The picture of barriers and solutions presented here is perhaps incomplete, but it illustrates what is significant to a particular group of students. The participants and steering committees were asked questions about attendance, but the solutions they provided were engagement strategies, demonstrating the agility of the yarning circle method. By incorporating mixed-methods evaluation that includes attendance data in future studies, we will be better placed to explore the relationships between attendance, engagement and participant/committee-identified solutions. Additionally, future research which uses the yarning circle across the broader school community, inviting young men, non-Aboriginal students and teachers, for example, will not only provide a more comprehensive picture of disengagement, but assist in the generation of specific solutions to improve school climate. While

imperfect, the beauty of the yarning circle is that it provides a space to create cohesion, through conversation, through contention and through sharing.

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