

The Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS): Why invest in a strategy that reduces attendance?

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In late 2013, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abbott, the Australian Government announced a new policy designed to increase attendance rates in remote community schools—the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). The model assumed that employing local people in the program, which was designed to support parents get their children to school, would yield significant improvements and consequently improve educational outcomes. After a slight initial increase in school attendance rates, RSAS schools have seen average attendance rates decline since 2016, which now stand more than eight percentage points lower than at commencement. This article analyses My School data for Very Remote Aboriginal schools, showing how the RSAS school attendance results compare with similar non-RSAS schools. We question why the Australian Government continues to invest in a program that is not meeting its objectives, asking, what went wrong?. We do this by critically analysing 36 policy-related documents, looking for ideological clues that show why the government continues to invest in the program and how it sees it as “successful”. We conclude by raising ethical and accountability concerns about the RSAS, which lacks evidence of attendance improvement, and which potentially causes harm to its objects: First Nations students.

Keywords: attendance, remote education, policy interventions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, success

Introduction

Despite Aboriginal school attendance being a long-term problem needing to be solved, the reasons for non-attendance are “complex and contextual” (Armstrong & Buckley, 2011, p. 64) with several factors working together to reduce the likelihood of regular attendance (Prout-Quicke & Biddle, 2017). The context that Prout-Quicke and Biddle refer to is one where students do not speak English as their first language, where the history of schooling is relatively recent, and where traditional cultural values and ways of being underpin community life.

Remote Aboriginal education has historically been viewed through lenses of issues, concerns and perceived deficits. In the 1980s and 1990s these concerns were couched in discourses of access (Yunupingu, 1995), equity (Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988) and participation (Harris, 1990). In the 2000s, outcomes emerged as a primary concern in policy documents (Boughton, 2001; Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999) along with data quality (Armstrong & Buckley, 2011; Gray & Partington, 2012). Outcomes did not figure as strongly in Wilson's (2014) *Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*, except in its explicit mention of literacy; what did figure strongly in Wilson's report was a concern about attendance. Attendance was linked to literacy and numeracy outcomes and was seen to be a reason for the failure of Indigenous education in remote Northern Territory schools. Attendance targets were not in the original measures of the Closing the Gap initiatives (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), but were added in 2015 (Australian Government, 2015a). The target set was to "close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years" (Australian Government, 2015a, p. 5). According to the 2018 Operational Framework for RSAS, the desired impact "is an average attendance [of] 90% or higher" (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019, p. 13).

The purpose of this article is to first assess the attendance outcomes of the RSAS. Second, we seek to understand why the Australian Government continues to fund the program. The second aim is important because, as our analysis shows, schools in the program are achieving lower attendance results than they were in 2014 when the program commenced, and lower results than schools that received no attendance intervention.

Positionality

Our positionality in the research presented here is a collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. We all have long-standing connections with First Nations people in remote communities and our work in urban and remote schools includes pedagogy, research, teaching and leadership. We are conscious of the potential for power imbalance that exists between us – and the ontological (our ways of being), epistemological (ways of knowing) and axiological (ways of valuing) positions we bring – and those who are locals in communities. We draw on Rigney's (2006) research into Indigenist epistemologies in education that foregrounds the following practices: empowering students; reinforcing the integrity of cultural knowledges; privileging Indigenous voices, knowledges and interests; reflexive positioning; and building community relationships. We maintain long-standing relationships with local First Nations educators and with communities we have lived and worked in. These educators and communities are working hard to improve student attendance and outcomes in their local schools.

Context and background to the RSAS

The importance of attendance was flagged in Prime Minister Abbott's first *Closing the Gap Report* (Australian Government, 2014), which argued:

Getting children to school is the Australian Government's number one priority in Indigenous Affairs. Poor attendance means that Indigenous children find it hard to perform at school. We must break the cycle of non-attendance to ensure today's kids are educated and equipped to become future leaders in their communities. (p. 2)

The priority of attendance was embodied in the RSAS, announced in December 2013 and rolled out to 44 schools in Term 1 of 2014. A second stage commenced in Term 2 of 2014 for an additional 33 schools. A third stage followed in 2015 with the program now involving schools in 84 communities in remote parts of Australia. The RSAS is operationalised through community-based providers which employ local people to support the program's activities.

Investment in the program included \$46.5 million over 2014–2015, followed by \$81.5 million for the period to 2018, and an additional \$78.4 million to extend the program until 2021 – a total of \$206.4 million over eight years. The original list of schools had relatively low attendance rates, mostly under 70%, but, with successive stages, the schools with much higher levels of attendance were added and three schools in the second stage had attendance rates at 80% or above (Kenmore Park Anangu School, Pormpuraaw State School and Elliott School). Another eight of the second-round schools had attendance rates above 70% in Term 1 2014 before joining the program.

Despite the absence of any recent evaluation report that assesses the program's effectiveness, the RSAS has continued, employing up to 500 people as school attendance officers and school attendance supervisors. The latest evaluation was a qualitative assessment of parent perceptions and did not make a judgement of the program's efficacy (Niddrie et al., 2018).

It should be noted that the Australian Government along with state and territory departments of education have introduced a range of measures designed to improve educational outcomes, and some of these may well have had a confounding impact on remote school attendance. For example, the introduction of Direct Instruction delivered through the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Program has been associated with lower attendance rates (Guenther & Osborne, 2020b). The promotion of boarding schools as a preferred option for secondary schooling, while arguably improving secondary completion rates (Guenther & Osborne, 2020a), has possibly had a negative impact on secondary attendance within remote community schools.

Literature review

Australians have become familiar with messages about the importance of attendance. While some states and territories have had attendance strategies in the past, currently only South Australia has a strategy – Attendance matters – which specifically targets Aboriginal attendance (Department for Education, 2018). Some states have policies, such as Western Australia's Student Attendance in Public Schools Policy (Department of Education, 2015), Victoria's Attendance Policy with accompanying Guidelines (Department of Education and Training, 2020), New South Wales's School Attendance Policy (NSW Department of Education, 2015), and Queensland's initiative Every Day Counts (Department of Education, 2019). All states and territories have Education Acts, which mandate school attendance. The Australian Government's Remote School Attendance Strategy (Scullion, 2019) is focused on remote Aboriginal communities. But why is attendance important—in particular to the Australian Government—and what are the theoretical frameworks that explain non-attendance in remote First Nations communities? These two issues are the focus of the literature review.

Why is school attendance important?

While student attendance is recognised as important, being at school is not for the singular purpose of academic achievement. It is an indication of a level of student engagement and participation in education that happens through learning at school. But school provides several social, health and other benefits

(albeit with attendant risks, which enable many children to achieve their potential in sport, in arts, through socially inclusive relationships, and in the development of their own axiological (values) and ontological (identity) formation; these are elements of a “good” education (Biesta, 2010). However, we argue that the priority that governments have placed on remote school attendance in the last 20 years is based on flawed assumptions that attendance leads to educational achievement, particularly academic achievement. Educational participation (attendance) is therefore seen as an investment that produces a productive return, consistent with an understanding of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), an assumption that has been challenged in remote Australian contexts (Guenther, 2021).

Power and resistance

Education is a complex and contested space. Policy can apply simplistic and linear logics that fail to account for the diversity and complexities of the student context (Biesta, 2010). Biesta (2020) challenges a global trend towards a narrow set of measurable “learning outcomes” (p. 1) in an assumption that:

Education is “all about learning”, without ever asking the question what such learning actually is, what educational learning is supposed to be about and supposed to be for, and who should have a say in answering these questions. (p. 1)

In remote Australian Aboriginal schools, attendance may be viewed as a litmus test which monitors the nexus between power and resistance as determined – not by scholars – by children who have been raised to exercise their right to autonomy as a deeply cherished inherent value (Prout-Quicke & Biddle, 2017). Current education policy assumes that improving attendance will lead to improved educational outcomes for students. The strongest argument for this from research literature is the comprehensive work carried out by Hancock et al. (2013), which demonstrates an association between attendance and NAPLAN outcomes. Their report does, however, acknowledge that “even if educators were successful in improving attendance rates for at-risk children, they need to be aware that good attendance is not a panacea for overcoming disparities in academic achievement” (p. 258). Silburn et al. (2018) also suggest that increased pre-school attendance leads to better outcomes, but the authors acknowledge they cannot prove causality and there are many other factors they did not include in their modelling which influence educational outcomes. They also acknowledge that attendance is a “weak proxy for engagement” (p. 135). Even if the association is causal, one of the key problems for this research is that it suggests raising attendance of an individual will raise outcomes for the same individual.

Other evidence disputes this association (Baxter & Meyers, 2019; Guenther, 2013; Ladwig & Luke, 2013). Drawing on philosophical attachments to Human Capital Theory, proponents of these assumptions take the view that educational investments in members of society will provide future economic gains at an individual and wider community level (Guenther et al., 2014). Policy, in the case of the RSAS, seeks simplicity through an “architecture of regulation” (Ball, 2010, p. 165) that constructs and controls from a distance. This monitoring and measuring of progress from beyond communities themselves abandons “collective sense-making and consensual decision-making” (Sarra et al., 2020, p. 36) in favour of the imperatives of those with power. Built into the architecture of regulation is an assumption that teachers are willing and able to fill the apparent void of parental capacity. In this equation school teachers and their practices are unproblematised, while the errant parent/community is made out to be the problem (Lowe, 2011).

Hegemony is often used as a term to describe the power of governments over “the people”. In neo-Gramscian terms, hegemony and power are found within the ideas and structures that the dominant

state creates (Gill, 2008, p. 68). Hegemonic power, in Gramscian terms, does not necessarily depend on coercion or force. Rather, the work of organic intellectuals and subalterns “engaged in intellectual work, conceptualising and generating consent for particular definitions and constructions of ‘reality’ in restricted sites” (Mayo, 2015, p. 48) is perhaps far more important. The value of schooling (and attendance) then is imparted through organic intellectuals who are persuaded by the dominant structures in society – “the process of education is better conceived as a dialogue between intellectuals and ‘the people’” (Jones, 2006). For most, again in Gramsci’s terms, the need for school attendance should be “common sense” – beliefs and opinions held in common, or thought to be held in common (Crehan, 2016) – unless the subalterns and organic intellectuals chosen are not doing the persuading work they should.

Ethics of service delivery

The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019) states that Australian Governments are committed to providing “individualised, high quality learning opportunities and experiences” (p. 9). The declaration also notes that “strategic effort and investment” (p. 16) is required to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. It could well be argued that the RSAS sits within this “strategic effort”. However, despite the well-intended sentiment of the declaration, the tacit underpinning definitions of “high quality” experiences and “outcomes” suggest a circular argument where the benefits of education are prescribed by the service provider, not the service user. Similar self-reinforcing justifications are made in calls for “good quality data” and “reliable and appropriate information” for parents (p. 18). Despite calls for empowerment, First Nations students are cast as “disadvantaged” and “behind other learners” (p. 16). In all these statements, the disadvantage is assumed to exist on measures that come from the “good quality data” that reinforces the advantage of non-Indigenous students. This self-authorising stamp is used to assert complete authoritative control over the lives and affairs of “Indigenous others” (Macoun, 2016) within settler colonial societies.

The power-laden positioning of the declaration represents colonial discourses that immediately raise ethical concerns about the potential harm arising from self-authorised policy implementation. Calls for voice, power-sensitive dialogue (Osborne, 2017b) and ethical or “careful listening” (Delpit, 1993; Rigney, 2006) use different language to colonial, interventionist logics which work from the language of problems, targets, solutions, gaps, outcomes, opportunities, and investment, and which are deeply embedded in Closing the Gap policies (Fogarty et al., 2018). The discourse of school attendance argued for in the 2014 *Closing the Gap Report* and supported by the RSAS employs the latter form of language, telling the subjects of power (students) what is good for them and what governments will do to make that happen. “Success”, in these terms, is about attending school, achieving at NAPLAN tests, completing year 12, going to university and, more importantly, getting a job. As we will show in our analysis of policy documents, “getting a job” turns out to be a major indication of success for the RSAS.

Methodology

The work presented here is a mixed methods study, based on a QUAN→qual sequential design (Morse, 2010). The quantitative component of the study draws on publicly available numeric data from the My School website (ACARA, 2020). The qualitative component relies on publicly available policy-related documents which include government media releases and stories, reports (including evaluations) and Hansard extracts from parliament.

Our approach in analysing data could be seen as philosophically “post-positivist” (Lincoln et al., 2018) in order to present an unbiased assessment based on statistical methods. However, most of our research work on remote education has been built on either qualitative and/or mixed methods research where interpretive and constructivist paradigms are foundational in our analysis. We aim to be respectful and reflexive in presenting our work. As a team of non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers we are committed to the principles of *kulini* (ethical listening, see Osborne, 2017a) and the unsilenced dialogue that Delpit (1993) argues for.

Research questions

Using our methodology, we wanted to answer two questions:

1. After six years of operation, what are the attendance outcomes for RSAS schools?
2. On what basis does the Australian Government continue to fund the program?

We have compiled data from the My School website into a database about remote schooling since My School was established in 2010. Attendance data provided in My School is verified by each jurisdiction following a standard set of rules. We have used the Term 1 attendance data provided in My School.

The second question required a different approach where we examined 36 policy-related documents reflecting the Australian Government’s position on the RSAS. We examined these documents to find out what they said the RSAS achieved, assumptions about the program, how it was meant to work and any problems that were experienced.

RSAS schools

In the first stage of the RSAS (Term 1 2014), 44 schools participated in the program. Another 29 were added in Term 2 of the same year (which we describe as Stage 2). Another nine were added in the second funding round (Stage 3) and a further six were added in the funding round announced in 2018 (Stage 4). Four schools from Stage 1 are no longer participating. The total number of schools at the end of 2020 was 84. In our analysis, we define an RSAS school as one that has had or continues to have an RSAS program during the period from 2014 to 2019.

Samples

Selecting a sample for comparison purposes is not easy for Very Remote schools. Our research has shown that among the approximately 290 Very Remote schools in Australia, about 55% have a high proportion (>80%) of First Nations students. Outcomes and attendance rates for this group are markedly different than for other schools (Guenther, 2015).

We are most interested in the impact of programs for First Nations communities and schools which might typically be described as Very Remote, defined in My School in terms of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Structure (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The RSAS mostly targets Very Remote schools, though several schools in the program are Remote and there are some schools in the program that are defined as Outer Regional or Inner Regional. Our focus is on the Very Remote schools only.

Quantitative data

In order to assess the pre–post effect of the RSAS we have taken all Very Remote schools (as defined by My School) with greater than 80% First Nations students and compared the post-intervention results (2014 to 2019) with the pre-intervention attendance results (2008 to 2013). Table 1 summarises the number of schools introduced to the program by their stage of introduction, those which are classified as Very Remote and those with an enrolment of more than 80% First Nations students. “Comparison schools” are those non-RSAS schools that can reasonably be compared as similar to the Very Remote mostly First Nations schools, with similar proportions of First Nations enrolment as shown in Table 2. There are 100 of these schools in Very Remote parts of Australia.

Table 1: RSAS schools by stage of introduction and comparison schools (that have not received an RSAS intervention)

| | Number of RSAS schools | Average attendance rate in first year of stage | Number of Very Remote RSAS schools* | Number of Very Remote schools with >80%** First Nations students |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Stage 1, Term 1 2014 | 44 | 64.0% | 38 | 35 |
| Stage 2, Term 2 2014 | 29 | 67.9% | 26 | 24 |
| Stage 3, 2016–2018 | 9 | 70.7% | 8 | 5 |
| Stage 4, 2019–2021 | 6 | 81.0% | 6 | 3 |
| No longer involved | 4 | | 3 | 2 |

* The way My School defined remoteness changed during the period. The figure used here for Very Remote schools is the maximum during the period.

** Enrolment of First Nations students fluctuates over time; the figure shown here is the highest number of schools in the six years.

Table 2: Number of schools RSAS sample, Very Remote RSAS sub-set and comparison schools (Very Remote with >80% First Nations Enrolment)

| | All RSAS schools | Very Remote RSAS schools | Very Remote comparison schools with >80% First Nations enrolment |
|--|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Total schools in sample | 88 | 78 | 100 |
| Average First Nations enrolment | 88.9% | 96.5% | 97.0% |

Qualitative data

Data for the qualitative component of this analysis comes from an internet search of available policy documents related to the program. By “policy documents”, we mean documents representing the Australian Government’s position on the RSAS. We found:

- 22 media releases or stories provided either by the relevant Minister or the relevant department
- 8 extracts from parliament records
- 6 reports which detailed either evaluation findings or official results/goals of the program.

We would expect that there are probably more sources (some no longer available, and some unavailable to the public), but, given that these documents are all available either on government websites or media stories issued by the relevant Minister, they could be considered to be an adequate representation of the government's position on the RSAS program. Our analysis of these documents, using NVIVO qualitative analysis software, identified themes emerging from the texts. The themes emerging were grouped under the following headings:

1. What the RSAS is said to achieve
2. Assumptions of the program
3. How the RSAS works
4. Problems with the RSAS
5. Language used to describe the RSAS.

Limitations

There are several limitations that apply to the analysis presented here. First, the program itself has had a staged release and making an assessment about impact is hampered by the different time frames. Also, from a program perspective, the targeting has varied considerably, with some schools included where there are already relatively high rates of attendance, and some programs targeting only Aboriginal students rather than the whole school. The governance and management of the program varies, too. While each community includes attendance officers and supervisors, the auspicing organisations have different capacities and, in many cases, these organisations have changed over time.

Second, there are local and temporal factors that affect many schools. The extent to which factors such as funerals, cultural activities, weather events and staffing issues affect the program's outcomes is not captured in the data we have used. There have also been shifts in the scope of the RSAS program.

There are some missing data points for some schools. In the period 2008 to 2013 there are 51 out of 528 potential measurements for RSAS schools missing from our data set (either because they were not reported or we did not capture them before they disappeared from the My School website). A further two data points out of 528 potential measurements are missing from the 2014 to 2019 data set.

It is not reasonable to compare all RSAS schools with all non-RSAS schools. Non-RSAS schools include schools with mostly non-Indigenous enrolments – the latter group tend to display attendance patterns that mirror non-remote schools. It is, however, reasonable to compare Very Remote schools with high proportions of First Nations students – these schools have similar enrolments and sizes, and tend to have a high language-other-than-English cohort.

Findings

Figure 1 shows the attendance trajectory of all schools included in the RSAS, noting that the impact of the program is spread out over several years. The 2014 results reflect the impact of the 44 Stage 1 schools, 2015 adds the 29 Stage 2 schools, 2016 includes the impact of Stage 3, and 2019 includes the impact of Stage 4. Four schools that were included in Stage 1 that are now no longer involved are included.

Figure 1: Attendance trajectory for all RSAS schools (Term 1 data)

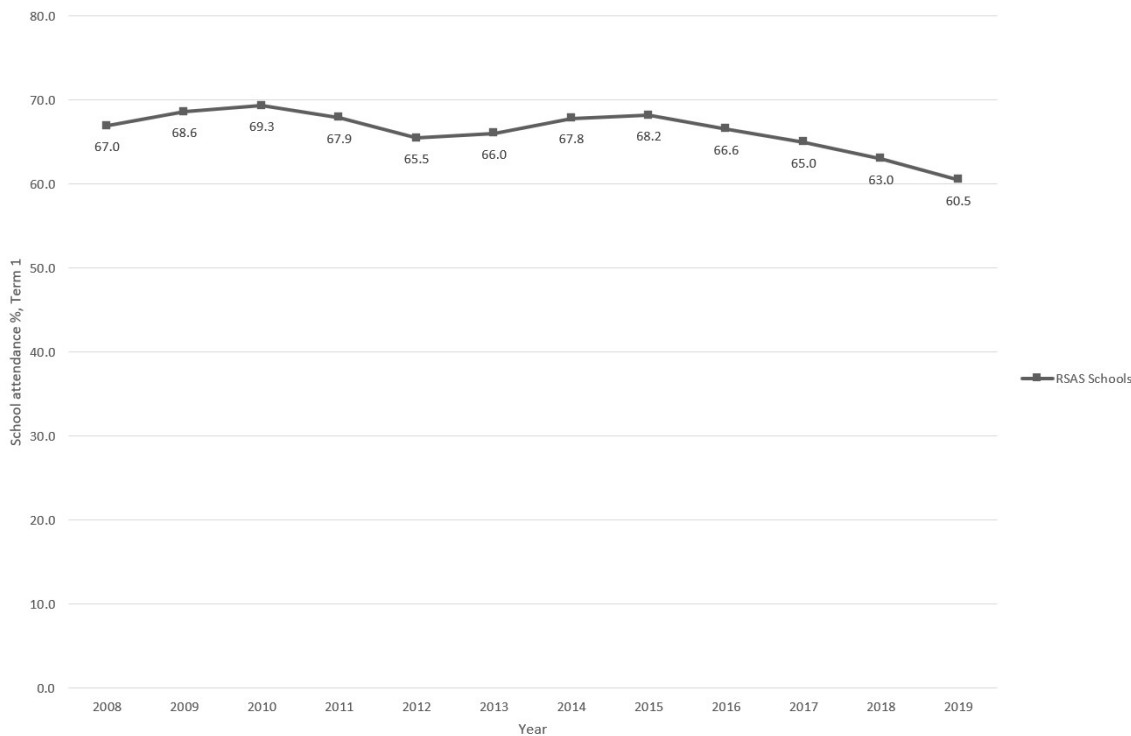


Table 3 shows attendance levels in the six years before the RSAS and the six years following. *T*-tests, comparing the periods, show the probability that the difference is similar. In both cases the difference in attendance is significantly lower, by a margin of 2.8% for all RSAS schools and 2.9% for all Very Remote RSAS schools with more than 80% First Nations students.

Table 3: Term 1 school attendance rates for RSAS schools 2008–2013 compared with 2014–2019

| | Attendance rate 2008–2013 | Attendance rate 2014–2019 | Attendance rate change | T-test result |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| All RSAS schools except 9 unmatched pairs (n = 78) | 67.3 | 64.5 | -2.8% | <i>p</i> < .01 |
| All Very Remote RSAS schools with >80% First Nations students except 2 unmatched pairs (n = 65) | 64.5 | 61.6 | -2.9% | <i>p</i> < .01 |

Table 4 summarises school attendance data for Term 1 2014 (when the RSAS began) with Term 1 2019 data for all RSAS schools, for Very Remote RSAS schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolments,

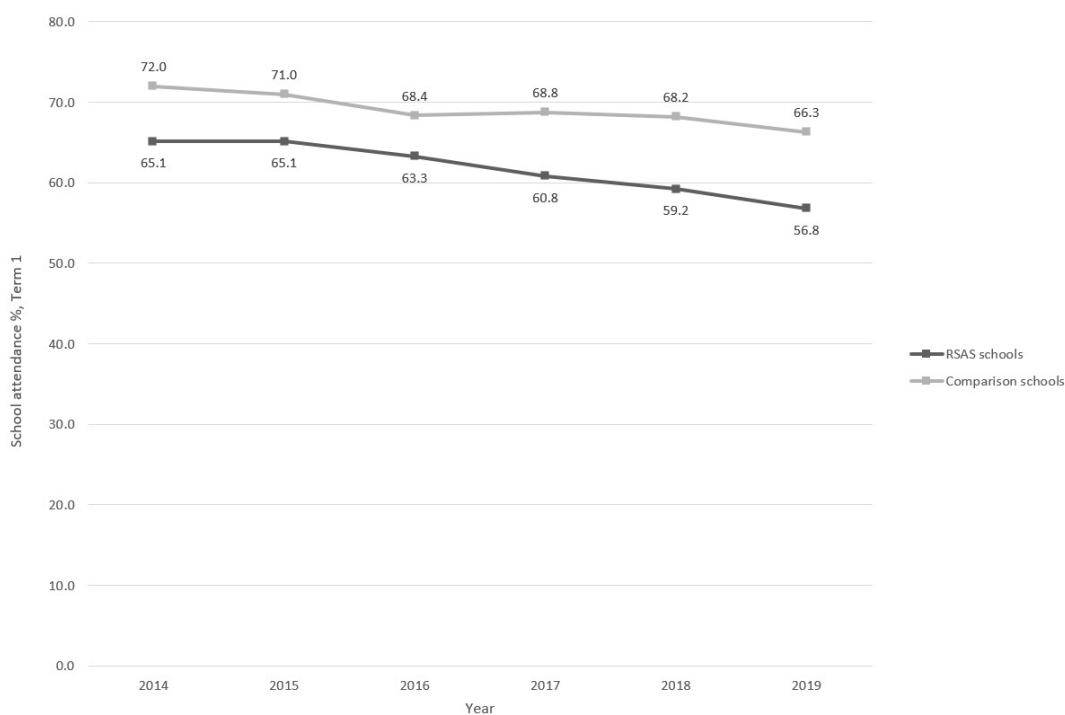
together with comparison schools. All groups of schools experienced a significant decline in attendance rates, as indicated by the *p* value for the *t*-test results. However, non-RSAS schools' attendance rates declined less than the comparison group of RSAS schools and the whole set of RSAS schools. In other words, schools that received the RSAS intervention performed worse (in terms of attendance rates) than schools that did not receive the intervention.

Table 1: Term 1 school attendance rates for RSAS schools and comparable Very Remote non-RSAS schools 2014 and 2019

| | Attendance rate at 2014 | Attendance rate at 2019 | Attendance rate change | T-test result |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| All RSAS schools | 67.8% | 60.5% | -7.3% | <i>p</i> < .01 |
| Very Remote RSAS schools with >80% First Nations students | 65.1% | 56.8% | -8.3% | <i>p</i> < .01 |
| All Very Remote non-RSAS schools with >80% First Nations students | 72.0 | 66.3 | -5.7% | <i>p</i> < .01 |

Figure 2 plots attendance rates year by year for the Very Remote, >80% First Nations, RSAS schools and comparison schools. Comparison schools did not receive the intervention at any time during the six years from 2014 to 2019. RSAS schools received the intervention either throughout the same six-year period or for part of the six-year period, noting that most schools in the program commenced either in Term 1 or 2 of the 2014 school year.

Figure 2: Attendance trajectories for Very Remote schools with and without an RSAS program (with >80% First Nations student enrolments) Term 1 data



Document analysis

In what follows, we present key themes that emerge from our reading of the 36 documents. These themes are discussed in the following sections under the headings Language used to describe the RSAS, What the RSAS is said to achieve, Assumptions of the program, How the RSAS works and Problems with the RSAS.

Language used to describe the RSAS

Three main themes emerged showing how the RSAS is described: (1) as a funding investment, (2) as a successful program, and (3) built on “teams”.

The theme of investment implies that there will be a return, here described as “opportunity”, “education” and a “transfer into employment”. Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion stated:

We are working in partnership with Indigenous communities, and the investments we are making are great news for our First Australians. We are ensuring that there are opportunities for people first to get an education and then to transfer into employment. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017)

The RSAS is portrayed as successful, for several reasons. First it “supports” a lot of students to attend school. Second it has “achieved a lot” getting more children to attend school. Third, it has created “almost 500 jobs”. Fourth, reinforcing the second reason, “RSAS has increased attendance rates in 84 communities”. Finally, it is successful because it was “co-designed” with communities.

Schools across Australia have returned for another year with around 14,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students supported to attend school through the Coalition Government’s successful Remote School Attendance Strategy.

RSAS has achieved a lot in the last five years ... getting more children to attend school, creating almost 500 jobs and bringing a new community driven focus to school attendance. ... RSAS has increased attendance rates in 84 communities in remote parts of the country.

The government’s Remote School Attendance Strategy has worked because it was co-designed with communities and local people are at the heart of its delivery – and that is why we are investing \$78.4 million to extend RSAS through to December 2021. (Scullion, 2019)

The narrative of “team” in documents conveys a sense of collaborative, cooperative and worthwhile work. The team endeavour is portrayed as “good” work, designed to “help kids get to school” – the emphasis on “mums, dads, caregivers ... who want to help ...” provides a perception that this program is important, not because the government thinks so, but because “mums and dads” think so.

RSAS works with local providers to employ teams of school attendance supervisors and school attendance officers to help kids get to school. Team members are local people from the community. They may be mums, dads, caregivers, aunts, uncles or grandparents who want to help kids in the community get to school. (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2020)

What the RSAS is said to achieve

There are three outcomes most frequently reported in the documents. These can be summarised as (1) improving attendance outcomes, (2) creating employment for people in remote communities, and (3) assisting and supporting families to help them get their children to attend school. A notable absence in the documents is any serious discussion about the connection between attendance and educational outcomes.

During initial rollout of the RSAS, the Minister used statistics from reports to argue that it was improving attendance results:

Overall last year school attendance improved by 15% in Northern Territory RSAS schools and 17% in Queensland RSAS schools. (Scullion, 2015)

As the program continued, there was less reliance on statistics and more reliance on normative statements. Announcing an RSAS conference in 2017, the Minister argues for a “further boost” to attendance. The language of “best practice” implies an allusion to evidence.

This historic conference will see RSAS staff and educators sharing best practice strategies and knowledge to further boost attendance. (Scullion, 2017)

By 2018, the language of improved attendance outcomes had become more muted, though official documents still alluded to improved attendance:

Since 2014 the Remote School Attendance Strategy has achieved promising results, with Queensland achieving the greatest average improvements. (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, 2018)

Even in 2019, with no evidence to support the claims for improvement, the Minister claimed that:

RSAS has increased attendance rates in 84 communities in remote parts of the country. (Scullion, 2019)

And as late as 2019 the Operational Framework suggested that the desired impacts of the program are:

- Attendance is community norm
- Average attendance rate is 90% or higher
- More students are going 90% of the time or more. (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019)

Attendance outcomes are coupled with a narrative of “support” or “help” for families.

It started off slow but once the parents figured out we were there to help them, they joined with us and gave us ideas to improve attendance. (Australian Government, 2015b)

The RSAS teams portray themselves as supporters not enforcers. (O’Brien Rich Research Group, 2016)

In 2019, RSAS is expected to support 13,885 students and their families across 84 remote schools. (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019)

Assumptions of the program

While there are numerous other assumptions reflected in the documents, three main messages emerge. First, education is important because it leads to a better life. Second, getting children to school is the government's highest priority. Third, attendance is parents' responsibility.

The "belief" in education as a vehicle for achieving a "better life" is represented in several statements, which see education as the primary means for a "successful" future.

The Coalition Government believes that every child, no matter where they live, deserves an education as the foundation to a successful life. (Scullion, 2019)

Children going to school only half the time are not getting an education that will give them a future—a future in which they can become whatever they want to be. (Scullion, 2014a)

This belief justifies the government's commitment to attendance:

Getting children to school, improving education outcomes and supporting families to give their children the best start in life is a major priority for the Australian Government. (Australian Government, 2015)

In the following statement, the belief of parental responsibility emerges as a direct goal of the government.

Reversing these falls [attendance rates in the NT] has been the Australian Government's No. 1 priority in Indigenous Affairs. The RSAS aims to break the cycle of non-attendance and ensure parents and carers take responsibility for educating their children. (Scullion, 2014b)

The language of parent responsibility disappeared from the discourse after 2014, perhaps because of the need for community decision-making and place-based solutions, which appear more in later documents, for example in the 2019 Operational Framework.

How the RSAS works

There are several mechanisms that the documents represent as important for the effectiveness of the RSAS. They include (1) working in partnership with communities, (2) supporting local decision-making about the program, (3) understanding the circumstances of parents and the community, and (4) brokering relationships between parents and schools. The language of partnership and relationships is seen as a key mechanism for the program's achievement of outcomes:

It supports local people to test approaches and it creates relationships between the community and school. (Scullion, 2016)

The O'Brien Rich Research Group (2016) case study report lists this kind of work as essential for success:

- Creating relationships with the community
- The RSAS team and the school working together. (O'Brien Rich Research Group, 2016)

Another evaluation report (Niddrie et al., 2018) makes similar claims suggesting that:

When it worked best, RSAS was an effective referral and coordination point. (Niddrie et al., 2018)

In the 2019 Operational Framework, relationships are described as a key foundation for the program's change assumptions. The program:

Brokers and builds relationships between stakeholders to ensure a whole-of-community [approach] to school attendance. (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019)

The same document describes underpinning strategies as "community planning" and "build and broker relationships", outputs as "relationships strengthened" and "schools part of community and RSAS", an outcome as "strong partnerships", and "trust and connection" as a desired impact. The program sounds like it is a community development program, built on collaboration with communities and local decision-making underpinning successful outcomes.

Problems with the RSAS

There were a few suggestions that there were problems with the RSAS. In most cases these problems were blamed on local issues like weather, funerals, and "complex life events":

RSAS is unable to improve school attendance for families experiencing complex life events. (Niddrie et al., 2018, p. 6)

These "complex life events" are perhaps a euphemistic way of describing parental deficits. More generally, there were many references to "barriers" to attendance, which needed to be "broken down". One Northern Territory coordinator supporting the program suggested that:

Kids miss school for days or weeks at a time when their families travel long distances to big events like community sporting carnivals, show days and meetings about the distribution of mining royalty payments, which all draw people into the larger centres. (Easton, 2014)

It is important to note that the "problems" were not to do with the program itself, but on the contextual factors perceived as inhibiting the program.

Discussion

After six years of operation, what are the attendance outcomes from the RSAS?

Despite significant financial investment, the RSAS has resulted in attendance outcomes that are lower than before the program's 2014 initiation. While the RSAS is driven by a commitment to "real and lasting change to school attendance at the local level" (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019, p. 8), comparisons available in Figure 1 between post-intervention results (2014–2019) and pre-intervention results (2008–2013) indicate that this program has not met its attendance objectives (90% or higher). When considering attendance mean values from the pre-intervention period (2008–2013) with the post-intervention results (2014–2019), a 2.8% net loss in student attendance across all schools involved in the program is evident (see Table 1).

Similarly, when RSAS results are considered alongside comparable schools (see Figure 2) that were not part of the program, RSAS schools experienced a greater attendance decline for the 2014–2019 period. While RSAS and non-RSAS school groups experienced an overall attendance decline, comparison schools experienced a 5.7% decrease while RSAS schools experienced an 8.3% decrease.

So, what went wrong? While government narratives about the RSAS program have consistently centred on collaboration, teamwork and co-design, our analysis suggests that failure of the RSAS can be attributed to the misalignment of ontological principles upon which the program was initially founded, possibly caused by a failure to “listen carefully” (Delpit, 1993) or ethically (Osborne, 2017a) leading to a lack of effective feedback loops. A reliance on Human Capital Theory assumptions underpins expectations of long-term outcomes for remote communities. That is, having invested in education, people will realise the hope of education to improve livelihoods. The problem, though, is that the service users—communities—have not invested in education; rather, it is the service providers, through the Australian Government, that have invested in education. The repeated emphasis on attendance as the government’s priority and ensuring that parents take responsibility for education demonstrates an intent to apply an “architecture of regulation” (Ball, 2010), which abrogates the Australian Government of responsibility for the structural inequalities it perpetuates.

The RSAS is generally operationalised from outside the school, so employee investment is not in schools either. Notwithstanding the benefit to local employment, the program was designed to adhere to political imperatives, which were arguably different from community aspirations for localised education. Aiming to achieve school attendance in remote communities in excess of 90% fails to recognise that the education currently on offer is not firmly grounded in what communities value (Guenther et al., 2015). While schooling does not align with communities’ contextual, cultural and linguistic aspirations, the impetus towards increased attendance is unlikely to change. Further, non-attendance could be a form of resistance which reflects a latent agency within communities not to buy into externally imagined political agendas. Regardless, by its own measures of success (increasing attendance towards a 90% goal), the strategy has failed, and has had declining results since 2016. What could be happening beyond the ontological/axiological mismatch is that the “common sense” message of school attendance is not being effectively translated by the RSAS structure to families and students, rendering co-design and collaboration effectively useless. In Gramscian terms the “organic intellectuals” of communities are not doing their jobs (which is to gain consent).

On what basis does the Australian Government continue to fund the program?

The extent of federal support most recently saw the program extended until 2021 at an additional cost of \$78.4 million. This raises questions about why a failing program is receiving significant ongoing funding. To answer the question of why the RSAS continues to be funded, four critical factors in the data require consideration. These include (1) positioning of the program as “collaborative” despite being conceived and directed by government, (2) political blindness to aspects of the program that are failing, (3) government commitment to local employment despite attendance declines, and (4) an embedded philosophical belief of government that the RSAS can work over the long term.

The RSAS was extended in February 2019 and, as part of the announcement, Minister Scullion said:

The government’s Remote School Attendance Strategy has worked because it was co-designed with communities and local people are at the heart of its delivery – and that is why we are investing \$78.4 million to extend RSAS through to December 2021.

Labor did not take action on addressing remote school attendance when they were in government and have not committed to supporting RSAS and the local jobs it provides. This means that the jobs for 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school attendance officers are at risk ahead of the upcoming Federal election. (Scullion, 2019)

Minister Scullion could be questioned about two aspects of his comments. Firstly, the suggestion that the program is “co-designed” positions the program as desired, designed, structured and enacted in collaboration with/by community stakeholders. There is no evidence from any of the documents we reviewed to suggest that communities have asked for this, or that communities themselves see it as community-led or community-designed. A more accurate assessment may be that the RSAS was conceived beyond remote locales, aligns predominantly with the Australian Government’s political rationalities and media messaging (McCallum & Waller, 2022; Waller et al., 2018), and is merely carried out in communities by local personnel. The lack of evidence for collaboration is reflected in the evaluation of the program (Niddrie et al., 2018), which avoids mention of collaboration or co-design. The approach is not representative of co-design, collaboration or teamwork. Rather, it is an example of asymmetrical power favouring the government to determine a course of action upon which communities must ultimately acquiesce if they wish to benefit from local employment opportunities.

Secondly, the Minister indicated that the program is working, possibly suggesting a “policy blindness” (Altman & Klein, 2018) to the shortcomings of the RSAS generally, despite the evidence. Given that RSAS school attendance rates have been decreasing since 2016, we could ask what aspect of the program the Minister is referring to when he posits that it is successful. Presumably, success is found in the second part of the quote: “jobs”. The creation of significant local employment is a positive element of the RSAS, and places the government in a difficult position, as removing local employment that has been created would be unpalatable on many levels.

Despite evident program deficiencies, the language used throughout the operation of the RSAS is indicative of a deep philosophical belief in the role that education plays in the development of a successful and productive life, an assumption that has been challenged (Guenther, 2021). This locates the RSAS as predicated on simplistic linear, cause-and-effect rationality, despite the complexity of remote community life. It is worth noting that the emphasis on employment outcomes as a measure of success is not matched by any discussion in the documents that we examined showing how attendance will lead to better educational outcomes and future employment opportunities. The early policy documents point to these causal pathways, but the more recent documents avoid these assertions in favour of the (false) claim of improved attendance as an outcome, and the purported benefits of community-based “co-designed” activities. The educational benefit for children seems to have been somehow lost in the discourse – perhaps because it is not there.

Conclusions

In this article we have highlighted the failure of the Remote School Attendance Strategy to deliver what it set out to do. This is not to be critical of the strategy – policies and strategies often fail, and we acknowledge the difficult task that governments have had in trying to establish regular school attendance as a normative pattern of behaviour in remote First Nations communities. Perhaps more importantly, what we have highlighted is the continued “investment” in a program that the Australian Government’s own data (My School) shows is failing. At face value, this is an issue of accountability, particularly when the policy documents we analysed describe the program as “successful” when it was not (at least in terms

of its attendance objectives). However, the deeper issue is an ethical one. How could it be that public money could continue to be invested in a program that was doing harm – making attendance rates worse than for schools that have had no intervention.

Why would a government continue to invest in a failing program and at the same time cast it as successful? We suspect that there are elements of “policy blindness” (Altman & Klein, 2018), which limits policy makers from seeing failure, masked as it is by alternative measures of success (in this case the employment of 500 people). But perhaps, too, there is an element of blind faith in the philosophical position of neo-liberal policy, the importance of individual choice and the hope that, given time, the logic will work. The policy blindness also disables a critical response to the causal pathways of failure – it is as if there is no failure inherent in the program so why would you need to change it?

Short of abandoning the RSAS, the policy options for governments are difficult. We believe a realignment of the 500 jobs – towards more education-focused roles within schools that enable greater local buy-in to education, not just attendance – is required. But this will require a more highly attuned ethical listening approach that affirms local aspirations, aligned to local axiological and ontological imperatives. A refocused attention to what is in the best educational interests of young children (as opposed to the benefit of 500 adult jobs) is required.

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