



## Research Report 49

# Schooling in Aurukun

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### Abstract

The remote Aboriginal community of Aurukun recently made national headlines when teachers were withdrawn for approximately the last four weeks of semester one after the school principal was twice assaulted by local youths. Commentaries on the incident included some from prominent educators and the local federal member of parliament that implicated the education model used in the school as contributing to the problems in the community. The school is a campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA), an initiative of controversial Aboriginal activist, Noel Pearson. In the wake of these criticisms the Queensland education minister announced a review of the schooling in Aurukun. The results of the review – conducted by the School Improvement Unit of the Department of Education and Training (DET) – were published on 5 July. Schooling is set to recommence in Aurukun from the beginning of semester two (11 July).

This paper provides a summary of some of the issues that arise from the operation of the CYAAA. It concludes that the recent turmoil in the Aurukun community tells us little one way or the other about the efficacy of the educational model employed at local school. As a noteworthy and controversial initiative in the important area of Aboriginal education, however, the operation of the CYAAA deserves to be the subject of ongoing examination and review. A definitive assessment of the CYAAA is fraught with complexities and difficulties and simplistic pronouncements from both supporters and critics of the academy have been less than helpful. The DET report, on the other hand, identifies that there are some significant problems with the way in which the school is currently operating and provides a useful starting point for improvement.

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# Schooling in Aurukun

## Introduction

The community of Aurukun recently made national headlines when teachers were withdrawn for approximately the last four weeks of semester one after the school principal was twice assaulted by local youths. Commentaries on the incident included some from prominent educators and the local federal member of parliament that implicated the education model used in the school as contributing to the problems in the community. In the wake of these criticisms the Queensland education minister announced a review of the program. The results of the review – conducted by the School Improvement Unit of the Department of Education and Training (DET) – were published on 5 July (DET, 2016). Schooling is set to recommence in Aurukun from the beginning of semester two (11 July).

Aurukun is a remote Aboriginal community on the western side of the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland. It has a population of about a thousand people. The community was originally a mission station, being reconstituted in the late 1970s as a local government (shire) council. In 1996, the area was the subject of the successful Wik Native Title case in the High Court. In recent decades, the community has become increasingly troubled and dysfunctional (see Sutton, 2009; Ford, 2013). Debates about the nature and causes of the community's problems continue, but suffice to say it is a sad testament to the continuing effects of Aboriginal dispossession and the failure of subsequent social policies over many years.

In 2010, the Aurukun school became a campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA).<sup>2</sup> The CYAAA was the brainchild of well-known and controversial Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson. While it operates as a state school, the academy has a board and Pearson's Cape York Partnerships (CYP) organisation exercises considerable influence on its operation. Under a "memorandum of understanding" between the CYAAA and DET:

The CYAAA is responsible for the teaching and learning program within the school, specifically the Class program (Direct Instruction and associated behaviour management components) and the delivery of Club and Culture. DET maintains responsibility for the overall operation of the school, including staffing and facilities. This arrangement is supported through a funding agreement between the two parties.<sup>3</sup> (DET, 2016, p. 4)

The curriculum at the CYAAA is organised around five components:

- The "childhood" component aims to close the early childhood development gap and covers early childhood from birth to three years.
- The "class" component focuses on mastery of literacy and numeracy using "Direct Instruction".
- The "club" component includes activities such as instrumental music, the arts, sports, and personal health.

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<sup>2</sup> The academy's other campuses are at Coen and Hopevale, which are also communities on Cape York (albeit on its the eastern side). Pearson's Cape York Partnerships also oversees the operation of Djarragun College, a private Indigenous boarding school, south of Cairns.

<sup>3</sup> Copies of the "memorandum of understanding" between DET and CYP, and the "funding agreement" between the state of Queensland and the CYAAA are included as appendices in the DET (2016) review.

- The "culture" component teaches cultural knowledge and local, traditional oral and written language.
- The "community" component is made up of case-managed school readiness, attendance, parental involvement and health programs. (CYAAA website).

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this program is the class component with its use of Direct Instruction (DI), a virtually teacher-proof American instructional strategy which uses a highly scripted and prescriptive approach to teaching literacy and numeracy basics in which learning is broken down into a hierarchy of skills and tasks.

Controversy about the CYAAA has been exacerbated by Pearson's bumptious, adversarial approach, which positions commentators and those working in Indigenous education as either for or against him (see, for example, Waters, 2014b, Sheehan, 2014). In laying out his case for the establishment of the CYAAA, Pearson argued not only that current approaches weren't working, but that this was in large part because of the wrong-headedness of progressive approaches to social policy generally and schooling in particular (see Pearson, 2009; McCollow, 2012a).

Pearson has explicitly tied the CYAAA to a suite of wider social reforms, "the Cape York Welfare Reform trial" (Cape York Partnerships, 2009, p. 9), which are also controversial.

There is a debate worth having about the efficacy of the CYAAA. This debate should include consideration of at least the following:

- Use of DI;
- Student results;
- The relative expense of the program;
- Governance and community support and engagement;
- Links to the wider Cape York Welfare Reforms.

## Matters for Debate

As noted by Luke (2014, p. 2), 'there are over three decades of claims, counter-claims, and debates' about Direct Instruction. DI has been the subject of extensive critique on philosophical and sociological grounds.<sup>4</sup> These debates can be situated in the larger, recurrent debates between "progressives" and "traditionalists" about literacy education. For critics, the DI approach, with its emphasis on rote learning and drilling basic skills, deprofessionalises teachers, ignores higher-order and independent thinking and fails to encourage the pursuit of excellence. Furthermore, its use of off-the-shelf, American-produced curriculum materials is seen as ignoring individual student needs and local context and as culturally inappropriate.

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<sup>4</sup> 'The progressive philosophical critique is sceptical of ... [DI's] behaviourist focus on teacher-centred instruction and knowledge, stating that the approach does not engage with student cultural resources, background knowledge and community context. The behaviourist approach is viewed as a deficit model that does not align with constructivist models of learning. The sociological critique is wary of the effects of scripted instruction on teacher professionalism, claiming that the model deskills teachers by routinizing their work and downplaying their professional capacity to vary instructional pace and curriculum content depending on the student cohort and context. There are also longstanding empirical sociological studies of the longitudinal effects of instruction based on strict ability grouping. Finally, there is an extensive published philosophic and sociological critique that comments on the asymmetrical relationships of power and knowledge in the DI model, making the case that it subordinates and mis-recognises student and community background knowledge, cultural experiences and prior knowledge schemata.' (Luke, 2014, p. 2)

In his influential book *Visible Learning*, John Hattie (2008) supports the use of DI arguing that when it is used well it encourages teachers to work together to plan lessons, and develop clear criteria for lessons. As noted by Luke (2014, p. 2) the 2013 ACER evaluation of the CYAAA reported that 'DI has provided a beneficial framework for staff continuity, instructional planning, developmental diagnostics and professional development in school contexts where these apparently had been lacking'.

Luke (2014, p. 3) argues that, while the claim of some proponents of DI that it represents a coherent over-arching curriculum is wrong, as a "specific instructional approach" it (and other models of explicit instruction) 'can generate some performance gains in conventionally-measured basic skills of early literacy and numeracy'. Luke (Ibid.) reminds us that basic skills acquisition is 'necessary, but not sufficient' for sustained educational achievement.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (McCollow, 2012a), many of the critiques of DI as it is used in the CYAAA do not take into account the "culture" and "club" components of the academy's curriculum, which potentially provide curricular depth and breadth, and address the cultural and contextual issues raised by the progressive critics of DI. When I visited the Aurukun school in 2011, I witnessed a class in the culture domain on the theme of 'performance', with students investigating Western (ballet) and Aboriginal (traditional dance) manifestations in order to produce a performance work. The aspects of the culture domain that related to Aboriginal culture engaged the local community and employed local culture tutors. However, the DET review of schooling in Aurukun, found that in 2016 the club and culture domains had become virtually inoperable, leading to an almost exclusive focus on literacy and numeracy instruction using DI. The reviewers reported:

The review found that the school is not providing the full Australian Curriculum to its students through the current approach. It is the conclusion of this review that the richness of schooling has been compromised by the pressure of delivering literacy and numeracy using only the DI approach. Going forward, a more balanced approach, contextualised for the Aurukun community, is required. (DET, 2016, p. 5)

Interestingly, it is not only the over-reliance on DI that is identified as a problem in the DET review, but also the way in which the provision of DI has been supported:

Teachers reported they were yet to gain confidence in the DI approach given their inexperience and inconsistent professional development in DI. (Ibid., p.16)

The principal reported that, as a result of staffing difficulties, the school's Head of Curriculum (HOC) and two teacher coaches were required to undertake classroom teaching duties, and were limited in their capacity to support teachers through coaching and professional development. (Ibid., p. 25)

The ACER evaluation of the Cape York Welfare Reforms in 2012 noted a significant improvement in school attendance and a reduction in unexplained absences at Aurukun school since the commencement of the Welfare Reforms in 2009 (Department of FaHCSIA, 2012, p. 4). However, it is possible that some of this improvement predates the establishment of the CYAAA. Table 1 provides some comparisons of attendance rates at the CYAAA in 2015 to other Indigenous community schools in Queensland.<sup>5</sup> Data from DET (DET website) for the period 2011 – 2015 show that annual attendance rates for the CYAAA generally sit at about the mid-point in comparison to other remote Indigenous schools. For the Aurukun site specifically, the DET review reported 'low levels of attendance ... while

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<sup>5</sup> The information in the table is for all three campuses of the CYAAA – Aurukun, Hopevale and Coen. The *My School* website does not provide data for the individual campuses.

attendance rose from 2008 to 2011, there has been a decline from 2012 to 2016' (DET, 2016, p. 28). The attendance rate at Aurukun for 2015 was 60 per cent, below the rate for the CYAAA as a whole and for all but one of the schools listed in Table 1. The rate for term one, 2016 was even lower at 51 per cent (Ibid., p. 29).

These low levels of attendance were seen as 'a major factor in the inability of the teachers and school leaders to enact the intended curriculum' (Ibid.).

**Table 1**

School	Student attendance rate, 2015 (%)	Student attendance level (Proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time)
Pompuraaw	85	50
Lockhart River	69	16
Kowanyama	74	23
Doomadgee	57	10
Mornington Island	76	36
NPAC <sup>a</sup>	73	28
CYAAA	72	37

a Northern Peninsula Area College

Source: My School website, <https://www.myschool.edu.au/>

An evaluation of the CYAAA conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in 2013, noted that 'school staff and community members at Aurukun, Coen and Hope Vale report that the CYAAA Initiative has had a wide range of positive outcomes' (ACER, p. 10). However, the report noted, 'it is not possible to conclude from the available test data, except in limited circumstances, whether or not the CYAAA Initiative has had an impact on student learning' (Ibid., p. 9). Unfortunately, in 2016 this is still the case. The most recent CYAAA annual report (for 2014) states:

We are very pleased with the following aspects of the 2014 National Assessment Program –Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results:

- increased number of students at national minimum standard,
- extended number of students in bands above national minimum standard,
- more students appearing in the upper two bands of the test results,
- students are making nearly twice the gain against the national average rate of progress (although starting from a very low base),
- the number of students performing exceptionally well has increased consistently under the Academy using DI. (DET, 2015, p. 1)

The annual report also quotes Professor John Hattie, Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute, as stating, that the 2009-13 NAPLAN results indicated that 'the program in Cape York shows greater growth than the Australian averages ... the overall program appears to be making a greater-than-average difference' (Ibid., p. 2). However, as shown in Table 2 for example, the NAPLAN data from 2013 to 2015 do not indicate that the CYAAA is achieving significantly better results than similar schools.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See note 4 above. NAPLAN also tests "persuasive writing", "spelling", and "grammar and punctuation". In terms of comparisons with similar and all schools, the CYAAA results for these skills are not significantly different than for reading, writing and numeracy.

**Table 2**  
**Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy – NAPLAN Mean Scores in Comparison to Other Schools<sup>a</sup>**

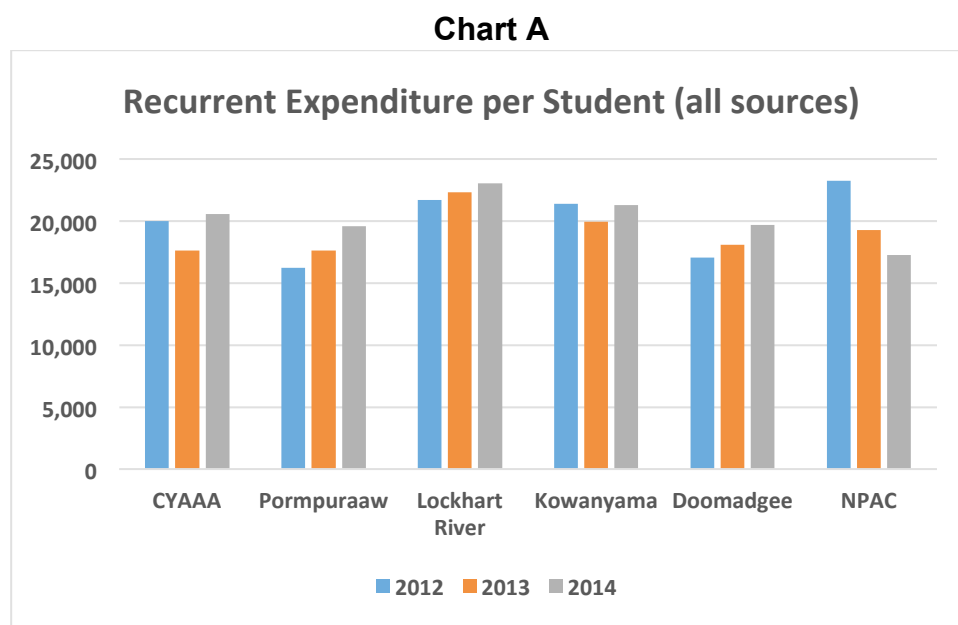
	Reading		Writing		Numeracy	
	<i>In comparison to “similar schools”<sup>ab</sup></i>	<i>In comparison to all schools</i>	<i>In comparison to “similar schools”</i>	<i>In comparison to all schools</i>	<i>In comparison to “similar schools”</i>	<i>In comparison to all schools</i>
<b>Year 3, 2013</b>	‘close to’	‘substantially below’	‘below’	‘substantially below’	‘below’	‘substantially below’
<b>Year 3, 2014</b>	‘above’	‘substantially below’	‘above’	‘substantially below’	‘above’	‘substantially below’
<b>Year 3, 2015</b>	‘close to’	‘substantially below’	‘close to’	‘substantially below’	‘close to’	‘substantially below’
<b>Year 5, 2013</b>	‘below’	‘substantially below’	‘below’	‘substantially below’	‘below’	‘substantially below’
<b>Year 5, 2014</b>	‘close to’	‘substantially below’	‘close to’	‘substantially below’	‘close to’	‘substantially below’
<b>Year 5, 2015</b>	‘below’	‘substantially below’	‘substantially below’	‘substantially below’	‘substantially below’	‘substantially below’
a. Source: <i>My School</i> website: <a href="https://www.myschool.edu.au/">https://www.myschool.edu.au/</a> . The colour code in the table reflects the colour code used on the <i>My School</i> website. Schools ‘serving students from statistically similar backgrounds’.						

The 2016 DET review, which focused specifically on Aurukun rather than on the CYAAA as a whole, noted that the NAPLAN participation rate at Aurukun in 2015 was ‘one of the lowest on any Queensland state school’ (DET, 2016, p. 20) and that in 2016 Aurukun students did not sit for the NAPLAN exams at all, due to ‘instability within the school community at the time’ (Ibid., p. 24). On the basis of low participation and missing data, the report concludes that ‘extreme caution should be taken in relation to the use of Aurukun campus’ NAPLAN data as a basis of judgements regarding the school’ (Ibid., p. 22).

Year 3 NAPLAN test mean scores at the Aurukun campus indicate an improvement in reading, writing, spelling, and grammar and punctuation over the period 2008-2015; however, numeracy scores have fluctuated, with the mean score in 2015 being the lowest since 2010 and below the 2008 mean score (Ibid., p. 22). Additionally, the percentage of Year 3 students at or above the national minimum standard has increased in all areas except numeracy since 2008 (Ibid., p. 23). Year 5 NAPLAN test mean scores indicate improvement across all five skill areas tested from 2008 to 2015 (ibid.) and the percentage of Year 5 students at or above the national minimum standard has increased in all areas except numeracy (where it declined from 2014 to 2015 but is above the 2008 level) since 2008 (Ibid., p. 24).

A further criticism of the CYAAA program is its expense, in particular as a result of its use of DI. Luke (2014, p. 3) claims: ‘At present, the curriculum materials, teachers’ guidebooks and training, propriety assessment materials – provided by ... [the National Institute for Direct Instruction] in Oregon – cost considerably more than locally developed materials’. Data from the *My School* website, on the other hand, indicates that recurrent expenditure at the CYAAA is comparable to that at other remote Queensland Indigenous schools (see Chart A below). The degree to which the *My School* data captures all expenditure is uncertain and it

is also unclear whether the National Institute for Direct Instruction subsidises the use of its materials.



Source: *My School* website: <https://www.myschool.edu.au/>.  
NPAC = Northern Peninsula Area College, Bamaga.

The 2016 DET review of schooling in Aurukun provides detailed information on funding for the CYAAA over the period 2011-12 to 2015-16. This is provided in three streams: school grants, funding for DI and funding for club and culture (see DET, 2016, pp. 31-34). Unfortunately, the report does not provide comparison data of funding levels to similar remote Indigenous schools. It does note, however, that audits carried out in 2014 and 2015 found that management of financial resources was ‘unsatisfactory’ (Ibid., p. 34).

The DET review of schooling in Aurukun reports that 94 per cent of staff agreed that staff morale was positive in 2013; this declined to 82 per cent in 2014 and to 40 per cent in 2015 (where a low response rate renders the results unreliable). It should be noted that, while staff expressed concerns about aspects of the educational program such as the use of DI, the major concerns revolved around issues in the community generally: ‘violence in the community, nights disturbed by noise, and anxiety over recent personal attacks on the principal’ (DET, 2016, p. 29). The reviewers also reported that ‘many staff members expressed a desire to return to the school as quickly as possible’ (Ibid.).

Staff experience and turnover is also a significant issue for the school. The staff retention rate for 2015 was 66 per cent compared to a state-wide average of 93 per cent (DET, 2016, p. 38). The CYAAA has also ‘experienced significant turnover of school leaders ... with five [Aurukun] principals and four executive principals in four years’ (Ibid., p. 16). The Aurukun campus is also notable for its ‘reliance on new graduate beginning teachers [with] ... most teaching staff ... either in their first or second year of teaching’ (Ibid., p. 38). These are, of course, issues that apply to many remote Indigenous schools.

In 2014, according to the CYAAA annual report, 100 per cent of parents responding to the school opinion survey<sup>7</sup> agreed that ‘this is a good school’ and 87 per cent agreed that ‘their

<sup>7</sup> The CYAAA Annual Report did not specify the proportion of parents responding to the survey.

child's learning needs are being met at this school' (DET, 2015, p. 4). However, according to the 2016 DET review, no parents at the Aurukun campus participated in this survey for 2014 or 2015. That there are strong supporters of the CYAAA in the Aurukun community is witnessed by an ad taken out in the Courier-Mail on 25 June 2016 by a group of 'Wik mothers, fathers, grandparents, and carers of children at the Aurukun Cape York Academy' pleading with the government to keep its 'hands off our school' (Wik Women's Group, 2016; see also AAP, 2016).

Aurukun is, however, a divided community and from the start there have been those who have not supported Pearson's academy. Queensland Education Minister Kate Jones told the mass media that, in the aftermath of the school's temporary closure, 'community leaders in Aurukun had pleaded for Mr Pearson's Cape York Academy to be stripped of a contract to run the local school' (Elks and Walker, 2016).

The operation of the school is overseen by an 'independent board chaired by ... Noel Pearson' (CYAAA website). The Board is apparently hand-picked by Pearson and its membership is not revealed on the CYAAA website. It appears that the board of the "Good to Great Schools Australia" (GGSA) network, of which the CYAAA is described as a part and as 'the premier showcase' of the network's education reform model, operates as the board of the CYAAA. It consists of Pearson (chair), three representatives of the corporate world, an ex-politician, an ex-education bureaucrat, an ex-education academic, and an architect, who is the only other Indigenous member (GGSA website).

There are some interesting questions to be asked about the degree to which the Aurukun community supports the CYAAA, and the extent to which the community is involved in or even made aware of the reasons for operational decisions and practices within the school. The 2016 DET review (p. 30) acknowledged that 'the CYAAA undertook extensive consultation with the community about the implementation of DI and the school's future in 2009-10'. But it also noted that 'consultation and collaboration have not continued' (Ibid.).

The school's relationship with the local community is also affected by its links to the Cape York Welfare Reform "trial".<sup>8</sup> While both the LNP and Labor parties have supported continuation of the Cape York Welfare Reform trial, these reforms have been strongly criticised (see, for example, Hinkson, 2008; Worthington 2014; McQuire, 2015) and the subject of contestation in the trial communities themselves – though, interestingly, in 2012 at least, support for the reforms was strongest in Aurukun (see Department of FaHCSIA, 2012, pp. 1-3). A notable feature of these reforms has been their attempt to replace "passive welfare", which is seen as fostering the continued dependency and "victimhood" of its recipients, with "conditional welfare":

Conditional welfare has been an important part of Cape York Welfare Reform. Obligations are attached to payments for all welfare recipients in welfare reform communities. Adults are to make sure kids attend school, and are kept safe from harm and neglect; and that they themselves do not commit drug, alcohol or family violence offences; and abide by tenancy agreements. (CYP, 2015)

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<sup>8</sup> The Cape York Welfare Reform trial commenced in 2009 and was reviewed in 2012. It continues in the communities of Aurukun, Hope Vale, Coen, and Mossman Gorge, but with the exception of Doomadgee, has not been extended, as Pearson had hoped, to other Aboriginal communities in Queensland.

Where parents do not abide by the “obligations” set out for them, their welfare payments may be “managed” on their behalf by the Family Responsibilities Commission.<sup>9</sup>

As noted above, the program at the CYAAA includes a “community” component that uses case management to support parents to promote school readiness and attendance and to set up trust funds (student education trusts – SETs) for their children’s education. It also includes health and nutrition programs. All of these programs and activities are components of Cape York Welfare Reform. There is evidence that these initiatives are well-supported in the CYAAA communities; there was a strong uptake of SETs for example.<sup>10</sup>

Writers such as Waters (2014b) and McQuire (2015) argue that the welfare reforms have been an exceptionally expensive failure. McQuire states, ‘the only success the trials could claim has been the unbelievable ability to attract government funding’ (Ibid.). Waters claims that ‘the Cape York Welfare Reform Program has received more funding from federal and state government agencies than any other trial program per population base in the history of Aboriginal funding’ (Op. cit.). According to McQuire (Op. cit.), over the period of 2007 to 2014 Aurukun saw increases in criminal convictions, young adults not engaged in work or study, and in unemployment generally. She draws attention to the ‘significant number of disengaged youth of high school age ... not engaged in the education system’ (Ibid.).

A further issue is the reform’s relatively unique public/private partnership model where responsibility for decisions and programs is divided among the Australian and Queensland governments, the participating communities and the Pearson-controlled Cape York Partnerships and Cape York Institute, in particular, the degree of involvement and influence of the last two organisations.

The philosophical underpinnings of the reforms have also been criticised. Hinkson (2008, p. 5) notes that the perceived failure of established approaches to stem ‘child abuse, alcohol use and violence’ in remote Aboriginal communities led the way for approaches such as the Northern Territory “intervention” and the Cape York Welfare Reforms,<sup>11</sup> which can be characterised as pursuing “normalisation” rather than “cultural semi-autonomy” for Aboriginal peoples (see Sullivan, 2011). Hinkson (2008, p. 7) warns, however, that this approach to Indigenous policy – associated as it is with neo-liberalism – could ‘feed a new form of assimilation, apparently tolerant but potentially more destructive than even the assimilation of the past’. Hinkson (Ibid., p. 9) notes how the institutions of neo-liberalism ‘eat away’ at ‘tangible social relations’ and makes a case for the development of alternative strategies where Aboriginal people ‘might recognise, along with increasing numbers from non-Indigenous backgrounds, that the road offered by neo-liberalism threatens cultural disaster of historic proportions’.

The review of the Cape York Welfare Reforms carried out by the Federal Government in 2012 essentially concluded that it was too early to tell if the reforms were working. It noted ‘the limited progress from past efforts to improve the life circumstances of residents of remote Indigenous communities’ and that ‘there can be no quick fix to rectify challenges that have been decades in the making (Department of FaHCSIA, 2012, p. 7). It expressed hope that ‘subtle but fundamental shifts in behaviour ... [might be] built upon ... to yield significant longer term results’ (Ibid.).

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<sup>9</sup> The Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) is an independent statutory authority comprising a Commissioner and local Indigenous Commissioners from each of the reform communities.

<sup>10</sup> McCollow (2012b) reported that, ‘as of September 2011, there were 614 SETs with over \$1m in contributions’.

<sup>11</sup> There are important differences between these approaches so they shouldn’t be conflated.

## Media Commentaries on the Recent Temporary Closure of the Aurukun Campus, Its Causes and Implications

Prominent commentators who rushed to the media to proclaim that the events in Aurukun in May were an indictment of Pearson's education model included Warren Entsch, the federal Liberal Party member of parliament for Leichhardt (which is based on Cape York), Aboriginal educator Chris Sarra, and former Aurukun principal and Director of Indigenous Education Ian Mackie.<sup>12</sup>

Entsch criticised Aurukun as a 'failed social experiment' and said that 'the troubled youths were products of Mr Pearson's school system and it should be reviewed' (ABC, 2016a). Sarra stated that 'the problems in Aurukun showed the US direct instruction teaching system was not working' and that it 'is part of the problem in Aurukun' (ABC, 2016b). Mackie characterised the establishment of the CYAAA as 'the Government ... almost washing its hands of the responsibility of the school' and the temporary closure as 'a kind of group punishment or collective punishment which I thought was outlawed centuries ago ... it's quite detrimental to their long term prospects' (ABC, 2016c). Mackie identified the closure of the secondary program at the school as a contributory cause of violence in the community: 'there's a lot of adolescent children playing up, it's not rocket science that the design of the school has led to this breakdown in public law and order', claiming that 'there were never incidents of this gravity when I was there' (Ibid.).

Sarra's negative views of DI reflect the views of a number of its critics and put him in the company of a number of respected literacy experts. However, the implication that use of the program has somehow contributed to the problems in the community is unsupported hyperbole that undermines rather than strengthens his case.

Social unrest and violence have been unfortunate features of the Aurukun community for a number of years predating the establishment of the Cape York Welfare Reforms or the CYAAA. This has been documented by writers such as Koch (2007a, 2007b, 2008) Sutton (2009), Ford (2013) and Shaw (2009). If Aurukun is, as Entsch claims, 'a failed social experiment', it is one of long-standing. Mackie's claim that there were no incidents of similar "gravity" during his association with the school is disingenuous. In October, 2007, *The Australian* reported that, 'nine terrified school teachers and other public servants slept in a police station for protection, some of them in cells, while up to 200 members of two warring families in the Aurukun Aboriginal community in Cape York brawled and rioted throughout Wednesday night' (Koch, 2007b).

As a former teacher union president,<sup>13</sup> Mackie should also know better than to characterise the evacuation of teachers as a punitive measure aimed at the community. It was a safety

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<sup>12</sup> Entsch, Sarra and Mackie are not disinterested observers. Entsch supports the Cape York Alliance, a group of Indigenous elders opposed to Pearson. Mackie served as head of the Aurukun campus, when the school was a part of Western Cape College and subsequently was principal of Western Cape College. His wife, Elizabeth then served as head of the Aurukun campus and was honoured with Public Service Medal for her work there. Mackie himself received the Prime Minister's Award for School Community Partnerships Large Business Category in 2007, the Premier's Award Excellence in Public Sector Management Partnerships & Reconciliation 2008, and the Regional Showcase Award for the Arts Strategy in 2009. During this period, the school was part of Sarra's "Stronger, Smarter" program (see Stronger Smarter website). Criticism of schooling at Aurukun prior to the commencement of the CYAAA is implicitly a criticism of Mackie's tenure – and by extension of Sarra's Stronger Smarter program, which continues to operate as an alternative model of Indigenous education to Pearson's. Mackie has also developed a model of school improvement (see Nudge for Schools website).

<sup>13</sup> Mackie served as President of the Queensland Teachers' Union in the 1990s.

precaution undertaken at the teachers' request (through a motion moved at a school union meeting).

As noted above, there are legitimate questions to be asked about the governance arrangements of the CYAAA. However, Mackie's assertion that establishment of the CYAAA amounts to the government 'washing its hands of the responsibility of the school' is far too sweeping.

The most substantive criticism offered by Mackie is about the decision by the CYAAA to close its secondary education program. The DET (2016) review of schooling in Aurukun noted that disengaged adolescents were seen to be amongst those engaging in the violence that led to the temporary closure of the school. The decision to stop the provision of secondary school classes was controversial and did mean, as Mackie observes, that there is no program to engage adolescent youth. Against this, however, is the fact that the program did not provide a comprehensive secondary education and that attendance rates were very low and intermittent. It was decided that a better option would be to encourage youths to attend Western Cape College in Weipa or a boarding school, or to obtain local employment. Unfortunately, employment options in Aurukun are extremely limited. It might be observed that the establishment of alternative means of engaging the youth of Aurukun is not necessarily the responsibility solely of the CYAAA.

## Review of Schooling in Aurukun: Findings and Recommendations

A definitive assessment of the CYAAA is fraught with complexities and difficulties. A full analysis would need to include consideration of the academy's other campuses at Coen and Hopevale. More importantly, disentangling the degree to which the problems that beset Aurukun can be attributed to factors that confront remote Indigenous schools generally, or to factors specific to and located in the social and cultural conflicts in the Aurukun community, or to factors related to the educational model employed at the school is difficult. In reality, these factors interact. Finally, to what degree are the CYAAA's links to Noel Pearson's wider social reform agenda pertinent or a distraction? Certainly, the personality-driven dimensions of the debates between Pearson and his critics are a distraction.

The DET review of schooling in Aurukun takes a relatively modest but, I would argue, potentially productive approach. The review identifies some serious problems at the school and makes 27 recommendations (all of which have been adopted by the state government). The recommendations fall under 'four central themes':

- Governance and operational arrangements;
- Engagement of the Aurukun community;
- Secondary education provision;
- Direct instruction. (DET, 2016, p. 7)

The review found that there was a lack of clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of the CYAAA (and by implication of CYP) and the DET partners, leading to confusion about who is driving the future direction of the school. Additionally, the review noted that successive audits of the school had rated the school's internal financial control processes as unsatisfactory.

The report recommends that DET and the CYAAA negotiate a new service agreement, in which the former would 'strengthen its support for the governance and day-to-day operation of the school' (DET, 2016, p. 7), including the development and oversight of a school

improvement plan. The CYAAA would retain responsibility for professional development, curriculum and pedagogy. The relevant recommendation is, however, somewhat ambiguous about whether this relates specifically to DI or to professional development, curriculum and pedagogy generally:

DET to strengthen its support for the governance and day-to-day operation of the school, with CYAAA contracted to provide professional development, curriculum and pedagogy licensing and design, and ongoing accreditation services for DI, and a new service agreement between DET and CYAAA be implemented that identifies clearly the roles and responsibilities of each party. (Ibid., p. 7)

The report also recommends that resourcing processes for the school be aligned with the resourcing allocation methodologies for all other Queensland state schools, and that an independent financial audit of the school be undertaken, including a review of current financial arrangements.

As noted above, in laying the groundwork for the establishment of the CYAAA, extensive consultation was undertaken with the Aurukun community. This was facilitated at the time by the involvement of the late Neville Pootchemunka, then the mayor of Aurukun. The 2009 “business case” for the CYAAA states that Mr Pootchemunka would serve on the school’s board as a “community member” (CYP, p. 39). In 2016, other than Noel Pearson who is from Hopevale, there are no community representatives on the GGSA board, and the current mayor of Aurukun, Dereck Walpo, has been reported as calling for the return of the school to full DET control (Elks, 2016). According to the DET reviewers, ‘community members and key stakeholders ... indicated a preference for DET to lead the future directions of the school’ (DET, 2016, p. 16).

The degree of support for the school in the Aurukun community is a matter of debate and is difficult for anyone outside of the community to assess. While the Wik Women’s Group has strongly supported the CYAAA (Wik Women’s Group, 2016; AAP, 2016), the failure of any parent to complete a school opinion survey for two consecutive years is troubling. The DET reviewers state that ‘many community members reported that they feel they have been excluded from the school and are not consulted in relation to the school curriculum, teaching practices and the school’s overall direction’ (DET, 2016, p. 7). Additionally, the DET report notes that teachers felt that there should be ‘a greater focus on the Aurukun community through the use of local people ... [including] introduction to Elders within the community, as well as parents and other key school partners’ (Ibid., p. 36).

The report recommends the development of a coordinated approach to community engagement, including the re-establishment of a Parents and Citizens’ Association and involvement of the community in staff induction, curriculum development and the school improvement plan.

The report acknowledges that the challenges of effectively supporting the transition of students to secondary schooling in a remote, isolated and culturally-distinct community are substantial. Retention rates for students transitioning from the CYAAA to secondary boarding facilities have fluctuated between 41 and 63 per cent in the period 2010-2015 (DET, 2016, p. 52). The abandonment of local secondary education by the CYAAA has been accompanied by a growing number of adolescents in the Aurukun community who have no supports, productive activities or prospects. These adolescents are seen to form a portion of those in the community who have engaged in socially disruptive behaviour. The report recommends that secondary education be re-introduced for Years 7 and 8, with greater

support for students to transition to boarding schools and the provision of alternative education options and vocational education and training.

While the report finds that DI 'has provided a consistent language and focus for teachers in a school where a high turnover of staff exists' (Ibid., p. 9), it concludes that a rigid over-reliance on DI to the exclusion of 'a range of high-yield strategies and contextualised curriculum to meet the needs of students in Aurukun' (Ibid.) has led to many aspects of the Australian curriculum being ignored or inconsistently taught. This is a serious matter: it indicates that 'the school does not expose students in depth to the full range of general capabilities' (Ibid., p. 41). Further, the over-reliance on DI has also contributed to a failure to engage with local Indigenous culture. The review notes that other schools, notably Broadbeach State School in Queensland and a number of Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory<sup>14</sup> also use DI. However, unlike Aurukun, these schools provide 'appropriate timetabling ... to ensure all elements of the Australian Curriculum are taught using a range of pedagogies' (Ibid., pp. 47-48).

The school operates an extended school day. The club and culture domains, which provide opportunities for a range of learning experiences beyond basic literacy and numeracy have been mainly relegated to the period between 2.30pm and 4pm each day – attendance during this time is voluntary, though strongly encouraged. The DET reviewers found that 'student engagement during this part of the program varies considerably' (Ibid., p. 41). Additionally, the pressure to deliver improved literacy and numeracy outcomes in an atmosphere of irregular attendance and disruption has led to more and more emphasis on DI. Professional development for teachers was almost exclusively related to DI: 'the review found that the school-based professional learning for teachers was not aligned with the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*' (Ibid., p. 36) and that while 'there was evidence of school-wide attention being given to student progress over time in literacy and numeracy as supported by DI ... [there was] no evidence of this same level of attention in other areas of the school curriculum' (Ibid., p. 19).

In the view of the reviewers, 'DI should be one, but not the only, approach incorporated into the teaching practices at Aurukun school' (Ibid.).

## Pearson's Response

Speaking to reporters in May before the outcomes of the review of the school were known, Noel Pearson expressed frustration that 'the school is now the scapegoat of what is very clearly a law, order and policing problem' (Brisbane Times, 2016). As noted above, Pearson had cause to feel aggrieved that several prominent commentators were quick to link the violence in the Aurukun community to the school's educational program and that the state government response to the violence was to announce an inquiry into the school. However questionable the specific rationale and logic motivating the review of schooling in Aurukun, a strong case can be made that such a review was overdue. In the event, the review uncovered some serious problems in the school.

It is unfortunate that Pearson's response to the findings of the review were defensive and failed to acknowledge that there were issues that the CYAAA needs to address. Pearson persisted with the line that the 'review did not include [a consideration of the] law and order problems which caused the violence and closed the school temporarily' (ABC, 2016d) and questioned the validity of a review that did not include classroom observations of DI in action. He also cast aspersions on the DET's previous administration of the school, stating

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<sup>14</sup> The NT schools are implementing DI with the support of Pearson's GGSA.

that 'you would have to believe in fairy tales' to think that the DET could run the school better (Ibid.). He claimed, without providing any specifics, that the review report contained 'a whole lot of stuff that is patently incorrect, inaccurate' (Ibid.).

It is to be hoped that, when the dust settles and schooling resumes, the focus of the CYAAA will shift from defending its record to productively engaging with the task of school improvement.

## Conclusion

The civil disturbances in the Aurukun community this year do not provide a useful basis for making a judgement one way or the other about the efficacy of the educational model employed at the CYAAA. Nevertheless, as a noteworthy and controversial initiative in the important area of Aboriginal education, the operation of the CYAAA deserves to be the subject of ongoing examination and review. As noted above, there are a number of issues that can fairly be raised about the social, cultural and educational assumptions underpinning the institution, its governance and cost, and its efficacy in producing outcomes for Aboriginal students. A definitive assessment of the CYAAA is fraught with complexities and difficulties and simplistic pronouncements from both supporters and critics of the academy have been less than helpful. The DET report, on the other hand, identifies that there are some significant problems with the way in which the school is currently operating and provides a useful starting point for improvement.

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