Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey

SUMMARY BOOKLET

Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People

How to obtain a copy of the main report

A copy of the report ***Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People*** can be purchased for $75 through:

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research
PO Box 855
WEST PERTH WA 6872

Telephone: (08) 9489 7777
Fax: (08) 9489 7700

A PDF version of the main publication, as well as a PDF version of this summary booklet, can be downloaded free from our web site:

www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/waachs

Further information

Other WAACHS publications, including Volume One — *The Health of Aboriginal Children and Young People*, and Volume Two — *The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People* can be obtained by contacting the Institute, or from our web site.

If you would like more information about the WAACHS, please email us at:

waachs@ichr.uwa.edu.au

Photographs: Tony McDonough

Drawing design by Charles, from Carnarvon, as part of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Schools Art Competition

About the survey

This booklet summarises the third volume of results from the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) — *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People*.

This large-scale investigation into the health, wellbeing and education of 5,289 Western Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 to 17 years was undertaken by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (the Institute) in conjunction with the Kulunga Research Network. The survey was designed to build the knowledge to develop preventative strategies that promote and maintain the healthy development and the social, emotional, academic, and vocational wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Volume Three concentrates on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children aged 4 to 17 years using data from carers, young people aged 12 to 17 years and teachers of students attending school.

In 1993 the Institute conducted the Western Australian Child Health Survey (WA CHS), from which three volumes of findings were produced documenting the health, wellbeing and education of 4 to 16 year-old Western Australian children. Recognising that the 1993 WA CHS did not have a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the Institute met with several key Aboriginal leaders and representatives from across the state to seek support and endorsement to conduct a survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 to 17 years. The survey was subsequently endorsed and has been the first to gather comprehensive health, developmental and educational information on a population-based sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their families and communities.

All phases of the survey were under the direction of the WAACHS Steering Committee. The Steering Committee comprises senior Aboriginal people from a cross section of agencies and settings.

About the information in this booklet

Terms used

Aboriginal: refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Non-Aboriginal: refers collectively to children in the 1993 WA CHS (see page 1) or to children classified as non-Aboriginal in administrative data.

Children: refers to persons under the age of 18 years at the time of the survey.

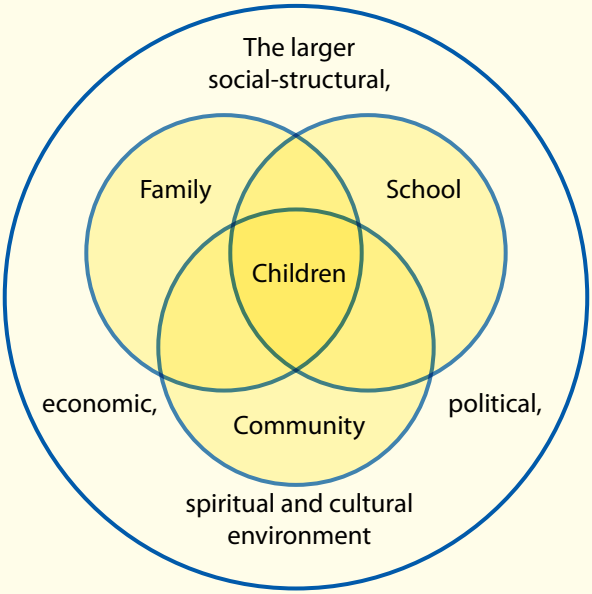
Young people: refers to persons aged 12 to 17 years at the time of the survey.

Students: refers to children who were attending school at the time of the survey.

Primary carer: the person spending most time with the child and considered to know most about the child. The child's primary carer was usually, but not always, the mother of the child.

Level of Relative Isolation (LORI): a new classification of remoteness (see page 4).

SURVEY MODEL: CHILDREN WITHIN CONTEXTS OF influence



Source: Jessor, 1993.

Analysis methods

In this booklet, findings are presented in two main ways:

- proportions, based on weighted estimates
- odds ratios, based on logistic regression modelling.

Survey findings can be inter-related. Many factors were found to be associated with educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. For instance, poor school attendance, level of education of the primary carer, and students' level of risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were all related to academic performance. However, level of education of the primary carer and student's risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were both related to attendance at school.

While percentages show the proportion of children affected by each factor, they are unable to fully explain the relationships between all the factors that affect a student's academic performance. There is a mathematical technique called logistic regression modelling which can help us understand the relationships between multiple factors. Logistic regression modelling has been used to determine the effect of each factor, separately from the effect of each other factor. Modelling results are presented as odds ratios. Odds ratios are calculated relative to an index category for each variable. The odds ratio is a measure of relative risk. For instance, compared with students with low risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, the odds ratio for low academic performance was 2.8 for students at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. This suggests that students at high risk are almost three times as likely to have low academic performance as students at low risk.

Accuracy of the estimates

All data presented in this booklet have been subject to rigorous statistical analysis. Estimates from the survey have been calculated at a 95% level of confidence, displayed on graphs by means of vertical confidence interval bars (⌶). There is a 95% chance that the true value for a data item lies between the upper and lower limits indicated by the confidence bars for that item. A full explanation of the survey methodology can be obtained from the Volume Three main report — *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People.*

Level of Relative Isolation

Measuring access to services

For this survey, a new classification of remoteness — the Level of Relative Isolation (LORI) — has been designed. The LORI is based on the ARIA++ product from the National Key Centre for Social Application of Geographic Information Systems at Adelaide University (GISCA). ARIA++ is an extension of ARIA (the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia), which has been widely adopted as the standard classification of remoteness in Australia. Because ARIA is based on describing the entire population of Australia, it has not been specifically designed to describe the circumstances of Aboriginal people living in remote areas. The ARIA++ gives a more detailed description of more remote areas by including more service centres, of smaller sizes, in calculating its remoteness scores.

ARIA++ : better definition of remote areas

Under the original ARIA, over two-thirds of the land mass of WA, and over one quarter of Aboriginal people in WA live in areas classified as 'very remote'. However, WAACHS data showed that, within this group, there were marked differences in access to basic services, cultures, lifestyles and health outcomes. The greater detail of ARIA++ enables these differences to be more adequately described in the Aboriginal population.

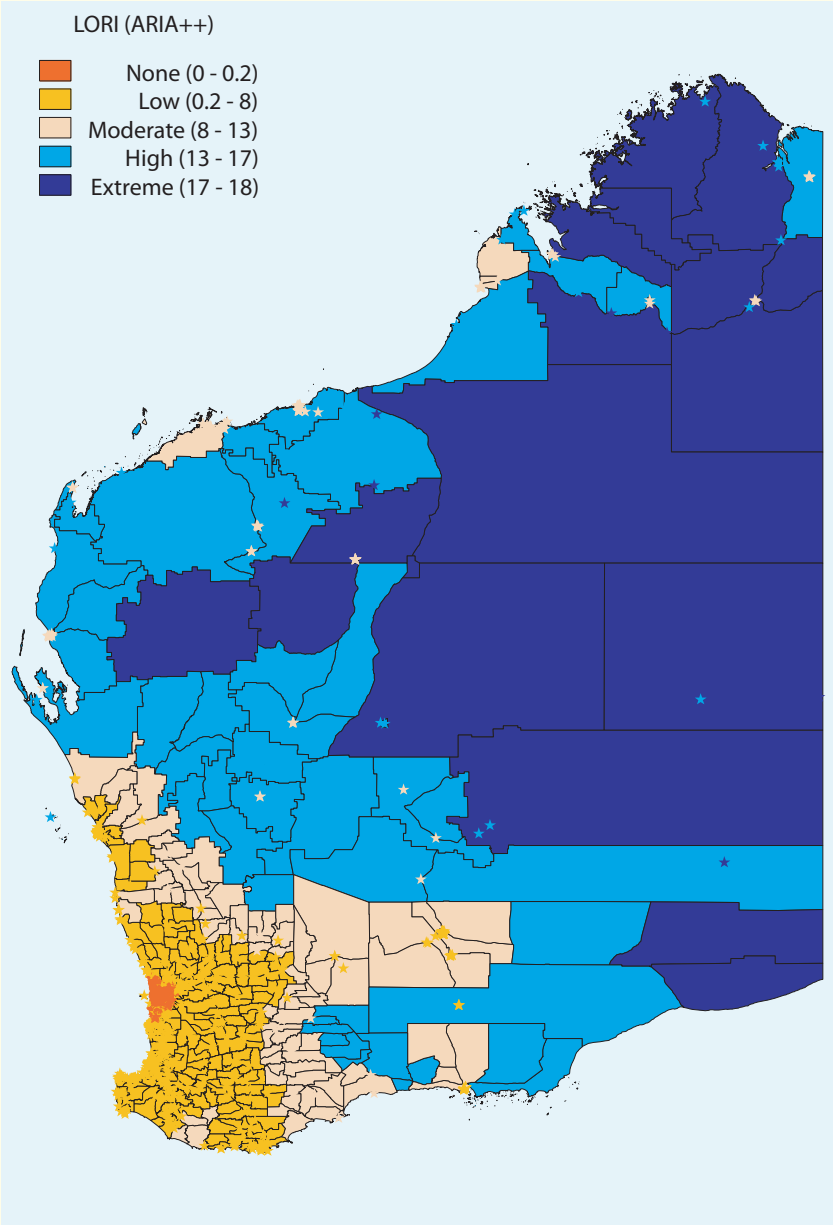
LORI categories

Based on the ARIA++ scores, five categories of isolation have been defined to more appropriately reflect differences in cultures, access to services and health outcomes for Aboriginal children. To avoid confusion with the original ARIA, the five categories are referred to as Levels of Relative Isolation (LORI) and range from None (the Perth Metropolitan area) to Low (e.g. Albany), Moderate (e.g. Broome), High (e.g. Kalumburu) and Extreme (e.g. Yiyili).

The Aboriginal population of WA at 30 June 2001 was estimated at 66,100 or 3.5% of the total WA population. Of this, 29,800 people (45%) were aged under 18 years, representing 6% of the total WA population for this age group. Proportions of Aboriginal children in each LORI category were as follows: None – 34%, Low – 24%, Moderate – 21%, High – 11%, Extreme – 10%.

Level of Relative Isolation *(continued)*

LEVEL OF RELATIVE ISOLATION (LORI) CATEGORIES BASED ON ARIA++ RANGES



Overview of Western Australian schools

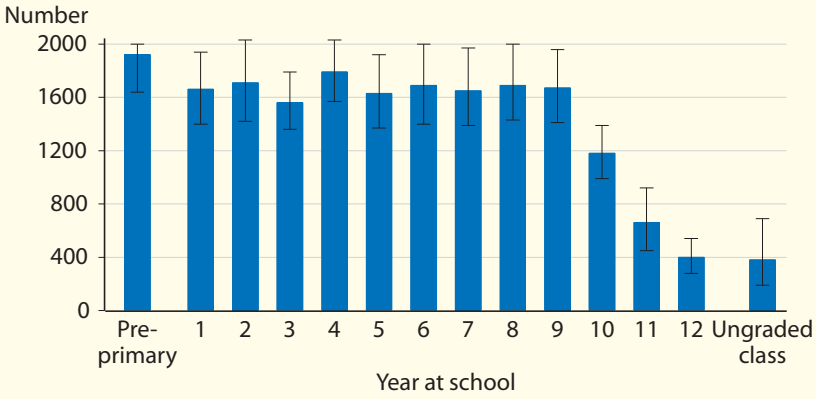
Schools

In 2001 there were 750 schools in WA with at least one Aboriginal student. Of these schools, 72% were Government schools, 17% were Catholic schools and 11% were Independent schools.

Students

There were 19,600 Aboriginal school students (Pre-primary to Year 12) in Western Australia in 2001.

ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS, BY YEAR AT SCHOOL



Most Aboriginal students went to Government schools (85%) regardless of the geographic location of the student. However, there was a greater proportion of Aboriginal students in Catholic or Independent schools in areas of high/extreme relative isolation (34%) when compared with Perth (10%) and low/moderate areas of relative isolation (11%).

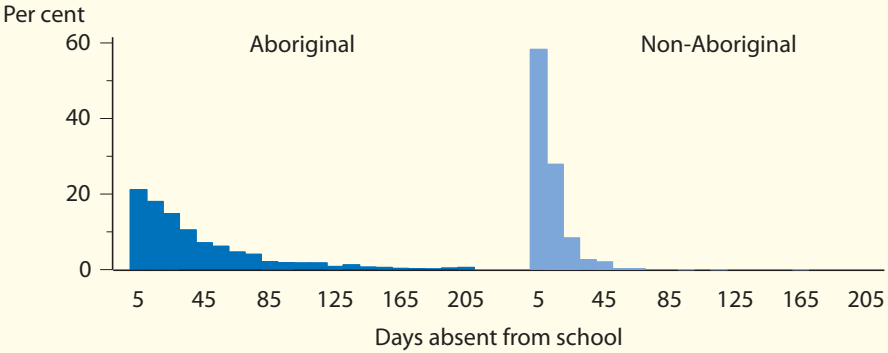
School attainment

In 2001, 22% of Aboriginal students who had commenced Year 11 the year before (Government and Catholic schools) achieved a Year 12 certificate. The corresponding figure for non-Aboriginal students in WA was 62%.

School attendance

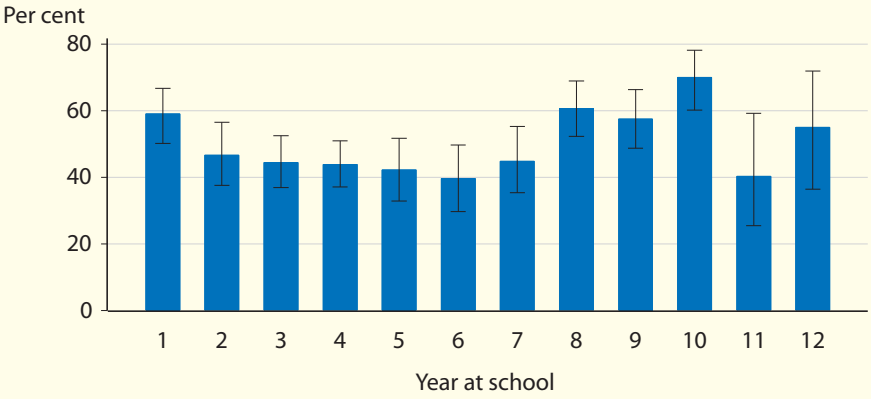
Half of all Aboriginal students attended school for at least 87.5% of the school year. In other words, the median number of days absent was 26 days. In 1993, the median number of days absent for non-Aboriginal students was 8 days. Only 18% of Aboriginal students had less than 8 days of absence from school.

STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS – DISTRIBUTION OF DAYS ABSENT IN SCHOOL YEAR, ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL STUDENTS



The proportion of students who missed 26 or more days of school in the school year tended to decline from Year 1 to Year 6 then increase to Year 10 where the proportion who have missed 26 days or more peaked at 70%.

PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS ABSENT FROM SCHOOL FOR 26 DAYS OR MORE, BY YEAR AT SCHOOL



Factors associated with school attendance

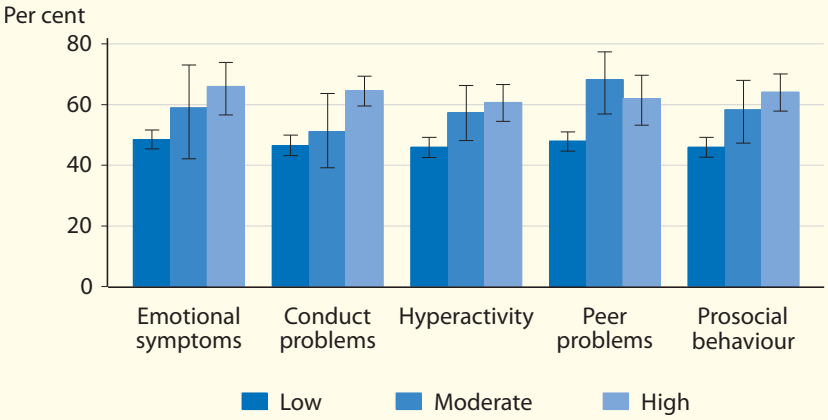
Factors found to be associated with attendance at school by Aboriginal students included the following:

- Students were almost 30% less likely to have lower than median attendance if their carers had been educated beyond Year 10 to Years 11 or 12.
- Students assessed by their teachers to be at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were almost twice as likely to have at least 26 days of absence from school compared with students at low risk.
- Students in families where 7 to 14 life stress events had occurred in the past 12 months were almost twice as likely to be absent for 26 days or more than students from families where 2 or less life stress events had occurred.
- Students were more likely to miss 26 days or more of school if their main language spoken in the playground was Aboriginal English or an Aboriginal language.
- Students who had trouble getting enough sleep were over one and a half times more likely to be absent for at least 26 days.
- Students who had never attended day care were one and a half times as likely to be absent from school for 26 days or more during the school year.
- Students whose primary carer had needed to see the school principal about a problem the student was having at school were almost twice as likely to be absent for 26 days or more.
- Students in schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students, or in schools that had Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) were more likely to be absent for at least 26 days.

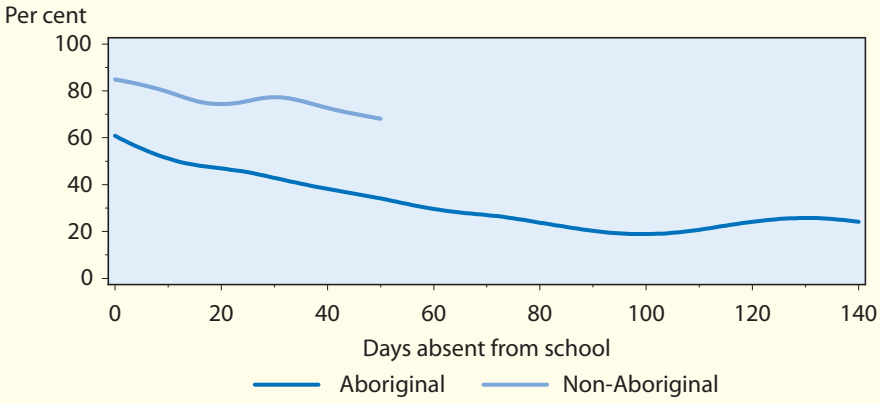
Almost half of all Aboriginal students had more than 10 unexplained days absent from school during the school year compared with only 4% of non-Aboriginal students. For Aboriginal students who were absent for 26 days or more, two-thirds of the days absent were unexplained.

Factors associated with school attendance *(continued)*

PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS WHO HAD MISSED AT LEAST 26 DAYS OF SCHOOL, BY RISK OF CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES



PROPORTION OF STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS (a) AT AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, BY NUMBER OF DAYS ABSENT FROM SCHOOL IN A SCHOOL YEAR, ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL STUDENTS



(a) Only students aged 4 to 16 years were included in the 1993 WA CHS, which was the source of the data for non-Aboriginal students.

Academic performance

Various aspects of the academic performance of Western Australian Aboriginal students aged 4 to 17 years have been measured in the WAACHS using teacher reports, independent tests of verbal and non-verbal ability, and administrative data linked to the survey.

Three measures of Aboriginal students' academic performance were collected in the WAACHS:

- Teacher rated literacy, numeracy and overall academic performance.
- Two standardised tests were administered to survey students — a test of visuo-spatial reasoning (Matrices test) where students were asked to complete a pattern or design; and a test of English language word definitions (Word Definitions test), comprising twenty words of increasing difficulty. Identical tests were administered to non-Aboriginal students in the 1993 WA CHS and comparison results are presented here.
- Test scores from the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) were obtained by linking consenting survey respondents with data held by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. WALNA is a curriculum-based assessment that tests students' knowledge and skills in numeracy, reading, spelling and writing. The WALNA tests are administered annually to students in Years 3, 5 and 7. Test results are related to national benchmark figures which are the agreed standards of performance that professional educators across the country deem to be the minimum level required for students in Years 3, 5 and 7.

National literacy and numeracy benchmarks are part of an agreement by all Australian Education Ministers, through the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), to enable each state and territory to annually report aggregate student achievement data based on a common set of measurement standards. This allows for comparisons to be made across jurisdictions and for national level reporting. Data was first reported for 1999, and is currently available for children in Years 3, 5 and 7. WALNA data is the Western Australian component of the national benchmark testing.

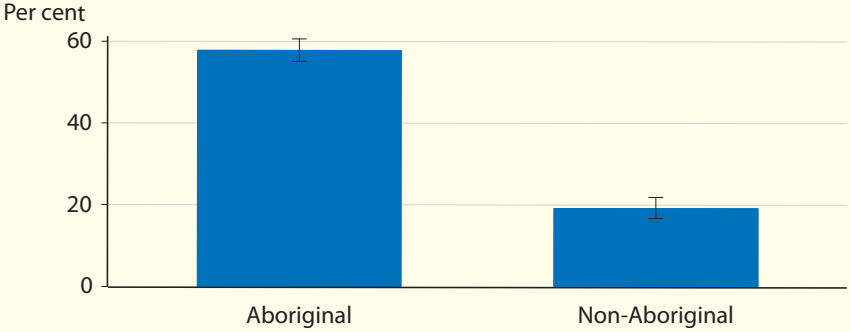
Academic performance *(continued)*

Teacher rated overall academic performance

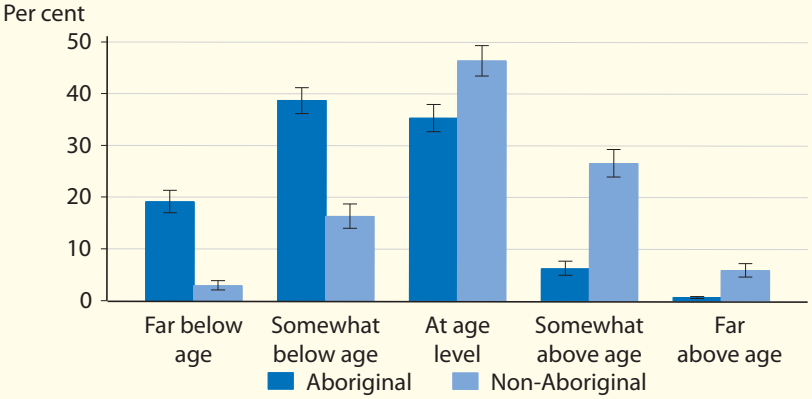
'Low academic performance' is defined by grouping students who were 'far below age level' or 'somewhat below age level' using teacher ratings of overall academic performance. Students who were 'at age level', 'somewhat above age level' or 'far above age level' are classified as having 'average or above average academic performance'.

An estimated 58% of Aboriginal students aged 4 to 16 years were rated by their teachers as having low academic performance. This compares with 19% of non-Aboriginal students having low academic performance.

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 16 YEARS AT LOW ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL STUDENTS



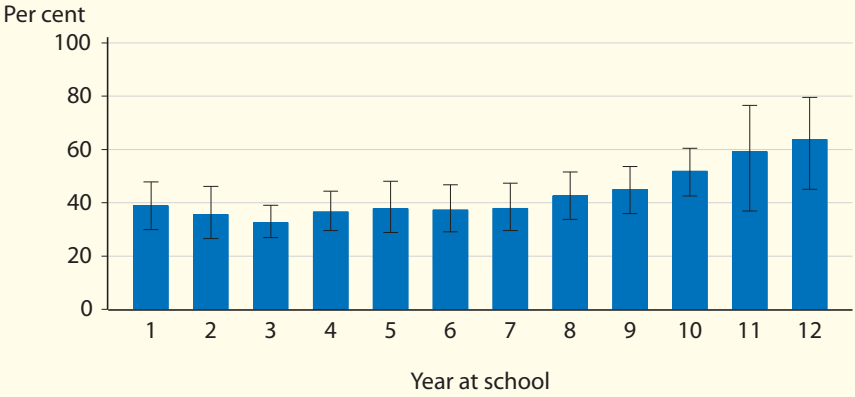
STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 16 YEARS — DISTRIBUTION OF OVERALL ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE (TEACHER RATING), ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL STUDENTS



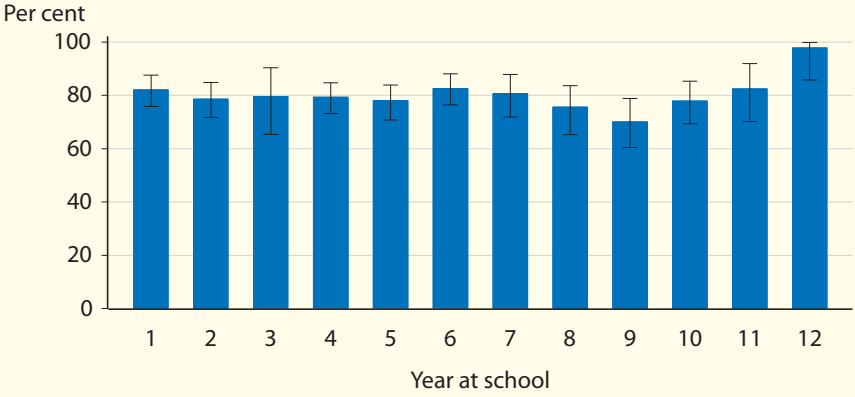
Academic performance *(continued)*

The disparity in academic performance between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students is evident from Year 1 onwards, and is maintained until the mid high school years. Studies have shown that, unless pre-school learning and early primary school assistance are provided, underperforming students are rarely able to catch up. The rise in performance in Years 11 and 12 merely reflects the fact that many of the lower performing students have by then left school.

PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS AT AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, BY YEAR AT SCHOOL



PROPORTION OF NON-ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 16 YEARS AT AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, BY YEAR AT SCHOOL (1993 WA CHS)

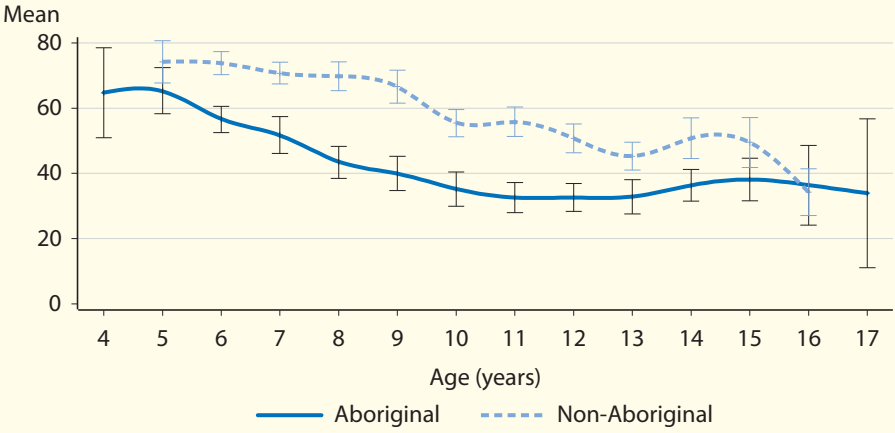


Academic performance *(continued)*

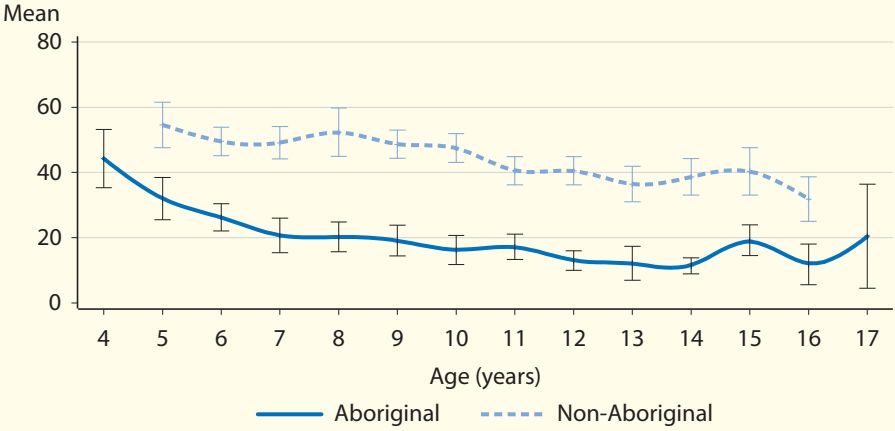
Matrices and Word Definitions test scores

The following two charts show the Matrices and Word Definitions test scores for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. They highlight that Aboriginal students begin their schooling at a clear disadvantage relative to non-Aboriginal students. The deficit in scores for both independent measures is most pronounced in the primary school years and is maintained into the final years of schooling.

STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS — MEAN MATRICES CENTILE SCORES, BY AGE



STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS — MEAN WORD DEFINITIONS CENTILE SCORES, BY AGE



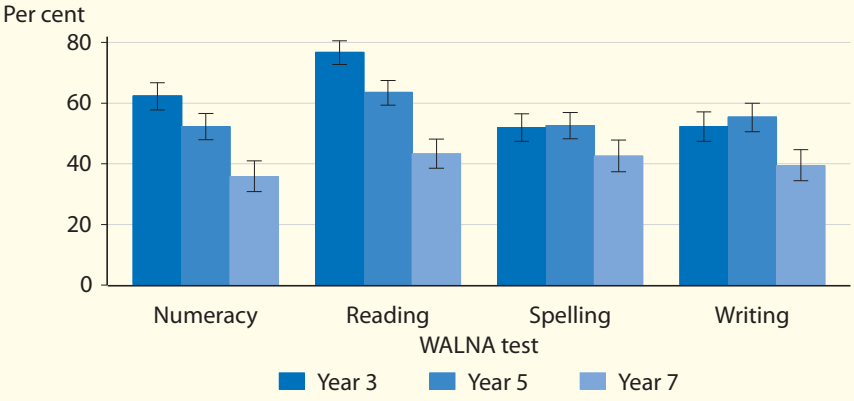
Academic performance *(continued)*

National literacy and numeracy benchmarks

Independent administrative data linked to the survey confirm inequalities in academic performance between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students. See page 10 for more information on WALNA and national literacy and numeracy benchmark testing.

The proportions of Aboriginal students achieving the national benchmarks in WALNA testing were highest in Year 3 testing, with results ranging from 50% to around 77% in numeracy, reading, spelling and writing tests. For Year 7 testing, the proportions achieving the national benchmarks were significantly lower, with results ranging from 35% to 44%. The corresponding proportions meeting the benchmark for all Western Australian students in Year 7 testing were between 77% and 85%, further confirming wide disparities in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS ACHIEVING THE NATIONAL BENCHMARK



Drawing design by Tammy from Paraburdoo as part of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Schools Art Competition

Factors associated with academic performance

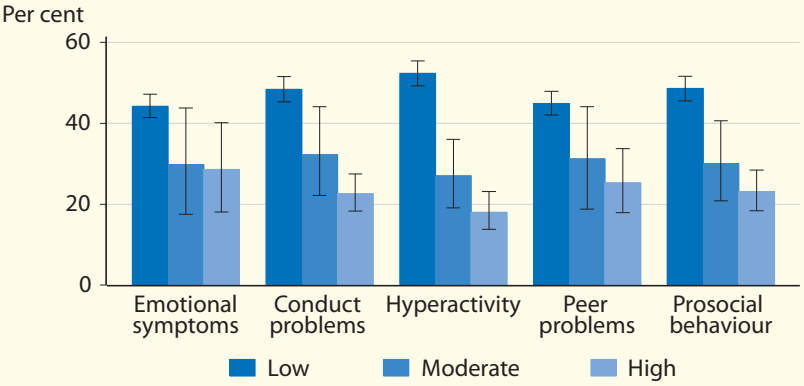
Factors associated with the academic performance of Aboriginal students are presented in four categories — student factors, carer factors, family and household factors, and school environment factors. A companion table of selected odds ratios for these findings follows on page 18.

In terms of each of these factors:

Student factors

- Males were almost twice as likely as females to have low academic performance.
- Students aged 12 to 14 years were around one and a half times more likely to have low academic performance than 4 to 7 year-olds.
- Students who had trouble saying certain sounds were around one and a half times more likely to have low academic performance.
- Students at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were almost three times more likely to have low academic performance compared with students at low risk. The same trend was observed for each of the five specific emotional or behavioural difficulties.

PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS AT AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, BY TEACHER RATED RISK OF CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES



Factors associated with academic performance *(continued)*

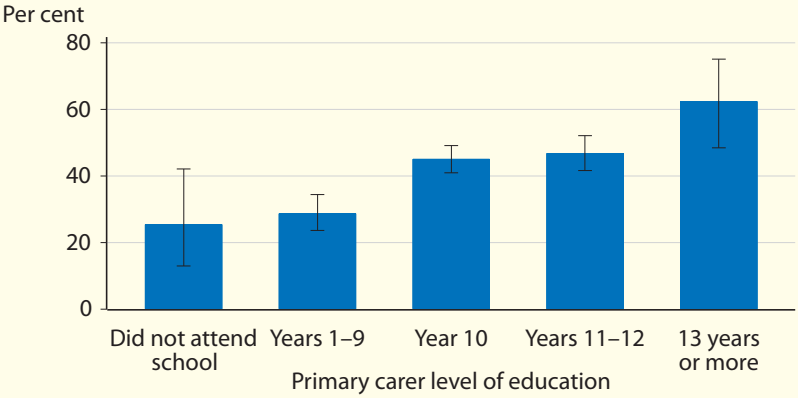
- Students who spoke Aboriginal English in the classroom were over twice as likely to be rated at low academic performance than students who spoke English in the classroom.
- Students whose carers had needed to see the class teacher in the last six months about a problem the student was having at school were around one and a half times more likely to be rated at low academic performance compared with students whose carers had not needed to see the class teacher about a problem.

Carer factors

- Students in the primary care of a person who had completed 13 or more years of education were over two times less likely to have low academic performance than students whose primary carer had 1 to 9 years of education.

  A higher proportion of students whose primary carer had 13 or more years of education (e.g. diploma, bachelor degree, postgraduate diploma or higher degree) were rated by their teachers at average or above average academic performance (62%). The corresponding proportion for students with carers who did not attend school was 25% while for students with carers who had completed 1 to 9 years of education the proportion was 29%.

PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS AT AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, BY PRIMARY CARER LEVEL OF EDUCATION



Factors associated with academic performance *(continued)*

- The students of primary carers who were not in the labour force were almost one and a half times more likely to have low academic performance relative to students whose primary carer was employed.
- Students whose primary carer had not attended an Aboriginal funeral in the last 12 months were almost one and a half times less likely to be rated at low academic performance relative to students whose primary carer had attended an Aboriginal funeral.

Family and household factors

- Students who had lived in five or more homes since birth were almost one and a half times less likely to be rated at low academic performance compared with students that had lived in four or less homes.

School environment factors

- Students attending schools where the student to teacher ratio was more than 20 were almost two times less likely to have low academic performance compared with students attending schools where this ratio was 10 or less.
- Students absent from school for 63 days or more were over two times more likely to have low academic performance relative to students who were absent for 10 days or less.
- Students who had more than 10 days of unexplained absence were almost twice as likely to have low academic performance than students who did not have any unexplained absence.
- Students suspended from school at least twice were over three times more likely to have low academic performance than students who had never been suspended.
- Students who had repeated a grade were over three times more likely to have low academic performance than students who had not repeated a grade.

Factors associated with academic performance *(continued)*

STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS — LIKELIHOOD OF BEING AT LOW ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, ASSOCIATED WITH SELECTED STUDENT, CARER, FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FACTORS

Parameter	*Odds Ratio*
Sex—	
Male	1.75
Female *	1.00
Age group (years)—	
4–7 *	1.00
8–11	1.36
12–14	1.47
15–17	0.71
Level of Relative Isolation—	
None *	1.00
Low	0.84
Moderate	0.92
High	1.15
Extreme	1.81
Teacher assessed risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties—	
Low *	1.00
Moderate	3.49
High	2.75
Primary carer level of education—	
Did not attend school	2.08
1–9 years education	1.47
10 years education *	1.00
11–12 years education	1.14
13 or more years education	0.46
Not stated	1.00
Primary carer labour force status—	
Unemployed	1.07
Employed *	1.00
Not in labour force	1.35
Not stated	1.00

Parameter	*Odds Ratio*
Days absent from school—	
More than 105 days	2.16
63–104 days	2.19
42–62 days	1.46
21–41 days	1.06
11–20 days	0.96
0–10 days *	1.00
Number of days of unexplained absence—	
None *	1.00
1–10 days	1.86
More than 10 days	1.80
Primary carer attended an Aboriginal funeral in the last 12 months—	
No	0.72
Yes *	1.00
Not stated	1.00
Number of homes lived in since birth—	
1–4 homes *	1.00
5 or more homes	0.73
Main language spoken in the classroom—	
English *	1.00
Aboriginal English	2.42
Kriol / Creole	2.92
Aboriginal language	1.31
Other	0.40
Student ever repeated a grade—	
No *	1.00
Yes	3.57

* Reference category — Odds ratios show risks relative to children in this category.
See *Analysis methods* on page 3 for information on how to interpret odds ratios.

Teacher and carer ratings of school work performance

Primary carer interactions with the school

Almost all primary carers of Aboriginal students (95%) reported that they felt welcome when going to their child's school, and almost all primary carers of Aboriginal students (95%) felt that if there was a problem at the school, they could sort it out. Also, primary carers of over 80% of students were either 'very happy' or 'a little bit happy' with the overall job the school was doing.

Comparing teacher and carer ratings

Both teachers and carers were asked to independently rate the school work performance of the students within their care.

Primary carers were asked the question: 'Is the child doing OK with his/her school work?' — 'yes' or 'no'. Teachers were asked about the academic performance of students, as explained on page 11.

To enable primary carer and teacher ratings to be compared, a carer response that their child was doing OK with their school work was assumed to indicate that the child's school work performance was at least comparable with the teacher category 'average or above average academic performance'.

Primary carers of Aboriginal students aged 4 to 17 years reported that 90% were doing OK with their school work. However, when school teachers were asked to rate the overall academic performance of students in their class, a significantly lower proportion — around 42% — were reported to have average or above average academic performance (see page 11).

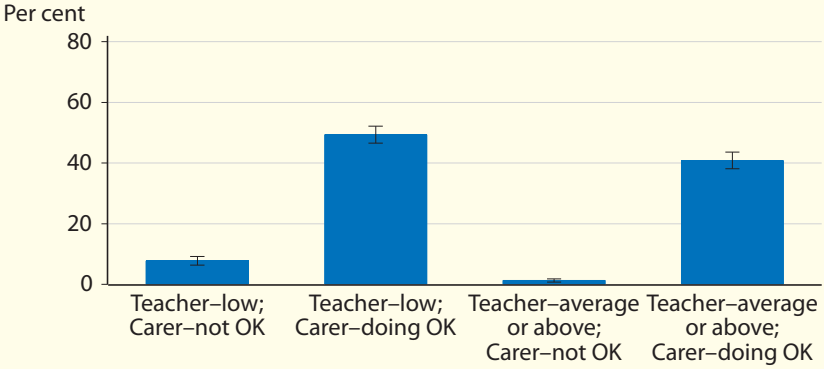
Looking only at the primary carer responses, the impression is one of tremendous success. Carers feel welcome at the school, are able to work with the school to solve problems and have a high level of satisfaction with the job that schools are doing. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of carers report that their children are doing OK at school.

The data collected from classroom teachers and through independent national benchmark testing shows that the majority of Aboriginal students are behind in their school work. In fact, on average, Aboriginal students are performing at levels far below that of non-Aboriginal students.

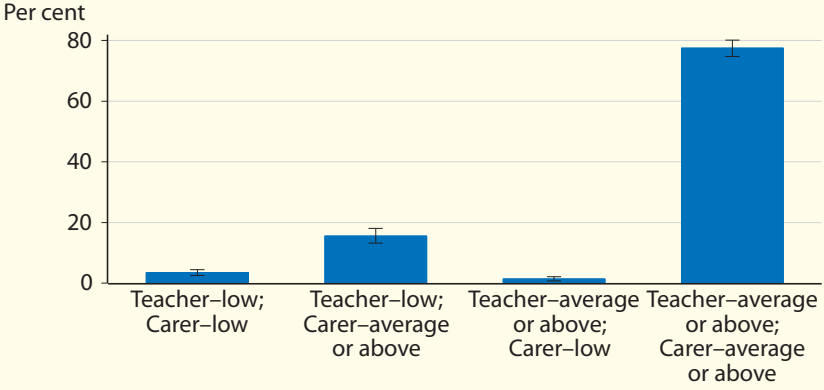
Teacher and carer ratings of school work performance *(continued)*

In almost 50% of cases there was a discrepancy between the carer and teacher ratings of academic performance, with carers rating their child as doing OK at school work while teachers rated the child as having low academic performance. For non-Aboriginal students, the level of discrepancy was significantly lower, at 16%. Carers of non-Aboriginal students appear to be more in tune with the true academic performance of their children than carers of Aboriginal children. See *Engaging carers and communities* on pages 27 and 28 for more on this issue.

ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 17 YEARS — SCHOOL TEACHER AND CARER RATINGS OF SCHOOL WORK PERFORMANCE



NON-ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AGED 4 TO 16 YEARS — SCHOOL TEACHER AND CARER RATINGS OF SCHOOL WORK PERFORMANCE (1993 WA CHS)



Teacher and carer ratings of school work performance *(continued)*

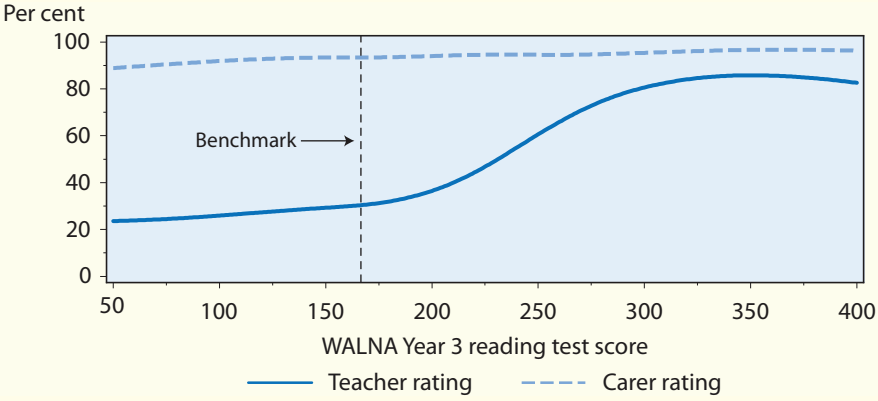
Comparison between teacher ratings, primary carer ratings and WALNA national benchmark tests

For each of the four WALNA tests (see page 10) an Aboriginal student's performance against the national test benchmark was compared with both the primary carer and teacher rating of the student's school work performance. Primary carer ratings did not change as the WALNA score rose. No matter what the WALNA score, primary carers rated around 90% of students as doing OK with their school work.

This finding was in stark contrast to teacher ratings, which showed good alignment with WALNA test scores — as WALNA scores increased, so did teacher ratings.

An example chart is presented here comparing Year 3 WALNA reading test scores with both primary carer ratings of school work performance and teacher ratings of reading performance. The pattern of results in this chart are indicative of the results observed in the other three WALNA tests (numeracy, spelling and writing) and for Year 5 and Year 7 students who also sat the tests. This reinforces the WAACHS findings of discrepancy between primary carer ratings of school work performance and teacher ratings of academic performance for Aboriginal students. See the Volume Three main report for a full analysis of these data.

YEAR 3 ABORIGINAL STUDENTS — PROPORTION FOR WHOM CARERS RATED SCHOOL WORK AS 'OK' AND TEACHERS RATED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AS AVERAGE OR ABOVE AVERAGE, BY WALNA READING TEST RESULTS



Teacher and carer ratings of school work performance *(continued)*

Factors associated with a discrepancy between primary carer and teacher ratings of school work performance included:

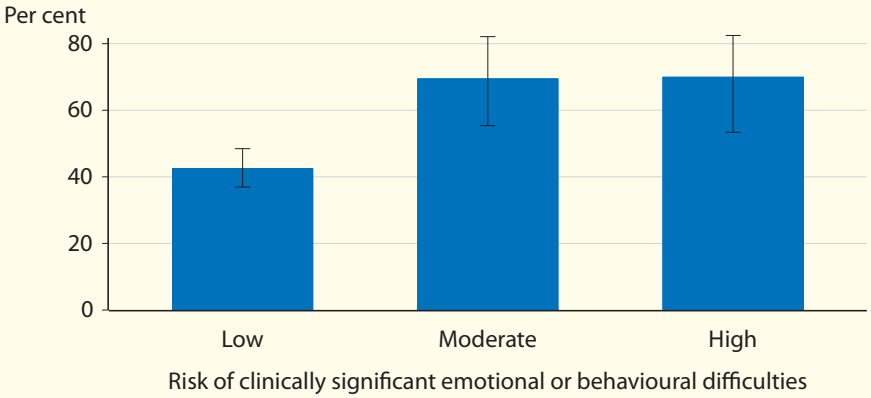
- Students who were assessed only by their teacher as being at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were over one and a half times as likely to have their school work performance rated differently than students assessed by both the primary carer and teacher as being at high risk.
- Students whose primary carers had attained higher levels of education (i.e. completed 13 or more years of schooling) were almost two times less likely to be rated differently than students whose primary carers had left school after completing Year 10.
- Students whose primary carers were employed were one and a third times less likely to have their school work performance rated differently than students whose carers were not in the labour force.
- Students of primary carers who had been forcibly separated from their natural family were one and a half times as likely to have their school work performance rated differently than students whose carers who had not been forcibly separated.
- Students of primary carers who were conversant in an Aboriginal language were almost twice as likely to have their school work performance rated differently than students whose carers who did not speak an Aboriginal language.
- As unexplained absences increased, primary carers were more likely to differ from teachers in rating the child's school work performance. Primary carers of students who had 1 to 10 unexplained absences were one and a half times as likely to differ from teachers than carers of students who had no unexplained absence; while carers of students who had more than 10 unexplained absences were twice as likely to differ.

Young people and overall academic performance

Based on data from Aboriginal students aged 12 to 17 years who completed a Youth Self Report (YSR), the following findings were made in respect of overall academic performance:

- Risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties was associated with overall academic performance. Students aged 12 to 17 years with both moderate and high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were over three times as likely to have low academic performance as those at low risk.

PROPORTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT LOW ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, BY RISK OF CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES



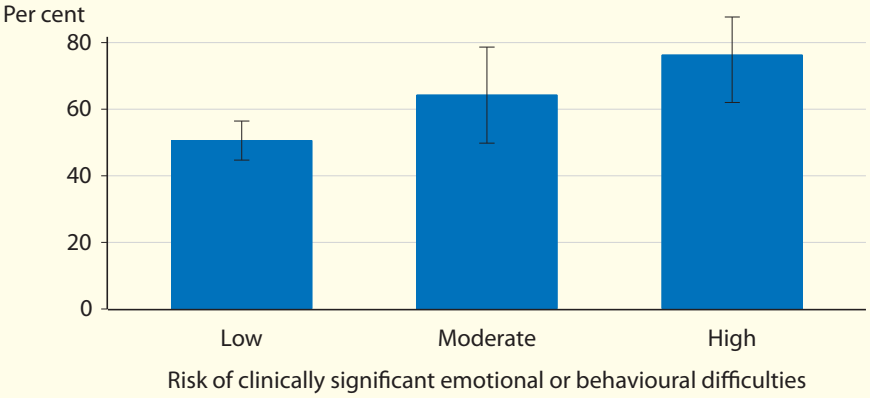
- Students in areas of high and extreme relative isolation were over twice as likely to have low academic performance.
- Students absent for 26 days or more of the school year were almost twice as likely to have low academic performance than those with more regular attendance.
- Students who have a primary carer who has never been in paid work were twice as likely to have low academic performance.
- Self-esteem of students aged 12 to 17 years was not associated with academic performance.

Young people and school attendance

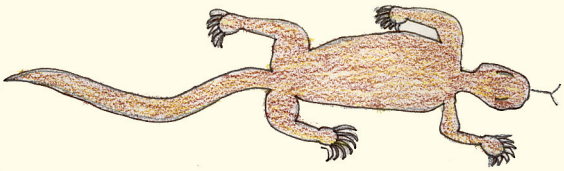
Based on data from Aboriginal students aged 12 to 17 years who also completed a YSR, the following findings were made in respect of school attendance:

- Students with both moderate and high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were more likely to be absent from school for 26 days or more than those at low risk.

PROPORTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE ABSENT FROM SCHOOL FOR 26 DAYS OR MORE, BY RISK OF CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES



- Students living in areas of low through to extreme relative isolation were all more likely to be absent from school for 26 days or more than students living in Perth.
- Students who have ever had sex were over two and a half times as likely to be absent from school for 26 days or more than those who have never had sex.
- Self-esteem of students aged 12 to 17 years was not associated with attendance at school.



Drawing design by Kathy from Paraburdoo as part of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Schools Art Competition

Young people aged 15 to 17 years no longer at school

Starting from 2006, the period of compulsory education for all Western Australian young people will extend until the end of the year they turn 16, rising to 17 years by 2008. Previously, young people had to remain in school until the end of the year they turned 15 and this was the situation at the time of the WAACHS.

This section concentrates on Aboriginal young people aged 15 to 17 years. The vast majority of Aboriginal young people aged under 15 years were still in school. From age 15 years and older, the proportion of Aboriginal young people who no longer attended school was substantially higher, reducing their chances of academic and vocational success beyond the school years.

Based on data from Aboriginal young people aged 15 to 17 years for whom a child health questionnaire was completed by their primary carer, the following findings were made in respect of retention in school and education:

- About 47% were no longer going to school.
- Some 56% were still in some form of school or post-school education.
- Around 12% were working.
- About 32% were neither working nor in any form of education.
- Young people living in areas of low, high and extreme relative isolation were over twice as likely to no longer be at school.
- Young people who had drunk alcohol or gotten drunk in the six months prior to the survey were over twice as likely to no longer be at school.
- Young people who live in households where overuse of alcohol causes problems were over twice as likely to no longer be at school.

Drawing design by Melissa from Paraburdoo as part of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Schools Art Competition

Discussion

The findings reported in Volume Three build on the findings on physical health and social and emotional wellbeing reported in Volumes One and Two. The findings highlight the magnitude of the educational disadvantage facing many Aboriginal students and their families. The majority of Aboriginal students are behind in their level of school performance. The enormity of the discrepancy in the level of academic performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and the lack of substantial progress in closing this gap, underscores the importance and urgency of developing new approaches to addressing the challenges faced by Aboriginal students.

Disparities in educational performance

Educational disparities in school performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children are larger than disparities found in health and mental health as reported in Volumes One and Two. For example, about 21% of Aboriginal children were born with sub-optimal foetal growth compared with 13% of non-Aboriginal children — a disparity of 8 percentage points. About 24% of Aboriginal children were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties compared with 15% of non-Aboriginal children — a disparity of 9 percentage points. Disparities in academic performance are in the order of 30 to 40 percentage points regardless of the measure used for assessment. For instance, 57% of Aboriginal students have low academic performance compared with 19% of non-Aboriginal students — a disparity of 38 percentage points.

Reasons for low academic performance

In addition to describing the level of performance of Aboriginal students, the survey, by collecting information on students' lives in the contexts of their family, community and school environments, has identified several key factors associated with ongoing low performance of Aboriginal students. Understanding which factors drive the current situation focuses attention on the issues that matter, and offers ways forward in the development of policies and programmes to help current and future generations of Aboriginal children achieve their full potential. Substantial changes are required to stop the ongoing trend of disadvantage being passed down between generations.

Discussion *(continued)*

The findings challenge prevailing wisdom in key areas, particularly regarding the role of physical health, diet and nutrition in inhibiting school performance. While good physical health and adequate nutrition are vitally important in their own right, and are a major component of overall wellbeing, it is clear from the findings of the survey that physical health problems and poor nutrition are not the major factors holding back the performance of Aboriginal children in school. Until the more deep-seated problems of social and emotional wellbeing and the ongoing consequences of past policies of exclusion from school-based education are addressed, the prospects for major improvements in academic performance are limited.

The survey has identified three key areas of action that are needed to improve the performance at school of Aboriginal students. These are:

- the need for schools to engage carers and communities to break the cycle of the transfer of educational disadvantage between generations
- the need to improve early childhood and early school learning for Aboriginal children to prevent children falling behind in the crucial early years of school
- the need to provide appropriate support and assistance to Aboriginal students who are at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties.

Engaging carers and communities

The survey found that carers' own levels of educational attainment were key predictors of both school attendance and academic performance of the children in their care. This suggests that the legacy of poor academic attainment, originating in past policies of exclusion, is being passed down from generation to generation.

The survey findings also show that while the majority of Aboriginal students have fallen behind in their schooling, the overwhelming majority of carers are both happy with the job that their children's schools are doing, and report that their children are doing well in school. This suggests a degree of alienation of carers from schools and the education of their children.

Discussion *(continued)*

Strategic directions need to be set to address carer disengagement and alienation from schools and to improve carer awareness of their children's educational progress and their capacity to support their children's schooling.

Achieving this goal will require more than creating a welcoming environment in schools and having parent committees. Schools must reach out to carers and communities proactively to:

- establish a relationship of trust with the community based on shared values, shared decision-making and shared expectations
- address issues surrounding carers' own poor experiences at school
- provide opportunities for carers to obtain positive educational experiences
- demonstrate the value and positive culture of schools
- actively promote the benefits education can provide to children
- demonstrate respect for Aboriginal people and culture.

Early years at school

The survey found that, on average, the academic performance of Aboriginal students was lower than non-Aboriginal students from the first year of schooling, and the gap between the performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students widens dramatically in the first years of school. Once children fall more than a year behind in their schooling it is extremely difficult to catch up. Preventing Aboriginal children falling behind in the early years of primary school is a crucial component of improving overall levels of academic performance. Achieving this goal will require:

- improving the readiness to learn of Aboriginal students upon entering school by providing early childhood education and developmentally appropriate readiness to learn programmes for children in home care, day care, play groups and other settings
- providing language and cognitive enrichment programmes at kindergarten and pre-school
- identifying and addressing learning problems in the first years of school.

Discussion *(continued)*

Emotional and behavioural difficulties

Volume Two documented the high proportion of Aboriginal children at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, and the factors associated with these difficulties. Volume Three has identified the contribution of emotional and behavioural difficulties to poor academic performance. High risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties was one of the main predictors of both poor school attendance and low academic performance. Current services targetting the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people are inadequate at all levels. Schools currently lack the resources to provide treatment and support services to all students at risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, and few students access services in other settings.

Education systems and health systems need to work together to provide appropriate support and assistance to Aboriginal students with emotional or behavioural difficulties. In addition to support services, prevention programmes are fundamental to reducing the burden of emotional and behavioural difficulties. As documented in Volume Two, multiple life stress events, poor family functioning and poor quality of parenting are major contributors to the high rate of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties among Aboriginal children. Responding to the findings and recommendations of Volume Two will not only reduce the overall burden of emotional and behavioural difficulties in Aboriginal children, but will also improve prospects for good performance at school.

What should be done now?

Without substantial changes to policies and programmes for the education of Aboriginal students, the enormous gap between the levels of performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is likely to be maintained. Community leaders, politicians, policy makers, educators, and family, health and other human service providers must acknowledge the urgency of the situation, and commit to building partnerships with Aboriginal communities to address the drivers of low academic performance in Aboriginal students.

Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People

Curtin University of Technology

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

Kulunga Research Network

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