ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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What are the success factors for schools in remote Indigenous communities?

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Abstract

Indigenous Australian students generally attain poorer educational outcomes compared to non-Indigenous students. However, some remote schools are challenging the status quo by providing schooling experiences where Indigenous students thrive. Using an Indigenous research paradigm and a comparative case study methodology, we conducted interviews with stakeholders from two different remote community schools where students were predominantly Indigenous. Recognising the limitations of assessing student success solely on westernised concepts of success, we adopted a strengths-based approach. Using thematic analysis, qualitative data were analysed to yield themes that were sorted using a model of Indigenous wellbeing comprising five dimensions (academic, cultural, physical, psychological and social wellbeing). Responses from stakeholders (teachers, community leaders and students) show that success can be achieved when local culture is respected and incorporated into the curriculum by dedicated staff who maintain open communication with community. While both schools shared a largely common approach to Indigenous education, a hallmark was their responsiveness to local needs.

KEYWORDS
Indigenous, remoteness, school, thriving, wellbeing

All work was conducted at the Australian Catholic University.

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Indigenous students experience poorer educational outcomes. Improving these outcomes is particularly challenging in remote communities. However, some remote schools are providing experiences where Indigenous students thrive. Drivers of student success in remote communities are largely unknown. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

There is value in listening to local Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders when seeking to understand Indigenous student wellbeing. In remote Indigenous settings, a responsiveness to local Indigenous culture and needs should be considered for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world yet is the 55th most populated (Geoscience Australia, 2023). Australia is also one of the most urbanised nations, with 90% of the population living in cities (Geoscience Australia, 2023). The education system in Australia consists of three distinct sectors: government (65.6%), Catholic/religious (19.9%) and independent (14.5%), with each sector heavily subsidised by the public (e.g., more than half of revenue received by all sectors is from government sources; Horwood, 2021). Most research associated with Indigenous populations in Australia includes reference to the different 'remoteness areas'. Based on the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia, the Australian states and territories are divided into the five following classes of remoteness ('remoteness areas') based on relative access to services: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.).

REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY SCHOOLING

Education is critical for increasing Indigenous pathways to success. Indigenous students around the world experience lesser educational outcomes in comparison to their non-Indigenous peers. Educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians follow a trend similar to that of other Indigenous peoples around the world (Schellekens et al., 2022). For example, North America has seen a widening in the academic achievement gap between Native American students and the general student population (Fischer & Stoddard, 2013). A similar picture emerges for Canadian Aboriginal high-school students, where completion rates are about 72% compared to 88% for non-Aboriginal students (Calver, 2015).

In Australia, the problem is most prominent in remote areas (Guenther et al., 2019), with Indigenous and non-Indigenous differences in school completion varying by socioeconomic status and remoteness (Schellekens et al., 2022). Despite the Australian government's

substantial investments in providing quality education for Indigenous students, data show little improvement.

The disparity of educational outcomes between Australian non-Indigenous and Indigenous students has persistently been greater for those living in more remote locations. In 2022, Year 9 non-Indigenous students in outer regional areas, remote areas and very remote areas achieved 87.6%, 88.3% and 85.1% at or above national minimum standards for reading, respectively. For Year 9 Indigenous students, the percentages for outer regional areas, remote areas and very remote areas were 64.8%, 51.2% and 33.1%, respectively. For numeracy, the trends were slightly different. For Year 9 non-Indigenous students, the percentages for outer regional areas, remote areas and very remote areas were 94.8%, 94.8% and 94.4%, respectively. For Year 9 Indigenous students, the percentages for outer regional areas, remote areas and very remote areas were 80.3%, 70.4% and 53.0%, respectively (ACARA, 2023).

While these statistics are useful for measuring academic progress, identifying needs and allocating resources, they too often become tools to describe disadvantage, failure and deficit (Jang, 2019). This deficit emphasis often masks the strengths and achievements of the students, schools and communities that exist within the broad and diverse remote schooling context. Thus, it is critical to investigate the schools and communities that are creative, hopeful and successful in their understanding and implementation of positive remote schooling experiences for Indigenous students.

CONCEPTUALISING STUDENT THRIVING

The World Health Organisation and UNICEF recognise the multidimensional nature of child wellbeing (Fava et al., 2017), highlighting the widespread belief that there is more to an individual than success in any one component of life. Providing best support for Indigenous academic thriving means recognising all aspects of wellbeing. Craven et al. (2016) developed a multidimensional model for promoting Indigenous thriving, which posits that a student's general wellbeing comprises: (1) academic wellbeing, (2) physical wellbeing, (3) psychological wellbeing and (4) social wellbeing. An additional dimension, cultural thriving, is important as research indicates that cultural pride, knowledge and identity are key drivers of wellbeing for Indigenous students (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017). We suggest that these five dimensions may be a useful way for sorting and understanding the data collected in this research. The five dimensions are briefly described as follows.

Academic wellbeing

Academic wellbeing encompasses students' perceived competence in their school work (Kadir et al., 2017), the extent to which they enjoy learning in school (Arens et al., 2011) and their ability to deal successfully with academic challenges (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Academic wellbeing is a key influence for Indigenous student life satisfaction, self-concept and capacity to navigate critical life transitions (Biddle, 2014).

Cultural wellbeing

Cultural wellbeing is the strength of one's cultural identity and pride, and knowledge and connection to one's culture (Kadir & Yeung, 2017). Strong cultural identity promotes self-esteem, resilience and positive mental health (Dockery, 2010).

Physical wellbeing

Physical wellbeing is the sense of being healthy, strong and having vitality, or energy available (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Butler et al. (2019) have noted that Indigenous Australians' conceptions of health include the impact that health has on their ability to engage in life roles and maintain valued connections. Thus, strong physical health is a critical ingredient that underlies the ability to participate fully in life (Dudgeon et al., 2017).

Psychological wellbeing

Within the Indigenous Australian context, conceptions of psychological wellbeing include positive self-beliefs, positive emotions, autonomy and a sense of meaning and purpose (Craven & Dillon, 2013). Positive emotions and healthy psychological functioning are essential elements of individual wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). They promote resilience, good relationships, better health and job satisfaction (e.g., Fredrickson & Kurtz, 2011).

Social wellbeing

Social wellbeing relates to the quality, interconnectedness and support between students and their community. Connectedness is profoundly relevant to Indigenous Australian wellbeing due to their cultural values of social harmony, family, kinship, social responsibility and respect for others (Gee et al., 2014).

THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

This research aimed to understand drivers of Indigenous student success in remote communities. Accordingly, we posed two research questions: (1) What are the perceived key drivers of thriving for Indigenous students within remote schooling contexts? (2) To what extent do the perceptions of the drivers of success vary across two different remote school environments? We capitalised upon the voices of relevant stakeholders (Indigenous students, students' parents, school teaching and leadership staff, community leaders) to identify key factors that enable Indigenous students in remote communities to thrive. Our aim was also to assess whether schools differ in strategies to optimise wellbeing, to explore whether our findings were comparable between two different Australian remote schooling contexts.

Before data collection, consent was obtained from the school staff (principals, teachers and teacher assistants), parents and community members (i.e., community elders), and assent from students, which was conducted either in printed form or online as preferred by the school and class teachers. All consent and assent procedures were reviewed and approved by the Australian Catholic University Ethics Committee (Ref. HREC: 2016-169HI).

Methodology

This study adopted a comparative case study approach suitable for complex and broad phenomena (Heale & Twycross, 2018). Given that our aim is to privilege Indigenous knowledge, experiences and voices, the theoretical underpinnings of our research closely align with an Indigenous research paradigm (Getty, 2010; Held, 2019; Walter, 2019). Such an

approach enables Indigenous people to become active agents in all phases of the research process. Central to achieving this was the inclusion of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to listen to key stakeholders (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) express their perspectives about Indigenous student educational needs.

This paper also draws on the notion of critical realism (CR), which is underpinned by a philosophical perspective developed by Bhaskar (2013) and others (e.g., Gorski, 2013). A CR lens encourages researchers to engage with reality as material, and a phenomenon which can be observed and reported on with accuracy. However, a CR lens (see McMullan, 2019 for discussion) also allows researchers to engage with the structures, institutions and ideologies that have helped to shape that reality—for example, local cultural knowledge and understandings.

Participating schools

The researchers relied on their networks to identify schools with good reputations, which were accessible and prepared to participate. Invitations were then sent to eligible schools. Budget restrictions meant that only two remote schools could be selected. The two schools selected for this study were selected mostly on the basis of responding schools' availability matching researchers' availability to travel to the schools. Both schools are located on islands, with each being approximately 100 km from the nearest major mainland town.

We used the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), derived from a database of the Australian government (MySchool website), to measure the relative advantage of potential schools. The ICSEA is a scale of socio-educational advantage and not a rating of the school. ICSEA values have a mean score of 1000, with scores around 500 representing extremely disadvantaged student backgrounds and 1300 representing schools with extremely advantaged students. A measure of advantage at the student level, referred to as socio-educational advantage (SEA), is also provided on the MySchool website and measured in terms of quartiles, ranging from most disadvantaged to most advantaged. SEA quartiles provide important contextual information about the socio-educational composition of the students in every school. All Australian students are distributed evenly across the four quartiles (i.e., 25% in Q1, 25% in Q2, etc.; ACARA, 2020).

School 1

School 1 is a pre-preparatory to Year 12 school, that is, for ages 3–17 with an entirely Indigenous student population ($N \sim 300$; ICSEA ~ 600; 90% of students in the bottom SEA quartile). There is a high unemployment rate in the community. As one community member stated:

> … *no industry, there's nothing and, … not enough homes for families and that, and we've got big families, you know, and about ten, fifteen people in a three bed-roomed home*.

There is a vibrancy among the community, despite the socioeconomic disadvantage, with the school achieving remarkable levels of success for their students. The principal reported:

- Improved student attendance (up 7% from the year prior to the research being conducted).
- High levels of student engagement and significant improvements across prep to Year 6 in reading, maths and English academic grades.
- Increased levels of engagement of parents and community, as well as enhanced connections with support agencies.

School 2

School 2 caters for children in preschool to Year 6, that is, age 4–11 ($N \sim 200$; ICSEA ~ 500; all students in the bottom SEA quartile). We found the school staff and the community working well together, providing optimal learning experiences where children thrive. An Indigenous charity worked closely with the school and has observed the following indicators of success:

- Provision of foundational learning which students may not receive at home.
- The local cultures are highly respected by the school.

Data collection

Two researchers (one of whom was Indigenous) travelled to each remote community and conducted interviews. Having both an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous researcher benefited this research, providing guidance on Indigenous and westernised research methodologies, respectively, creating a synergy through the research process (i.e., survey design, data collection and data analysis). The history of inappropriate research involving Indigenous communities (Kennedy et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2014) suggests that Indigenous people should be at the forefront, and directly involved with conducting Indigenous research. Further, conducting ethical research warrants representation and agency from the demographic being researched (Clements & Horwood, 2023). Having an Indigenous researcher actively involved at all stages of this research contributed to positioning Indigenous people at the forefront of Indigenous research, and ensured the interests of Indigenous people are represented and respected. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers played vital roles in the project. Incorporating Indigenous research methodological practices (e.g., yarning; Walker et al., 2014), for example, provided the team with better quality data due to greater community engagement (i.e., respecting cultural practices and customary forms of communication). Further, the direct involvement of an Indigenous researcher in the interview/yarning processes proved useful with establishing and maintaining good working relationships with the Indigenous school communities.

Blending Indigenous and westernised research perspectives is consistent with Craven el.'s (2016) model for promoting Indigenous wellbeing. In their model, appropriately called the Reciprocal Research Partnership Model of Indigenous Thriving Futures, Craven and colleagues have proposed the integration of 'Western and Indigenous methodologies, particularly those emphasizing the importance of embracing Indigenous knowledge, values, self-concepts, and autonomy, in new synergistic ways' (p. 35).

Stakeholders were interviewed in focus groups of teaching staff, other school staff, students, parents and community members. Principals were interviewed individually. In total there were 53 participants (see Table 1). For most stakeholder categories (e.g., principal,

TABLE 1 Breakdown of participants for each school.

	School 1	School 2
Principal	1	1
Leadership team	1	1
Teachers	4	6
Students	14	8
Parents/family members	6	5
Community elders/leaders	1	5
Total participants	**27**	**26**

leadership team) there was only one interview. For School 1, three groups of students were interviewed; for School 2, two groups of students were interviewed. For each school, two groups of teachers were interviewed. Groupings were chosen at each school's discretion.

All interviews were audio recorded. The average length and range of time of interviews was similar for both schools: School 1 (average 28 min, range 6–70 min); School 2 (average 34 min, range 6–68 min).

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to ensure participants were comfortable to speak openly and honestly. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to facilitate the process of 'yarning', which Walker et al. (2014, p. 1216) describe as a conversational process that 'prioritizes indigenous ways of communicating, in that it is culturally prescribed, cooperative, and respectful' (see also Mooney et al., 2018). Further, semi-structured interviews allowed us to target our particular area of interest, while providing the flexibility to ask additional questions in response to the interviewees' responses.

The following points were discussed with student participant groups: what students liked and disliked about school; how they would describe the school to a newcomer; whether there was a sense of community among peers; whether education was important and why; homework; and the importance of local culture. Similar topics were discussed with staff, parents and community members, in addition to thoughts regarding the school's approach to curriculum and national education standards. Researchers were able to discuss these topics on a deeper level with principals due to the one-on-one nature of the interviews. Interviews were transcribed and transcripts coded.

Analysis

Data analysis was guided by a thematic analysis approach, a popular form of qualitative analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis is used across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017) and commonly to 'identify and describe patterns of meaning in a dataset' (Joffe, 2012, p. 210). Thematic analysis is guided by a six-phase procedure proposed by Clarke and Braun (2017): (1) gaining familiarity with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (i.e., developing a narrative and contextualising the analysis).

Two researchers read interview transcripts and noted the types of strategies indicated by stakeholders as potential causes for school success. Researchers then discussed their thematic findings and established strategy categories. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used, as described by Proudfoot's (2023) inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis. The inductive approach of thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the interview data. A deductive-driven approach was then used with identified themes, then assigned to the wellbeing dimensions introduced earlier (i.e., academic, cultural, physical, psychological and social) based on their alignment with the emergent themes.

The two researchers engaged in an iterative approach, reducing the data to meaningful themes and combining them into broader categories to reach agreement. The researchers proceeded by detailing the interview file, school, dimension, school strategy identified, direct quotes relating to key school strategies and stakeholder responsible for strategy implementation. One strategy quote could be coded under more than one wellbeing dimension. Two researchers reviewed this information together and made changes to some strategy quotes' categorisation as required through discussion. Results are presented according to the wellbeing dimensions from Craven et al. (2016) and identified themes are provided as supplementary materials.

RESULTS

Academic wellbeing

School attendance

School 1

School 1 emphasised that cooperative collaboration between stakeholders increased attendance, along with incentives from the school and national organisations. The school offered gift cards to parents for high student attendance levels. The principal educated the community on the importance of attendance over a full day's absence: '*… bring them in until 1:00 or 1:30* [PM] *and then take them … because half a day across a year for 50 days impacts on their attendance*' (Principal). The principal also collaborated with the local council and others to schedule community events outside school hours.

School 2

The school spoke to parents if student attendance was low. The school worked closely with their Remote School Attendance Strategy team as well as national organisations and various agencies to incentivise attendance. One stakeholder provided school end-of-term excursions for high-attending students (90% plus), while another hosted sporting activities and events '*… to get children back after bush break* [school holidays]' (School leadership team member), encouraging families to come back to the community and become school-ready.

Resourcefulness in meeting student engagement needs

School 1

The school practices differentiated learning. Individualised support plans cater to each student's need to address gaps and '*… promote opportunity for academic engagement*' (Teacher).

Teachers' styles were adapted to differentiated learning plans: '*… Some kids have verified … intellectual things going on and it's sensory stuff. So I've got some playdough and also when they need time out, I've got iPads*' (Teacher); '*… when he* [needs] *time to sit and have time out he can go to his own little area. We made a little tent for him*' (Teacher).

Teachers utilised inclusive instruction. The cyclical 'I do, we do, you do' method allowed them to assess student understanding and repeat the process until all students grasped the concept: '*It's just finding where you need to be on that scale for the different topics. You have to fill in the gaps where they pop up*' (Teacher).

School 2

Many local teaching assistants spoke the local language to help provide support to students with varying learning needs. Teaching assistants allowed classroom teachers greater freedom to plan lessons to adapt to student learning challenges: '*Their main role* [Teaching Assistants] *is to do intervention Literacy and Numeracy sessions to help push every kid, not just the low kids, the middle ones, the high ones, so that they're all progressing*' (Teacher).

Foundational academic skills

School 1

The school is dedicated to improving student literacy and numeracy skills. The principal's 10-year plan seeks to '*get* [the students] *up to the rest of the country in terms of those areas*'

(Principal). To optimise learning, literacy and numeracy is taught '*in the morning when the brain's a bit more on task*' (Principal). Separate intensive lessons were held for struggling students to ensure that literacy skills are acquired.

School 2

School 2 focused on building foundational literacy and numeracy skills: '*Let's get numeracy and literacy first … and ensure the culture's strong … and the rest will come*' (Principal). Staff prioritised reading as essential to get students work-ready and prepared for life after school. The school employed a teaching assistant to support foundational academic skills development.

Staff dedication to successful student outcomes

School 1

The school executive maintained '*a high expectations, no excuses environment … which is inclusive of all and delivers a world-class education*' (Principal). A rigorous recruitment process by the principal ensured teacher commitment to achieving student outcomes: '*I make sure … you're here for the kids, you're going to give me 100% to these children*' (Principal). The principal ensured staff capability through instructional role modelling: '*… we work with them, shoulder to shoulder*' (Principal) to build a '*good team*' (counsellor, teachers and parents) who step outside their own role's boundaries to create successful student outcomes.

School 2

The principal was committed to hiring teachers who are '*… willing to learn*, [and] *willing to push themselves*' (Principal). One teacher reflected: '*… I had to be flexible, I had to find that resilience, and I had to rise to the occasion otherwise I wouldn't have made it*' (Teacher). Staff would undergo in-house training to ensure cutting-edge teaching skills. The principal praised staff dedication, highlighting that staff choose to work extra hours to '*ensure they're prepared for the next day or the weeks to come*' (Principal). One teacher described: '*We have got to have that support for each other to get this job done … if you have one chink in the armour … the whole thing falls apart.*'

Employability

School 1

School 1 guaranteed work experience and post-school pathways to enhance student employability in the community or '*something beyond*' (Community Member). Work experience commenced in Year 10, followed by school-based training and community-based apprenticeships. The school established community connections for students, including introductions to Indigenous role models and career pathway programmes with local organisations (e.g., trades, local museum, radio station): '*It's giving them a stepping stone*' (Parent).

School 2

School 2 is located on an island which is less accessible to the mainland compared to the island on which School 1 is located. This results in less employment opportunities for locals. Greater employment opportunity exists on the mainland; however, this is not always

attractive to youth on the island, as it often means relocation to an environment away from family and familiar culture, which can feel alienating.

Cultural wellbeing

Weaving Indigenous culture into mainstream education

School 1
The principal ensured '*respect about how* [to] *do things*' to overcome the Indigenous community's historically negative experience of being silenced. The community were engaged in decision-making to ensure culture passes to the school. For example, elders played a pivotal role in student life, teaching history, culture and traditional practice (e.g., weaving, dance) inside and beyond the classroom (e.g., camps, excursions). Teachers used cultural values to encourage student learning: '*… there are a lot of different tribes here and they really pride themselves on acting as one kind of community. So, I feel even as a teacher in the classroom*, I *can play on that and say: We have our differences … but we are here to push forward*' (Teacher).

The school motto promotes respect for Indigeneity and encourages students to use both '*their home language and … standard Australian English*' (Teacher). The school employs Indigenous education assistants to translate lessons into local language if required, to assist learning. Classroom teachers integrated local culture and knowledge within their curriculum lessons, using Indigenous examples to teach concepts to make them easier to understand. One teacher reported: '*I talk about the history, what's happened. The kids need to know their history*' (Teacher).

School 2
The school used culturally informed and respectful decision-making. Keeping consistent social structure and norms between home and school helps students adapt to formal education. An Indigenous Council of Elders comprised a member from each skin group (i.e., moieties), alongside the school executive: '*If there's any big decisions to be made or if there's any projects or ideas that want to be undertaken … it has to be passed through* [Council name]' (Community member).

Teachers cultivated a cultural presence. A specialised Learning and Culture teacher taught students in the local language about community culture and history. Two-way learning was prioritised, while also meeting '*… mainland curriculum testing requirements and standards*' (Principal). Teachers used cultural examples to teach the curriculum: '*In the city they might explain numeracy in terms of cars or bank interest … if there's something that the kids can relate to, fishing, animals, why not do that?*' (Teacher).

Cultural awareness among staff

School 1
Compulsory staff formal cultural awareness training on the mainland was attended each year. This knowledge was supplemented by local teachings provided by elders. Our elders '*do the cultural awareness programme about the protocols and whatnot on the island and at the school*'. Non-Indigenous staff also appreciate that Indigenous parents sometimes prefer to communicate with Indigenous staff: '*When some of the parents don't want to speak to the non-Indigenous teachers, they'll go and approach an Indigenous teacher*' (Parent).

School 2

At least two assistant teachers from the community were present in each classroom during lessons. Their presence allowed staff to remain culturally aware and receptive to the community while teaching. They assisted in teaching certain topics, as the local community's '*… worldview is just so different at times*' (Teacher). Most non-Indigenous staff '*… are all very open to* [local] *people helping them to get a better understanding…*' (Teacher). Local Indigenous staff allowed a line of communication between the school and parents who may otherwise be hesitant to approach non-Indigenous staff.

Physical wellbeing

Health screening

School 1

An employed nurse provided screening services on campus to detect health issues early. Students received incentives, such as t-shirts, to encourage regular student attendance to eye, ear, dental and other health check-ups. Health concerns were referred to relevant external health care providers. External Australian sight and hearing organisations supplemented the efforts of the school nurse, offering further screening and follow-up services. Such services broke down barriers so students could be educated about their health.

School 2

Staff received training to monitor student physical health needs. The school arranged health practitioner appointments upon detection of health issues. External Australian health organisations also visited to assess students. Students learnt to build skills in recognising their own health problems and were encouraged to ask for help. Staff were told '*to focus on the health of the kids first … I just can't understand how kids can come to school and do their best and get the most out of them if they can't hear, their heads are full of nits, and they have got open wounds and boils all over their bodies and scabies … and they do*' (Leadership team member). The welfare of the child was paramount.

Self-care and daily routine

School 1

The school emphasised self-care initiatives to increase the likelihood of students adopting these practices independently. Initiatives included a daily breakfast club and a tooth-brushing programme. Further, relevant police and ambulance staff assisted in education regarding drugs, alcohol and sexual health to reduce stigma and increase the approachability of these services.

> *Sometimes when the kids see the paramedics they get really nervous and upset because they obviously associate that with something bad that's happened. But if they are establishing that relationship, they can ask them those questions: Why is smoking actually bad for you? Rather than us just standing at the front saying: Don't do it. Don't do this. Don't do that.*
>
> (School nurse)

School 2

The school promoted regular sleep, exercise, hygiene and routine. The school created a routine for students by holding an assembly every morning at the same time, regardless of attendance numbers, followed by exercise. Some family homes may not always be able to provide a conducive environment for students' sleep: '*Often they come from homes where they cannot sleep overnight*' (Leadership team member). Teachers are therefore receptive to such circumstances and, in communication with the Council, allow students to have time and space for sleep where possible.

Nutrition and exercise initiatives

School 1

Several healthy eating initiatives have been established. Drinks high in sugar (e,g., fruit juices) have been prohibited at school, and flavoured milk has been replaced with plain milk. The school has also increased physical activity via sports, as well as daily walks.

School 2

This school understands that physical wellbeing is an essential precursor to effective learning. The school provided students with breakfast, recess and lunch to ensure all students had nutritious meals. Students also received lessons on nutrition. The school incorporated daily physical activity such as running.

Psychological wellbeing

Psychosocial skills and wellbeing

School 1

Students who display challenging or poor behaviours received counselling from Community Education Counsellors to regulate behaviour. Problematic behaviour was highlighted, reasons why the behaviour was poor were explained and skills were provided to assist in altering future behaviour. Teachers and parents/guardians collaborated to help students feel supported in implementing change. Community members, such as grandparents, worked with the school to provide support to both parents and students.

The school ensures the '*whole social, emotional wellbeing with teaching and learning*' is prioritised with the help of resources provided by a government agency and a charity (Teacher). '*Wraparound support*' is provided to staff and students as it '*makes a major, major impact on the child's general welfare*' (Principal). This included a full-time onsite Guidance Officer, as well as the full-time school nurse.

School 2

Students were taught strategies to handle emotional difficulties and who to approach for help in times of need. Students were taught to use distress tolerance skills, which assist students to problem solve or recognise issues which are out of their control. For example, simple interventions in conflict like '*how to take a breath and walk away*' were adopted, despite initially being '*very challenging*' for students (Teacher). One student reported: '*The teachers really try to help you keep calm and get along and play properly.*'

'*Wellbeing is a top priority*' and staff brainstorm how to improve support (Teacher). '*Students can access one-to-one counselling with a specialised therapist*' (Teacher). The leadership team conduct frequent informal check-ins with staff and students and are

'*very good at picking up on how people are travelling*', referring individuals to appropriate support (Teacher). One teacher stated: '*I feel like we try to model to the kids, with smiles and humour and all that sort of thing, ways through their problems and how to move on*' (Teacher).

Student confidence and aspirations

School 1

The principal encouraged students to possess pride in, and recognition of, their capabilities: '*But it's all about that community confidence within the school, building that confidence*' (Principal). Teachers used various learning strategies to help build student confidence, such as '*learning walls where students are rewarded for getting up and participating*' in their own time (Teacher). External Australian organisations provided students with opportunities to participate in extracurricular trips and goal-setting activities focused on encouraging students to believe in a limitless future. For inspiration, the school enabled students to get their '*little world across to their classmates*' about their experience, '*saying "it's good, you should have a go"*' at assemblies (Principal).

School 2

The principal emphasised that '*there's more to children than a test*'. To increase self-worth, the school adopted a points system for achievements outside of academia, such as positive social interaction and punctuality. To develop student independence, teachers ensure students receive manageable tasks for independent completion to assist in self-regulation skills and preparation for life after school.

Staff planned more excursions to the nearest city, believing that students can thrive by seeing '*a bit more of the wider world*' (Teacher). Members of trusted organisations provided support for those students without a stable family presence, to ensure that all students felt supported and received guidance through struggles or goal setting.

Social wellbeing

Cultivating positive social relationships and interactions

School 1

Prioritising classroom etiquette maintained student respect for each other's learning and reduced disengagement. Etiquette includes '*counting to ten*' and '*we plan something and then we say something*' (Student). Two Community Education Counsellors ensure students understand how mainland social norms can harmoniously coexist with local cultural norms. For example, students were taught '*You give the same respect to your teachers as you would give to elders in the community*' (Community member).

School 2

Staff model socially acceptable behaviours so students '*hopefully grasp*' the same (Principal). Students were encouraged to approach designated teachers if they become victim to behavioural issues. '*Time out*' is a strategy used by Indigenous teacher assistants and Indigenous Council members for students who have been moved to a '*buddy*' classroom for reflection (Teacher).

Parent/guardian involvement

School 1

The school hosted parents and citizens meetings, open days and invited parents to weekly assemblies for award presentations. Parents were invited for classroom visits and were encouraged to volunteer with tasks (e.g., reading groups). Most parents committed to reinforcing school expectations at home, should Community Education Counsellors make them aware of behavioural or wellbeing issues. As one grandparent stated: '*We've got to try as parents and grandparents to give advice to our children and the best* [advice] *is to be in school and be educated. If we're not there for them, who else is going to be there?*'

School 2

The school ensured any new rules were explained and understood by parents. The Indigenous Council of Elders assisted by facilitating parent involvement during this process. The school would '*come and pick up*' parents for meetings or school events (Parent). The adoption of community skin groups into the school pastoral care system allowed parents a familiarity and comfortability in communicating with the school. Students reported their parents '*keep them safe and rested on school nights*' and '*provide assistance for homework*', highlighting parent efforts to enhance regular school engagement and student success.

Principal engagement

School 1

The principal communicated with the wider community and staff and focused on being approachable. Every day the principal '[goes] *walkabout* [outside of the school] *and just* [talks] *to people … because you can find out these little things that are niggling at them and they'll never come and tell you about it until it explodes one day*' (Principal). The principal also consulted with families to understand how to make school policies easier to abide, stating: '*Listen to your community … Because if you come in and throw your weight around and think you're going to know everything … all that does is it pushes people away. Show that respect and yarn…*' (Principal).

School 2

The principal was conscious that their role is not to '*sit there and say, I am the boss, this is how it's going to be*' (Principal). Instead, decision-making and problem-solving with the community occurred through the Indigenous Council of Elders. The principal understood their role as being proactive and engaging to help students stay in school: '*I see a principal as being fun, keeping the kids safe, you know, make sure my staff is happy, with all those kinds of things, with the kids, and they see that you and you model it, and hopefully they will grasp it*' (Principal).

DISCUSSION

Given the volume of data generated from interviews, the description of the results was necessarily detailed. The discussion that follows aims to economically address our research questions to inform stakeholders of beneficial strategies for remote Indigenous student education by highlighting key findings and relating them to existing research.

Research question 1

We aimed to uncover common factors across school communities which promote student thriving.

Academic wellbeing

To nurture and enhance academic wellbeing, the schools ensured that classrooms are well resourced, laying strong literacy foundations and enabling teacher wellbeing and performance. Teachers recognise the need to be adaptive in their teaching and have the support of school leadership. Providing equipment such as microphones, iPads and speaker systems can assist students with physical impairments. To improve attendance, the schools work with the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy Team and parents and use positive incentives (e.g., gift cards). Both schools understand the relevance of local cultural practices (e.g., community events, sports carnivals and leaving the community for extended periods) and work with family and community to help families prioritise school attendance.

Cultural wellbeing

Incorporating local culture, knowledge, values and beliefs into the curriculum is important (Fogarty et al., 2015). Both schools ensured cultural competence among staff and use Indigenous staff to facilitate vital relationships, such as those between school and parent, or student and non-Indigenous staff members. Indigenous staff in both schools utilised local Indigenous culture to explain concepts.

Language is central to culture. Indigenous children in remote communities do not often learn English as a first language. Teachers need to teach in English to best prepare students for post-schooling opportunities where English fluency is crucial, while respecting student culture (Anderson, 2013). Both schools prioritised the teaching of English literacy skills while optimising the student learning experience by describing more difficult concepts in the local language or using cultural examples, allowing students to understand that the two languages can co-exist.

Physical wellbeing

Poor health impacts school attendance (Dreise et al., 2016). Poor nutrition, injuries and illness can lead to reduced physical activity levels, contributing to an increase in chronic diseases (Victoria State Government, 2015). Both schools acted in accordance with Sarra's (2014, p. 46) advice for educating Indigenous students: 'Boundaries between the school and the community should be lowered. The school is not a fortress. It should be in and of the community.' External agencies partnered with schools to provide regular testing and incentives for students to monitor, promote and maintain their physical wellbeing. This also involved providing needed resources, such as appropriate footwear, that may not be readily available at their homes.

Psychological wellbeing

Children with high levels of hope experience high levels of school performance, are more active, have better problem-solving skills and psychological adjustment (Snyder, 2002).

Instilling hope, students at both schools are taught about the world of opportunities available to them. To further support psychosocial adjustment, both schools provided students with emotion regulation skills and other positive reinforcement strategies to prevent poor behaviour.

Social wellbeing

Both schools placed a strong emphasis on promoting social wellbeing. Children across the school displayed vibrancy; there was plenty of play, activity and sport. Social activities extended into the community outside of school hours. Indigenous Australians traditionally educate children in an integrated way with the community, whereas mainstream society tends to assign the responsibility to schools and trained teachers (Purtill, 2017). Both schools provided opportunities for family involvement in children's schooling, including developing strong relationships with school staff. Each school principal referred to not being seen as '*the boss*', but as someone who encourages active community participation in school life, effortfully seeking community member opinion. Such community and parental engagement in student education improves educational attainment engagement (Higgins & Morley, 2014).

Research question 2

Research question 2 aimed to ascertain whether perceptions of strategies that drive student thriving varied between remote school contexts. A uniquely perceived student thriving strategy may indicate context-specific effectiveness, unable to be generalised across other remote school contexts. We discovered that key discrepancies in strategy type within wellbeing domains were driven by the school community's location, local culture and school sector, underpinned by differences in students' stock of capital between both schools.

The mainland was far more accessible for community members of School 1 in comparison to School 2. This proximity saw School 1 foster the idea of an unlimited future, emphasising student awareness and exposure of further education and employment prospects on the mainland in preparation for the pursuit of varied life possibilities after graduation and to ease any required off-island transition. School 1 was therefore able to focus on employment and employability strategies such as providing etiquette skills, organising work experience and employment partners, through social, cultural and economic capital, which was not as accessible to School 2.

School 2 found strength in their local practices and school sector to enhance thriving, with resourcing allowing an Indigenous Council of Elders to be active in all school decision-making. The school pastoral structures, which are prioritised, reflect the community's social and family structures and create consistency for students between school and home, leveraging local community social and cultural capital. They utilised this input and community member opinions to establish a behavioural management system to reduce absenteeism and reinforce positive behaviour. Further, while School 1 depended on school rules and changes to canteen options to optimise nutrition for physical wellbeing, School 2 was able to organise resourcing to provide daily meals for students to ensure fulfilment of nutritional requirements.

The differences between schools were not stark and each aimed to reach the same goal of students thriving, accounting for what was best given the individual community's context. Key differences in perspective and strategies associated with wellbeing were tied to how students would typically act within their communities after graduation (i.e., extent of accessibility to the mainland versus high integration within an island community). Generalising

strategies was not possible. As such, the importance of gaining advice from individual remote communities as to how to achieve Indigenous student wellbeing in their schools is imperative.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The current study has contributed to research regarding schooling in remote Indigenous communities, although more research is needed with other schools to strengthen the generalisability of findings. A major strength of the research was the opportunity to interview stakeholders belonging to school communities with prominent Indigeneity, allowing for authentic Indigenous voices to be heard regarding issues which directly affect their community. Given the significant integration of both schools with their local Indigenous communities, this meant gaining invaluable perspectives from significant community members (e.g., parents and elders) in the interviewing process. The array of interviewees contributed to the depth of research findings.

The volume of data collected was another strength of this study. Using the five wellbeing dimensions to unpack our research questions allowed our findings to be accessible and logical. However, given the vast amount of data yielded from the two schools, only a snapshot of the findings could be given in this paper. Future research could focus on fewer dimensions and delve deeper to understand how these dimensions relate to school success for Indigenous children in remote communities, perhaps of varying geographies (e.g., island schools vs desert schools).

CONCLUSION

Indigenous students deserve the opportunities a formal education provides. However, a child is more than their academic achievement under a western lens, and a focus on deficits can negatively impact thriving. Guided by the Indigenous research paradigm, which prioritises Indigenous voices, this research probed beneath the surface of traditional academic achievements to highlight complex social and psychological threads that contribute to the educational experiences of those one in five young Indigenous people living in remote Australia who are often lost in aggregated data.

This research shows that skilled educators, alongside their remote communities, are committed to understanding how to support Indigenous students thriving to improve standard academic outcomes. The evidence gathered highlights the use of local Indigenous ways and knowledge among other wellbeing strategies to empower students to be at their best, acknowledging that attainment of quality education will not close them off from their culture, but prepare them for participation in broader society. It is hoped that a review of these strategies used by two exemplar schools in remote Indigenous communities will inform stakeholders about future pathways to engage Indigenous students in their education and consequently improve academic achievement to enable Indigenous students to not just succeed, but thrive.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare. There are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Australian Catholic University; HREC: 2016-169HI. University ethics procedures were followed. Consents were obtained from the schools and parents before data collection and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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