

# The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy Three Years On: What is the Evidence? What Does It Indicate?

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## Abstract

The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA), which began operation as part of the government schooling system in 2010, incorporates activities across three overlapping "domains": Class - the formal schooling component; Culture - Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural knowledge; and Club - sporting, cultural, music and physical education activities. The Academy operates over an extended school day and makes use of the controversial instructional strategy known as Direct Instruction.

A framework for rigorously evaluating the Academy trial has been developed but the evaluation has not been completed. This paper draws on the following sources:

- Data provided by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the Academy, Cape York Partnerships (CYP) and the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE);
- Literature reviews relating to Direct Instruction and Indigenous school reform;
- Personal observations at the Academy in 2010 and 2011;
- Meetings/interviews/discussions with staff at the Academy, DETE and CYP.

The available evidence indicates that literacy, numeracy, behaviour and attendance results are mixed. Debate about the degree to which the Academy provides a model for Indigenous schooling reform will be ongoing.

## Introduction

The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA) currently operates as part of the government schooling system at three sites: Coen, Aurukun and Hopevale (see Cape York Partnerships, 2009; McCollow, 2012). These are remote communities located on the Cape York Peninsula in the state of Queensland. It began operation at Coen and Aurukun in 2010 as a three-year "pilot". In 2011, the Academy expanded its operations to Hopevale.

The Academy incorporates activities across three overlapping "domains": Class - the formal schooling component; Culture - Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural knowledge; and Club - sporting, cultural, music and physical education activities. The Academy operates over an extended school day. It makes use of the controversial instructional strategy known as Direct Instruction. Unlike other public schools in Queensland the Academy has a "board" that oversees its operation.

Implementation of the Academy pilot has been marked by a number of problems but also apparent successes. This year (2012) is notionally the final year of the Academy pilot. While a framework for rigorously evaluating the Academy trial has been developed, it is not due to be completed until late March, 2013. In considering the evidence available so far, this paper draws on the following sources:

- Data and other information provided by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the Academy, Cape York

Partnerships (CYP) and the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE);

- Literature reviews relating to Direct Instruction and Indigenous school reform;
- Personal observations at the Academy in 2010 and 2011;
- Meetings/interviews/discussions with staff at the Academy, DETE and CYP.

## Noel Pearson

The CYAAA is the brainchild of Noel Pearson, an Aboriginal Australian lawyer, academic, land rights activist and founder of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, an organisation promoting the economic and social development of Cape York. Pearson is a polarising figure in Indigenous social policy debates, in which he is a high profile and formidable participant. Of particular note has been Pearson's support for the 'Intervention' in the Northern Territory (*Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act* of 2007) and his involvement in and promotion of the Queensland Family Responsibilities Commission legislation as part of the Cape York Welfare Reform. This support has seen him publically criticised by other Indigenous commentators such as Chris Sarra (e.g. Sarra, 2012) and Gracelyn Smallwood (e.g. Michael, 2012), but also vigorously defended by other Indigenous commentators, notably Marcia Langton (e.g. Langton, 2012).

Pearson is Executive Chair of Cape York Partnerships, which may be said to be an auspicing organisation for the CYAAA. The Business Case for the CYAAA was published in 2009 and explicitly linked this proposed school reform to the previous community work undertaken by Cape York Partnerships, including its involvement in the Cape York Welfare Reform trial.

## Pearson on Indigenous Social and Education Policy

The key strands of Pearson's approach to Indigenous education reform (see Pearson, 2007 & 2009; Cape York Partnerships, 2009) can be said to be:

- an approach to the current situation of Indigenous Australians based on the notion of a 'radical centre' and of 'radical hope'
- a critique of left/liberal social theory and of the social policies that derive from it— particularly as these relate to Indigenous social policy
- a critique of 'progressive' approaches to schooling — in particular, in terms of their implications for remote Indigenous students.

## *Radical Centre/Radical Hope*

Pearson (2007) proposes constructing a 'radical centre' that transcends what he calls the 'Washington-Dubois dialectic'. The dialectic revolves around the legacies of two great Black American leaders, Booker T. Washington – who argued that the key to securing Black American emancipation was through moral self-improvement and acceptance of responsibility – and W.E.B. Dubois, who argued that emancipation must be built around the assertion of Black American rights and the elimination of discrimination. While Pearson argues that both the rights and responsibilities agendas are valid and necessary and that the radical centre must be based on their 'dialectical synthesis', he identifies himself with a Washingtonian responsibilities agenda.

In a later essay 'Radical Hope', Pearson (2009) again juxtaposes the approaches of two notable American leaders of oppressed minorities: Chief Sitting Bull of the Sioux Nation and Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation. Pearson argues that under Sitting Bull's leadership the Sioux were reduced to dysfunctionality, nostalgically hankering for the return of an idealised past. In contrast, under Plenty Coup's program of hard work, education and adaptation, the Crow were able to secure relative autonomy in their native lands and preserve key elements of their culture and language.

For Pearson, the lesson of Sitting Bull/Plenty Coups is that you can't sustain an Indigenous culture if you don't engage pragmatically with the realities of the material circumstances faced by Indigenous peoples — that is, with the loss of the conditions that sustained traditional culture — and adapt the culture accordingly. This is the basis for constructing 'radical hope'.

### *Critique of Left/Liberal Social Theory*

Pearson's critiques of left/liberal social theory (what Sutton, 2009 describes as 'the liberal consensus') and of policy that derives from it is based on the 'malignant' effects of its focus on the structural causes of social problems such as racism, poverty and inequality.

The problem, according to Pearson, is that the focus on the structural causes of racism and inequality have acted to absolve Indigenous people from accepting any responsibility for improving their own situation and cultivated a culture of victimhood and dependency: 'structural explanations . . . absolve individuals from personal responsibility and agency'. Indigenous Australians are projected as weak and incapable of achieving advancement on their own, and the solution is for them to be rescued through the coordination of services. Furthermore, structurally based social policies reflect a form of 'moral vanity' in that they embody a 'state imposed vision of the social good'.

### *Critique of 'Progressive' Approaches to Schooling*

Pearson sees a progressive (i.e., left/liberal) approach to education as the prevailing orthodoxy and his critique takes as its starting point the egregious failure of schooling under this approach to provide remote Indigenous students with outcomes anywhere near those provided to non-Indigenous students.

For Pearson, progressive education is a specific manifestation of left/liberal social policy. One reason for its failure to improve Indigenous outcomes is that it draws on structural analyses of disadvantage; the effect in schools is a 'soft bigotry of low expectations'.

Many features of progressive education, according to Pearson, play out in practice in ways that reinforce or rationalise low expectations. The failure specifically to address skills development, over-sensitivity about student self-esteem, and a misplaced emphasis on cultural appropriateness and relevance, all can lead to the delivery of a dumbed-down or restricted curriculum and acceptance of low levels of performance.

Pearson is also concerned that mass education 'teaches to the middle', that is, that it assumes a standard distribution of academic aptitudes in classes (consisting of an upper quartile of advanced or 'gifted' students; a middle half of capable students and a lower quartile of low-progress learners) where mainstream instruction targets the middle half with extension and remedial programs for the other respective quartiles. In remote Indigenous schools, however, the 'academic tail' constitutes the majority of students. In these settings a mainstream program supplemented by remedial programs is not appropriate.

### *Pearson's Way Forward*

Pearson's model for remote Indigenous education reform can be said to have three dimensions:

#### *1. Demand-Side Reforms*

Consistent with his emphasis on building Indigenous responsibility, Pearson argues that school reform needs to take place in Indigenous communities that have signed up for welfare reforms that provide the following conditions:

- school-ready students keen and curious to learn;
- supportive parents who fulfil their responsibilities and demand good education for their children;
- community that values education and provides a good neighbourhood for children.

## 2. Governance

Pearson is attracted to the American charter school model where schools are funded by the government, but have considerable autonomy when it comes to matters of staffing, curriculum and pedagogy. This allows these schools, in Pearson's view, to encourage and reward excellence from both teachers and students, pursue innovative approaches, engage authentically with their clientele and avoid the 'dead hand' of educational bureaucracy.

## 3. Curriculum and Pedagogy

Pearson proposes an extended school day and dividing the curriculum into three domains: class, club and culture.

The 'class' domain is 'delineated as an English language domain dedicated to Western learning' with a very heavy emphasis on basic literacy and numeracy. Students do not move on to higher-order learning activities until they have mastered basic skills. There are to be no cross-cultural or bilingual dimensions to the class domain. The 'club' domain incorporates activities such as sports, music, IT and recreational reading, some of which in a mainstream school would be considered curricular activities and some of which would be considered extra-curricular. The 'culture' domain includes Western art and music, but also incorporates learning of traditional Indigenous language and culture and requires engagement with the local community. It is designed to move beyond token acknowledgement of Indigenous culture and be equally valued with the class and club domains.

Pearson adopts for the class domain a virtually teacher-proof instructional strategy known as 'Direct Instruction' (DI), which had been developed in the 1960s in the United States (see NIFDI website). DI is 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.

## The Academy Commences

In late 2009, the government announced that the CYAAA would proceed from the commencement of the 2010 school year in a modified form and as a 3-year 'pilot' at Coen and Aurukun. Hopevale became a campus in 2011. Funding for the Academy would be provided through normal resource allocation measures plus the Federal Government's Low SES National Partnership Agreement (\$7.2m over 3.5 years). While the Academy does have an academic board, it operates as a school within the state education system; teachers are appointed by the education department and have the same industrial conditions, including access to transfers, as other state school teachers.

### DI in Action

I visited the Academy in 2010 and again in 2011. In the class domain, teachers work from scripted DI lesson plans and use a set of instructional and classroom management techniques that are specified in the program. Deviation from the script or the use of alternative pedagogical or management techniques is strongly discouraged. Classroom management techniques are based on a classic 'rewards' and 'sanctions' approach. Lessons are a combination of teacher-led didactic drills and activities and worksheet work. All materials (lesson plans, activity sheets, workbooks and reading materials) are supplied by DI. Students are grouped by achievement level (as measured by weekly tests) and can move to a different group based on rate of achievement. They can be in different groups for literacy and numeracy. The DI groups I observed ranged in size from six to twelve students.

### The Culture Domain

Interestingly, the key curriculum strategy to be employed in the Culture domain is 'rich tasks' as developed through the 'New Basics' program (see New Basics website). New Basics and DI would probably be seen by many as representing opposite poles in current curriculum strategies/debates. Rich tasks are described as assessable activities in which 'students display their under-standings,

knowledges and skills through performance on trans-disciplinary activities that have an obvious connection to the wide world'. Arguably, it is very much in the progressive, constructivist paradigm that Pearson criticised in 'Radical Hope'.

## **Evaluating the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy**

Carrying out a rigorous evaluation of the CYAAA is both important and difficult. An evaluation framework has been developed that sets out a robust evaluation methodology that uses a range of data sources, both quantitative and qualitative. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has been contracted to conduct the evaluation and I am informed that an interim report will be provided in late January and the final report is due in late March. When and if the evaluation is to be made public is uncertain. The Queensland government has extended the trial for another year; while the Commonwealth government has withdrawn its funding.

In what follows I report the evidence, such as it is, based on my two visits to the Academy and data from various sources. As you will see, the evidence is not unambiguous.

### **Some Positives**

Despite the highly didactic nature of the DI lessons and materials, they are well constructed and interesting, and students were engaging with the tasks. In many remote Indigenous classrooms, students are too 'shamed' to read to a classroom visitor, but students eager to demonstrate their reading skills spontaneously approached me. All the teachers acknowledged that students were making progress in literacy and numeracy under the DI program and that behaviour was improved.

The unit being undertaken in the Culture domain at Aurukun at the time of my 2011 visit was based 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.

In contrast to 2010, when it appeared that a focus on basic literacy and numeracy had virtually driven all other aspects of the curriculum off the agenda, students were undertaking work that was varied, intellectually demanding and grounded in their lived experiences.

Of the 12 teachers on staff at Hopevale, 6 are Indigenous and all of these are from the community. All were trained as teachers through the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP), an alternative teacher education program that allows Indigenous teachers to gain their teacher qualification in their home communities. Several of these teachers expressed strong support for DI, stating that it had given them more confidence in teaching and classroom management and that their student results were improving. One stated that on the basis of the improved outcomes of her students, she now felt that the community saw her as a 'real teacher', not just a token Aboriginal face on staff.

The executive principal drew attention to a positive link between the CYAAA's operation and one aspect of the Cape York welfare reforms. Parents had been encouraged to become involved in their children's education through student educational trusts (SETs). The SETs, maintained by Cape York Partnerships, are funded by voluntary deductions from welfare payments to parents and can be used to support student-learning needs (e.g., for the purchase of ICT, to fund excursions, for boarding school fees). As of September 2011, there were 614 SETs with over \$1m in contributions.

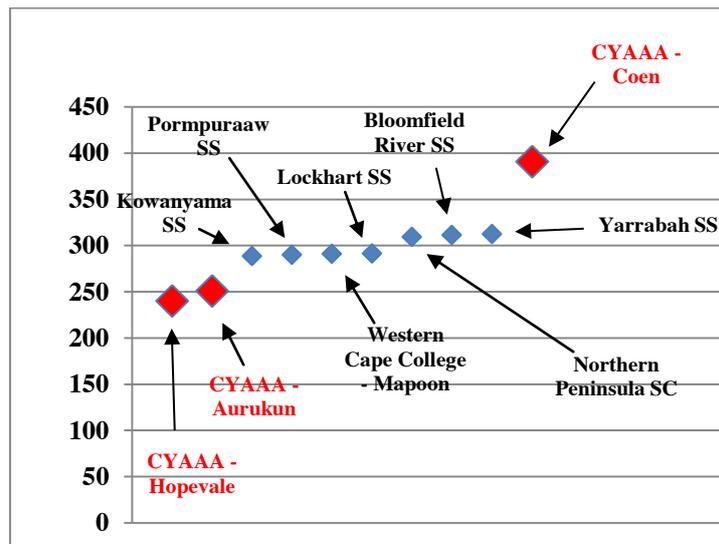
## Some Not-So-Positives

In this section of the paper, four sets of data are examined: preliminary 2012 NAPLAN results in comparison to other north Queensland Indigenous schools, NAPLAN means at each CYAAA campus from 2008 to 2012, within-school gains on successive NAPLAN tests (e.g. from Year 3 to Year 5), and school attendance. It would be inaccurate to characterise these data sets as uniformly “negative” (and certainly in the case of the Coen campus they are generally very positive). Nevertheless, in relation to the Hopevale and Aurukun CYAAA campuses, they are disappointing to say the least.

### *CYAAA 2012 NAPLAN Results in Comparison with Selected Other Cape York Indigenous Schools*

A key performance indicator will obviously be the literacy and numeracy results of students. Based on preliminary 2012 NAPLAN data as shown in Figures 1-5 and Figures 6-8<sup>1</sup>, there is no clear evidence of the superiority of the approach taken at the Academy to those being undertaken at other north Queensland Indigenous schools. Figures 1-5 show the NAPLAN mean scores for the three CYAAA campuses in comparison to the mean scores for other Cape York Indigenous schools. Coen, the smallest of the three CYAAA campuses, generally scores very well comparatively across all three domains (reading, writing and numeracy)<sup>2</sup> and all three year levels, having the best or second best mean score in all but one case. Aurukun and Hopevale, on the other hand, are generally at or near the bottom end of the range of scores.

*Figure 1: Mean Score, Year 3 Reading 2012*



<sup>1</sup> Data for Figures 1-8 are drawn from Education Queensland, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> NAPLAN also tests spelling and grammar and punctuation. For the sake of brevity results in these domains are not considered here.

Figure 2: Mean Score, Year 5 Reading 2012

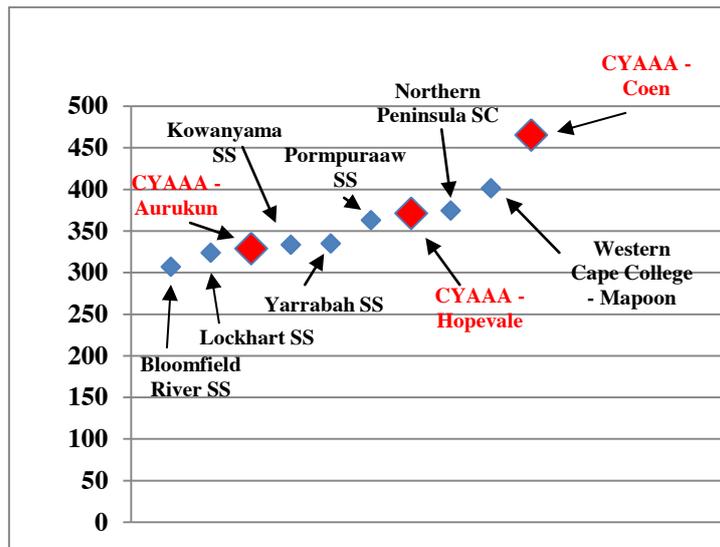
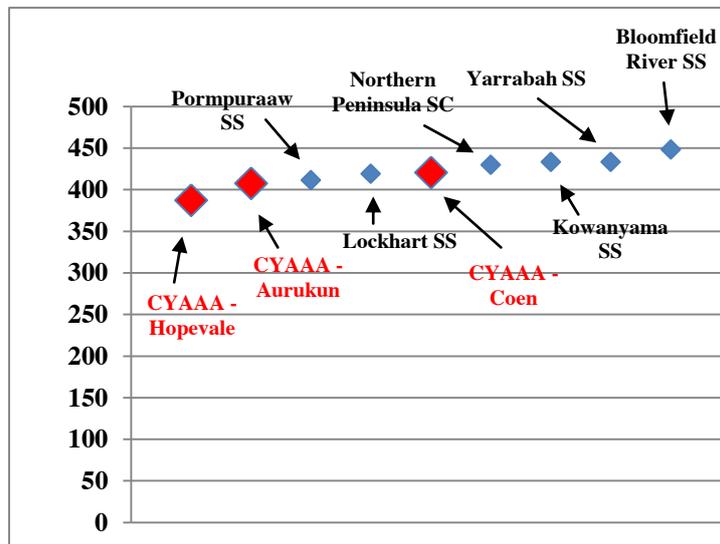


Figure 3: Mean Score, Year 7 Reading 2012



(Western Cape College – Mapoon campus does not have sufficient numbers of Year 7 students for data to be recorded.)

Figure 3: Mean Score, Year 3 Writing 2012

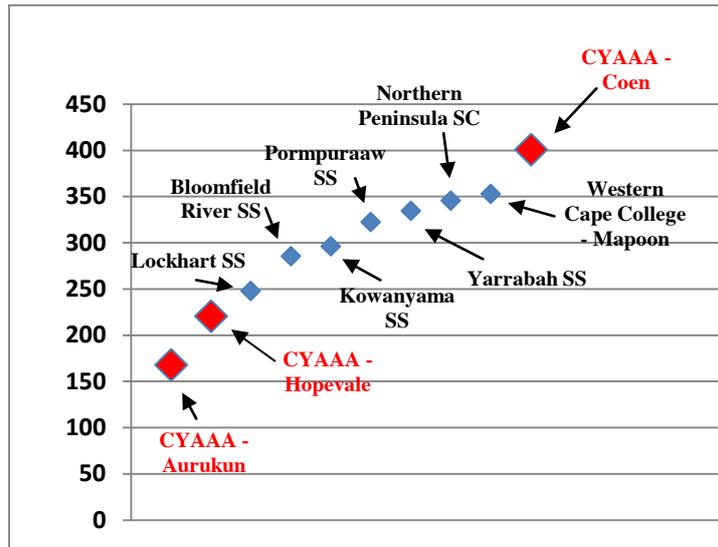


Figure 4: Mean Score, Year 5 Writing 2012

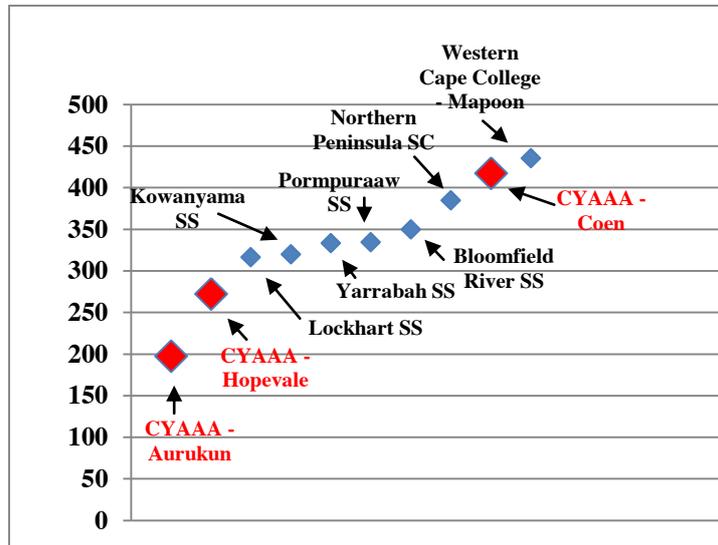
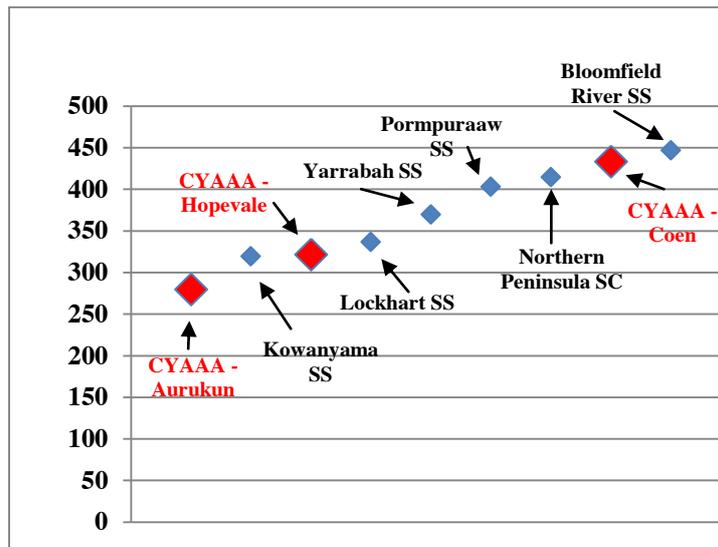


Figure 5: Mean Score, Year 7 Writing 2012



(Western Cape College – Mapoon campus does not have sufficient numbers of Year 7 students for data to be recorded.)

Figure 6: Mean Score, Year 3 Numeracy 2012

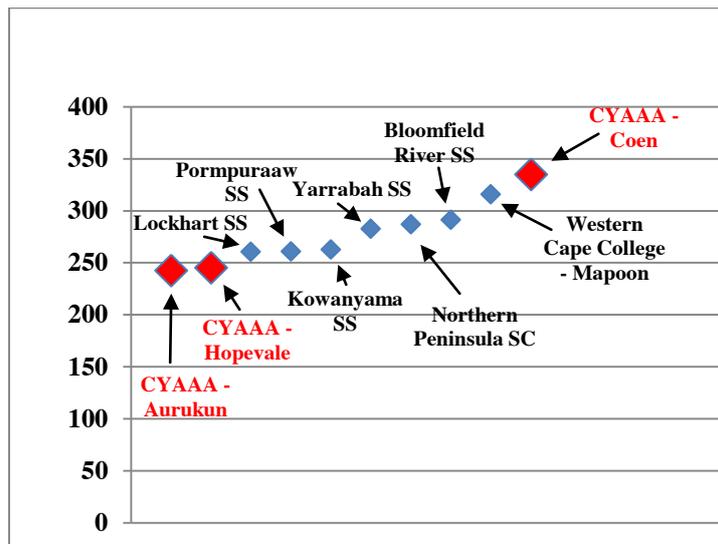


Figure 7: Mean Score, Year 5 Numeracy 2012

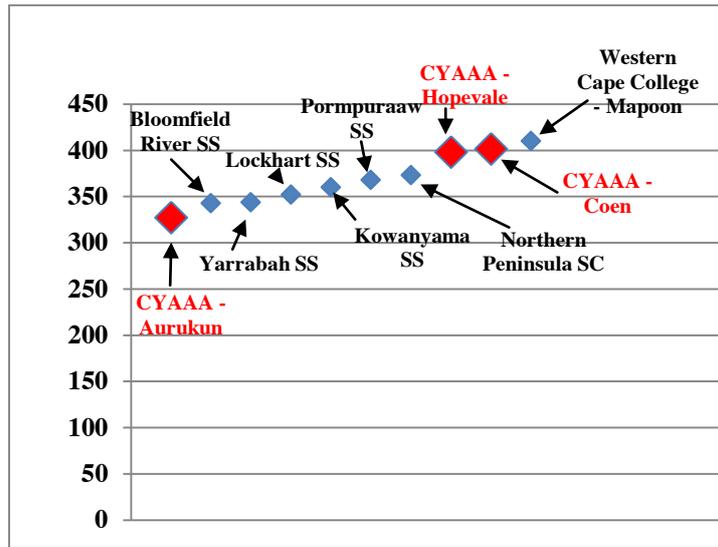
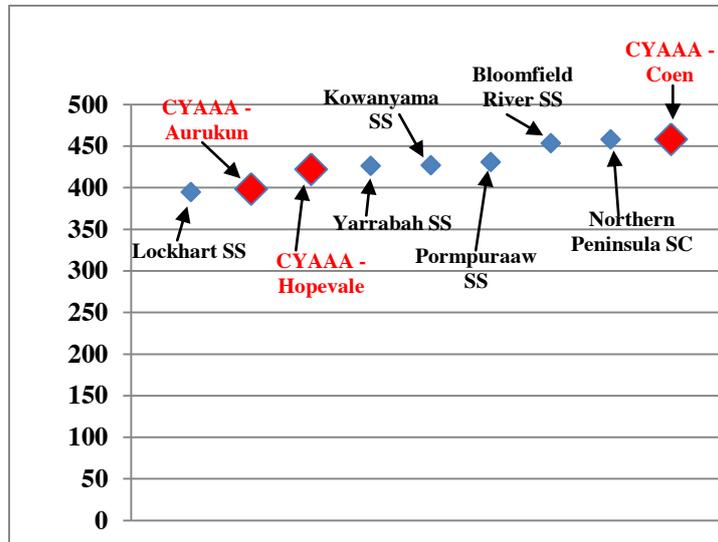


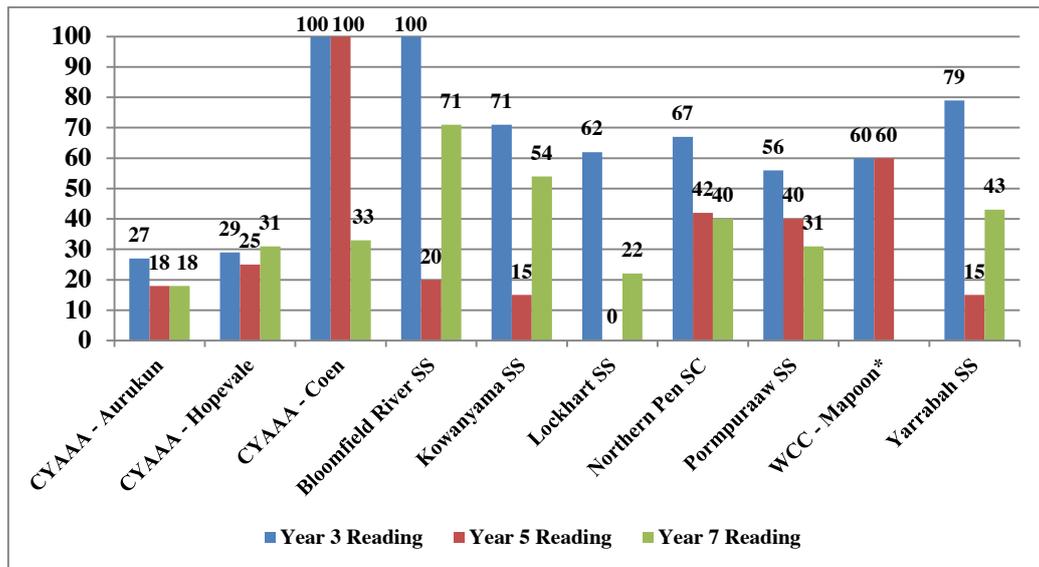
Figure 8: Mean Score, Year 7 Numeracy 2012



(Western Cape College – Mapoon campus does not have sufficient numbers of Year 7 students for data to be recorded.)

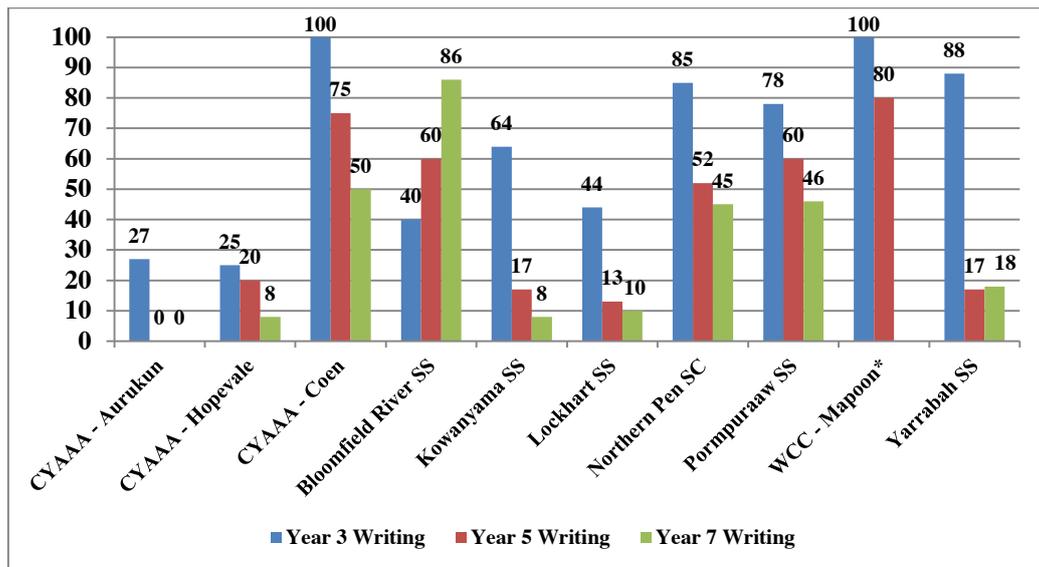
Figures 6-8 show the percentage of students at or above the national minimum standard for reading, writing and numeracy respectively at the three CYAAA campuses in comparison to other Cape York Indigenous schools for 2012 (preliminary results). On this measure, Coen also performs well in comparison to other Indigenous schools, particularly at Year 3, where 100 per cent of students were at or above national minimum standards across reading, writing and numeracy. Aurukun and Hopevale, on the other hand, ranked at or near the bottom of the schools in all of these domains and at all year levels.

Figure 6: Percentage of Students at or above National Minimum Standard – Reading



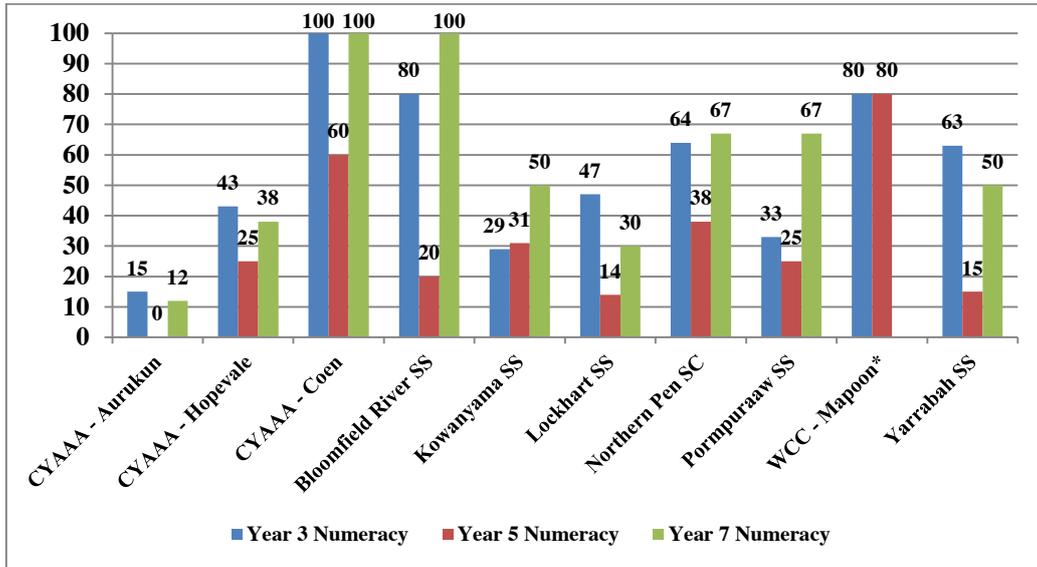
(Western Cape College – Mapoon campus does not have sufficient numbers of Year 7 students for data to be recorded.)

Figure 7: Percentage of Students at or above National Minimum Standard – Writing



(Western Cape College – Mapoon campus does not have sufficient numbers of Year 7 students for data to be recorded.)

Figure 8: Percentage of Students at or above National Minimum Standard – Numeracy

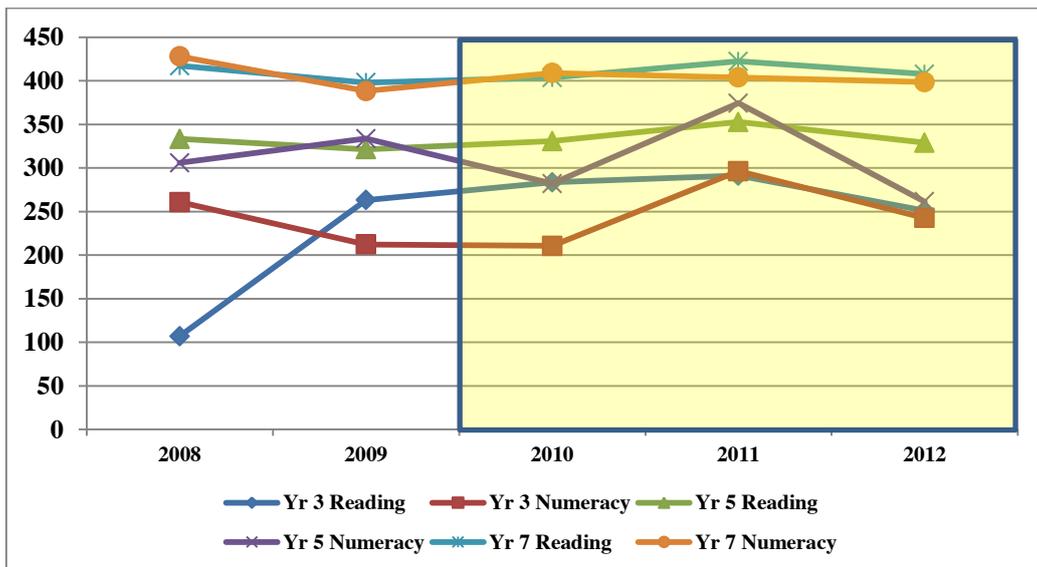


(Western Cape College – Mapoon campus does not have sufficient numbers of Year 7 students for data to be recorded.)

### NAPLAN Means, 2008 – 2012

Figures 9-11 below plot NAPLAN mean scores over the period 2008-2012 for each CYAAA campus (2012 data is preliminary data).<sup>3</sup> Scores for the period for which the site operated as a campus of the CYAAA are within the yellow borders in the figures. Caution needs to be exercised in drawing any conclusions from this data as the scores for each year are for a different cohort of students and, as each campus is relatively small, the test scores of just a few students could alter the mean scores significantly.

Figure 9: Trends - NAPLAN Means, Reading & Numeracy, Aurukun



<sup>3</sup> Data for Figures 9-14 are drawn from ACARA.

Figure 10: Trends - NAPLAN Means, Reading & Numeracy, Hopevale

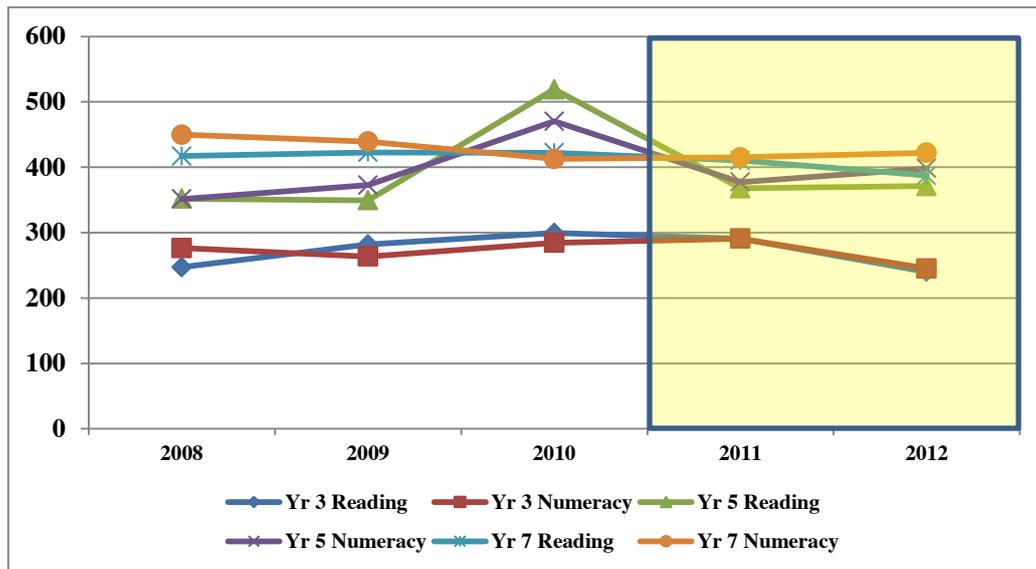
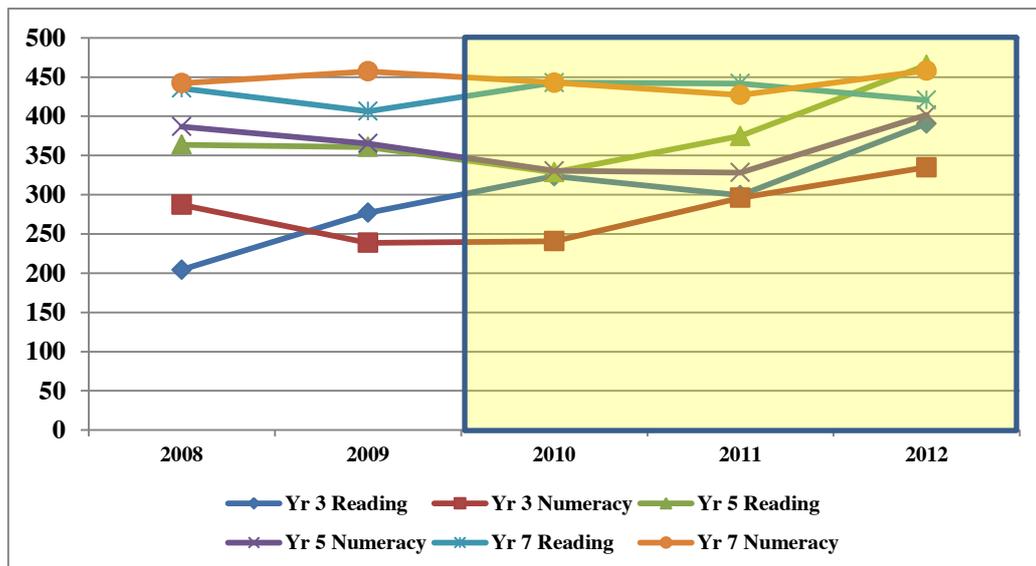


Figure 11: Trends - NAPLAN Means, Reading & Numeracy, Coen



### Within-School Cohort Gains

In terms of improvements of within-school age cohorts from one NAPLAN test to another (e.g. from Year 3 to Year 5) as compared to Queensland students generally – as shown in Figures 12-14, the results for the Coen campus are again generally quite positive but the same cannot be said for the Aurukun and Hopevale campuses. It should be emphasised that, unlike Figures 1-8, the comparisons in these figures are with all Queensland students, not with students in Indigenous schools.

Figure 12: Cohen Gains, 2010 – 2012

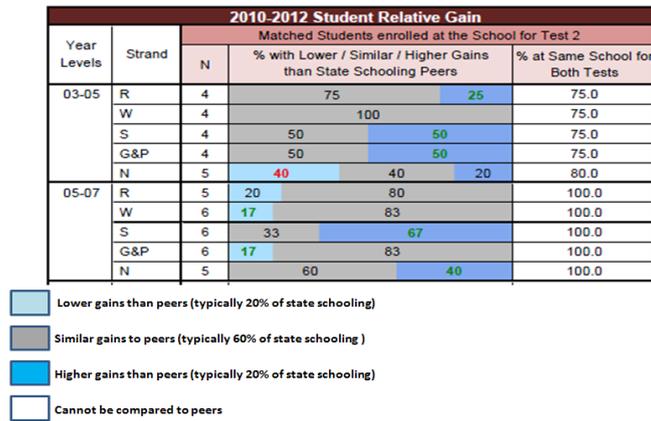


Figure 13: Hopevale Gains, 2010 – 2012

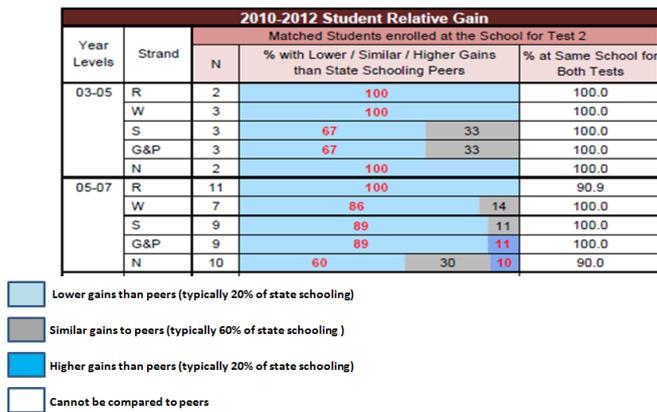
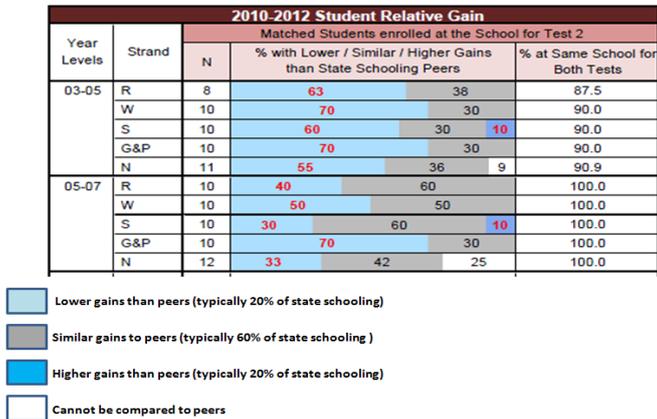


Figure 14: Aurukun Gains, 2010 – 2012



## Attendance

Table 1 shows the attendance rates at the three CYAAA campuses for the period 2008-2012.<sup>4</sup> The years for which the site operated as a campus of the CYAAA are shaded yellow. The Queensland Families Responsibilities Commission, from which these data are drawn, note that, because of changes in data collection processes and the small size of the student population at a centre such as Coen, caution should be used in interpreting this data. Nevertheless, only Aurukun shows a significant increase in the attendance rate over the period and the increase actually commenced in the year prior to the establishment of the CYAAA.

Table 1  
*Term 2 Attendance Rates CYAAA campuses 2008 – 2012 (%)*

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	% difference 2011 to 2012
Hopevale	87.6	86.9	83.5	78.6	78.8	.2
Aurukun (primary only)	44.0	68.8	64.7	73.2	61.5	-11.7
Coen	96.8	93.6	92.2	86.6	88.5	1.9

## Conclusion

It is too early and the data is too incomplete to draw any firm conclusions about the success or failure of the CYAAA or the efficacy generally of Pearson's approach to Indigenous education. The recent release of the NAPLAN data was greeted by some as evidence of the Academy's failure, but Pearson mounted a vigorous defence, citing the results from Coen and the Club and Culture activities not picked up in measures such as NAPLAN testing.

A fascinating issue, which may be addressed but is unlikely to be resolved in any evaluation of the CYAAA, is the validity of the social and educational philosophy/analysis underpinning the reform. Pearson develops his argument through the use of dichotomies: left versus right social policy, progressive versus conservative educational approaches. While calling for a 'radical centre' to emerge based on a 'dialectical synthesis' of these putative positions, he disavows any attempt at synthesis, arguing that it is not possible for him to play 'several roles in the dialectical process', and prosecutes a case against left social policy and progressive education. This is a pity, as it appears on the evidence that Pearson's approach is more nuanced than he claims or is credited for.

Perhaps the most controversial feature of the CYAAA is its embrace of DI. The 'literacy debate' has tended to polarise around two approaches: constructivist (whole language) methods and skills-based methods. DI is clearly an example of the latter and its proponents have been active in the debate. It will also be important to recognise that literacy and numeracy outcomes (even in the context of dramatic improvements) are not the only measures of educational success. The degree to which students are exposed to deeper and broader knowledge and thinking and prepared for learning outside of the context of highly scripted lessons is a relevant issue that needs to be assessed. The siting of DI (class domain) alongside the club and culture domains and, in particular, the use in the latter of rich tasks may provide a basis for this. However, the potential for DI to deskill teachers, the apparent 'disconnect' between DI and pedagogy and curriculum in other state schools, and extent to which learning within the class domain itself allows for broader and deeper social and intellectual experiences remain, at this stage, open questions.

<sup>4</sup> Data for Table 1 are drawn from Family Responsibilities Commission, 2012, p. 5.

In the end, neither the ‘success’ nor the ‘failure’ of the CYAAA (however measured) is likely to be unambiguous and it seems likely that the debates about it will continue. If the Academy is deemed a success, it may prove difficult to sort through the relative contributions made by factors such as DI (vs. any other highly structured learning program, for example), smaller-sized learning groups, enthusiastic teachers, an ongoing commitment to high standards (‘no excuses’), and substantial additional resourcing for the period of the trial. If the Academy fails, will it be because of flaws in the concept as developed by Pearson, or poor implementation, or surreptitious undermining by educational progressives in the bureaucracy, or because Pearson was constrained from implementing his plan exactly how he had originally envisaged it?

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