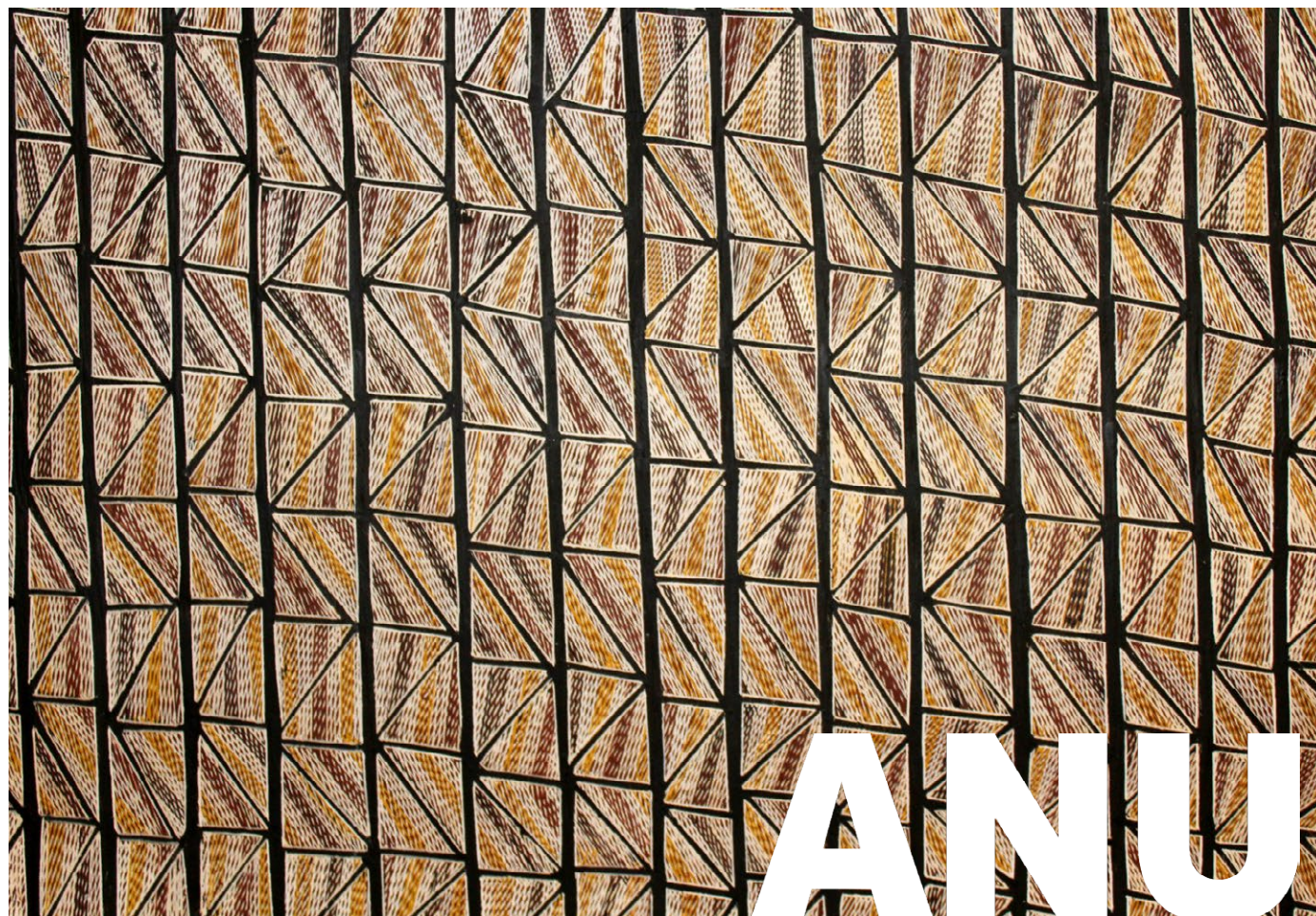




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BOARDING OFF AND ON COUNTRY:
A STUDY OF EDUCATION IN ONE NORTHERN
TERRITORY REMOTE COMMUNITY

M. O'BRYAN AND W. FOGARTY

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Aboriginal Economic
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Director, CAEPR
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Boarding off and on country: A study of education in one Northern Territory remote community

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, young people from remote communities in Australia's Northern Territory are required to attend boarding school in order to access a full secondary education. Commissioned by elders in one Northern Territory remote community, this report investigates the intended and unintended consequences of this policy approach at individual and community level. Working with families, researchers tracked the education histories of 100 young people identified as community members and aged 12–21 years. Findings reveal that for this community, the supply of boarding places is not equal to demand, and that families experience difficulties securing secondary pathways for their children. Members of the research cohort had been dispersed among 38 different schools across 16 cities or towns in every state or territory of mainland Australia. A concerning pattern of early disengagement from education and low levels of academic attainment is apparent, with consequences for youth wellbeing and community cohesion.

Findings of the study indicate the need for further systems-level research to test the generalisability of findings across other remote communities. They demonstrate that educational determinants in remote contexts (such as the community in this study) including housing, health, justice and employment need to be explicitly understood and quantified in policy discussions concerning educational effectiveness and secondary provision cost. The study has shown a disconnect between local educational aspirations and system-level provision. Policy decisions should seek to identify models which are shown to increase the likelihood of education engagement and attainment in place. The community involved in this study are adamant 'place-based approaches' to educational development must be paramount. This is likely to be generalised to other remote settings.

KEY WORDS

Indigenous education, boarding, remote secondary education, NT education policy, education on and off country.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
OVERVIEW AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	11
LITERATURE REVIEW	20
RESEARCH CONTEXT	26
RESEARCH TEAM	30
METHODOLOGY	32
QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE & FINDINGS	39
QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE & FINDINGS	54
DISCUSSION	79
RECOMENDATIONS	91
CONCLUSION	93
REFERENCES	94

ACRONYMS

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics	HSC Higher School Certificate	NT Northern Territory
ACARA Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority	ICSEA Index of Community Social Educational Advantage	NTCA Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association
ANU Australian National University	IES Indigenous Education strategy	RATE Remote Area Teacher Education (NT Department of Education)
CAEPR Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research	NAPLAN National Assessment Program– Literacy and Numeracy	TSU Transition Support Unit
CDP Community Development Program	NGO non-government organisation	VET Vocational Education and Training
CEO Chief Executive Officer	NHMRC National Health and Medical Research Council	VETiS VET in Schools

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This study would have been impossible without the wholehearted support of the target community.

They cannot be named here, for reasons of de-identification, but the elders who commissioned and shaped the work are heroes of education and the mainstays of community life. This work is dedicated to them and to the young ones they advocate for.

We are grateful to staff at the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment for resourcing this project and providing oversight of the work.

Sincere thanks to staff in boarding schools in the NT and interstate who have assisted in this study. In our communications, it is evident that they care deeply for the young people in their charge, and want the best for them, their families and communities.

To Lukas Arkapaw for his vision in facilitating this study, to Pilawuk White, Leslie Gordon and Georgia Pryce, who went so far beyond their brief as community-based research assistants; Llew Mullins, Yalari: to Oscar King, Frances Enilane and staff at Catholic Education NT; Marijke Welvaert, Statistical Support Unit, ANU and Tony Dreise, Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU our sincere thanks for your support and assistance. The authors thank Greg Wearne and two anonymous reviewers for comments received on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as participants at a seminar presentation to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and the Department of Social Services held in Canberra in November 2019. The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either department.

PHOTOGRAPHY

All photographs are the work of Associate Professor Wayne Quilliam, who assisted with this research project. Images are used with the express permission of community members pursuant to ANU Ethics Approval 2019/531.

The images reproduced in this report reflect the arts-based methodology employed. A primary concern of community members was to provide evidence of the joy, strength, beauty and resilience which are the hallmarks of their identity. Where individuals are identifiable, they have given specific approval for reproduction of the image in this context. Photographs appearing here are not to be used for any other purpose.

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INTRODUCTION

THE PROVISION OF MIDDLE AND SENIOR YEARS SCHOOLING IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY HAS LONG BEEN CONTENTIOUS.

Australian First Nations' education is a complex area of policy and development. Notwithstanding the sometimes extraordinary efforts of educators in remote communities, education for remote First Nations students in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia has often been described with discourses of failure and disadvantage (Guenther & McRea-Williams 2013). The 'solution' for this vexing 'policy problem' has been an incremental and deliberate move away from localised forms of educational development that acknowledge and include Indigenous wants and needs, towards mainstreaming and globalisation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). A focus on boarding school as an increasingly strong policy setting is a part of this broader ideological and policy framework (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018).

The most recent large-scale review of education in the NT, *A share in the future*, ('The Wilson Review') (Wilson, 2014) was conducted by independent consultant Bruce Wilson in 2014. On the basis of its recommendations, the NT Department of Education developed its Indigenous education strategy 2015-2024 (IES) (NT Education, 2015b).

The Strategy is underpinned by five key principles which are considered to have a direct and measurable impact on educational outcomes for Indigenous students:

1. Education provides social and economic advantages and all learners are respected.
2. Student wellbeing and education outcomes will not be compromised.
3. Community is engaged, has choice and culture is respected.
4. Resource decisions are based on effective, evidence-based practices driving improved outcomes for Indigenous students.
5. Autonomy is balanced with consistent and system-wide effort, accountability and alignment with NT Government policies addressing the needs of Indigenous people in the NT.

In relation to the provision of education for middle and senior school students, the Wilson Review recommended that most students should be educated in urban schools with extensive transition programs being developed for children from Grade 5 onwards, to prepare young people for the move to schools away from home. The recommendations proposed by Wilson, including 'the progressive cessation of senior secondary schooling in Priority 1 schools'¹, were adopted as policy. Accordingly, in 2020, the NT's Department of Education website advises that a young person who elects to stay in community for his or her secondary years will be

able to access 'post primary literacy and numeracy', and employment pathways programs 'may be offered'. No provision is made for the development of applied learning pathways.

The closure of full secondary programs in remote areas is positioned as a logical response to the lower educational achievements of remote schools. However, there is some question around the potential for severe unintended social consequences as a result of 'off country' schooling becoming the main choice for remote Indigenous students. The recommendation would seem to be at odds with previous reports. For instance, the Bringing them Home report, a major inquiry into the effects of removing Aboriginal children from their families, explicitly documented the dislocation, and the emotional toll that resulted from lack of education opportunities in Indigenous communities and the necessity of sending Indigenous students away to boarding schools (HREOC 1997, pp. 485-91). In commenting on the impact of the Wilson Review, Fogarty, Lovell & Dodson (2015) predicted 'if students were required to enrol in schools hundreds of kilometres away from home and family, past practices tell us very strongly that such an approach will lead to lower enrolments and poor retention, defeating the stated purpose of the Wilson Review' (p. 8). Unfortunately, this report, based on the in-depth study of one community, would seem to corroborate that prediction. Fogarty, Lovell and Dodson (2015) also noted that in many communities, full secondary education had only been provided for the last 10 years and these schools had long been substantially underfunded compared to schools in urban centres such as Darwin (Taylor, 2010).

The Wilson Review called for trial and evaluations of 'off country' residential facilities and the establishment of a representative advisory committee to monitor trials, report on progress and

advise on overcoming obstacles. To date, results of evaluative studies have not been made public.

In 2017, the Australian Government commissioned an Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education ('The Halsey Review') (Halsey, 2017). The Halsey Review began with the premise that the key challenge for regional, rural and remote education is ensuring, regardless of location or circumstances, that every young person has access to high quality schooling and opportunities. Discussing the secondary education options available to rural families, the Review acknowledged that boarding school is expensive and can be emotionally taxing for regional families who may live too far away to access appropriate local secondary education (p. 21). The report acknowledges the short, medium and longer term benefits of providing education opportunities close to home, for example through weekly boarding schools (p. 77). The particular social and emotional costs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families of leaving country and community are not addressed specifically, although the Review recommends that government should examine the resourcing allocations for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools to ensure they are authentically informed by culture and language, ceremonial obligations, the Australian curriculum, and enrolments. There is no focus on the cultural competence of boarding schools which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attend, notwithstanding research evidence indicating that the lack of cultural safety at boarding school is a barrier to engagement and attainment for First Nation students (Lowe, 2019; Mander, 2015a; O'Bryan, 2017; Rogers, 2016). Neither the Territory nor the Australian Government review proposes any 'fall-back' education programs or opportunities to ensure that remote-living First Australian students who discontinue boarding continue to have access to quality secondary education pathways.

Both the NT Government's *IES 2015-2024* and the Halsey Review presume that supporting remote secondary-aged Indigenous young people to attend boarding school represents best practice. Underpinning this is a very scant evidence base. As Guenther and Fogarty (2018) note:

There has recently been a mini-explosion of new research that highlights boarding school issues related to remote First Nations students. Most of the research is qualitative, reporting on the risks and challenges of boarding in social, psychological and emotional terms ... the emerging body of research does not include quantitative findings about the effectiveness of boarding in terms of academic outcomes, or retention, or pathways from education. There are no public evaluations of scholarship programmes. There is no evidence of the economic benefit to communities.

What we do know from the limited publicly available quantitative data is that there are not enough boarding places to cater for all remote students, and with an increase in demand of more than 40% in recent years (Commonwealth of Australia, & Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017) up to two-thirds of students are either not ready for boarding or come back to communities to disengage from education altogether (Guenther et al., 2016). Further, some students enter what the recent Power of Education Report calls a 'revolving door' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 116) of one boarding school experience after another. Risks of sexual abuse in boarding schools are also noted by the report of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

Despite evidence to the contrary, boarding school pathways for Indigenous students continue to be presented as an unequivocal good and as an effective discharge of governmental responsibility to ensure access to quality secondary education.

This study represents the first time that these assumptions have been tested in the context of a single remote community.

Commissioned by elders, researchers were invited to track the educational trajectories of the whole population of young people aged 12-21 from their community. The unwavering commitment local families displayed in supporting the research team, reflects the deep concern they have for their children's education outcomes, their wellbeing, and the present and future social cohesion of their community. Their contributions have provided unique insights into the costs and benefits of educating young people from remote Australia away from their land, language and cultural context.

¹ A schedule of schools is provided in Appendix 6 of the Wilson Review, with Priority 1 status attaching to schools with remote or very remote geolocation, a relatively lower ICSEA score, a high percentage of Indigenous students and education or developmental factors which attract additional resourcing or support (Wilson, 2014, p. 274)



OVERVIEW AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS MIXED METHODS RESEARCH PROJECT WAS UNDERTAKEN AT THE INVITATION OF ELDERS IN A REMOTE NT COMMUNITY.

The community is made up of approximately 400 residents. The project has been funded by Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

The research took place over a one-year period and was led by Dr Marnie O'Bryan and Dr William Fogarty from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University. The research grew from a direct concern by community about education opportunities available to, and outcomes being achieved by, their young people.

This study tests the five key principles which underpin the NT Government's IES 2015–24 by interrogating their implementation and measurable impact in one remote NT community. The project focus is an examination of the central policy, endorsed by the IES and the Halsey Review, of secondary education in boarding schools 'off country'.

The research objectives were to:

- Develop a comprehensive database tracking the individual education histories of a cohort of young people aged 12–21 years from the target community. These data included attendance, engagement, academic attainment, post-school outcomes and social and emotional wellbeing.
- Identify and examine the determinants of success and barriers to engagement.

- Discuss the adequacy and impact of secondary education provision in the target community regarding individual life chances and wellbeing and community cultural, social and economic aspiration.
- Make recommendations to the community and school leadership to improve secondary education provision.

In policy terms, boarding programs for First Australian students are presented by government as an unequivocal good: an expression of governments' commitment to providing access to quality secondary education programs for Indigenous youth, wherever they come from.

In the NT, an education strategy (NT Education, 2015a) which includes the discontinuation of remote secondary programs, in favour of boarding 'off country', was characterised at its launch by the then Minister for Education as: 'the provision of greater opportunities and pathways through secondary education that leads to real employment outcomes and opportunities'. He acknowledged the need for ongoing evaluation of the approach, and that 'quality programs, quality teaching and strong community engagement are integral to the success of the reforms in this strategy' (IES 2015–2024). Although the strategy is expected to be reviewed every three years, no evaluation has yet been made public.



The 2016 Census of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations reports that 52.8% of residents in the target community are speakers of local languages. The community has no discrete high school, although there is a composite 'Senior Years' class in one of the two local primary schools. The majority of secondary-aged students leave home to study in boarding schools either in the NT or interstate. There has been a long tradition of young people from the community attending boarding school; historically secondary students would attend one of two schools in Darwin, returning home on weekends, or having family members coming to Darwin to support them. Elders report that in recent years they have observed a decline in educational engagement, and in the general wellbeing of their youth, with suicide, suicidal ideation and substance abuse persistent problems.

Given the small scale and tight time frame of this project, researchers had limited access to systems-level data. Initially, researchers worked with the two

primary schools in the community to establish the size of the potential research cohort. While systems-level data gave an initial indication of the size of the research cohort, and provided cohort-level data on attendance, quantitative and qualitative data collected at local level inform more detailed research findings. The research team worked directly with families to identify a research cohort of 100 young people aged 12–21 years. Family meetings took place during which the education and life experiences of each family member within the target age bracket were recorded. Results were entered into a spread sheet and de-identified before being analysed to understand school choice; education engagement; education or training programs and pathways available; post-school choice of domicile and activity; parental status; age and gender based outcomes. Quantitative results were supplemented with qualitative interview data explaining individual, community and school level factors impacting education engagement and attainment.

FIG. 5

NUMBER OF BOARDING SCHOOLS ATTENDED 2009–2019 (N=30)



Location of boarding schools attended by research cohort (This graph does not include day schools attended by members of the cohort (n=8) situated in the NT, South Australia and Victoria).

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE COHORT ARE:

- Findings show that members of the research cohort had disparate experiences of secondary education.
- Over a 10-year period, the 100 young people had attended 38 day or boarding schools, located in 16 different towns or cities, across six states or territories.
- A pattern emerged of early disengagement from secondary school for the majority of the cohort. Amongst those who did persevere with education, many had significant discontinuity of school engagement, with students attending a number of different boarding schools.
- Of 80 current school-aged young people (12–18 years old), nine had never attended any secondary school, 15 had only ever engaged with the composite Senior Years program in the community.
- Of the remaining 56, all of whom had attended boarding school, 33 had attended more than one school, but of this group, none remained in the subsequent school for more than one academic year.

FIG. 12

**NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN YEAR 6–YEAR 10.
(COHORT OF STUDENTS AT OR ABOVE YEAR 10 IN 2019) (N=57)**



Number of individuals at or above Year 10 in 2019 who participated in Years 6–10 (n=57)

In quantifying the highest level of education attained by members of the research cohort, findings reveal a steady decline in engagement:

- Attrition began in the transition from Year 5 to Year 6.
- The highest dropout rates were amongst students in Years 7 and 8 from boarding school.
- Amongst members of the research cohort who had had the opportunity to complete Year 10 (n=57), 74% had dropped out by before the end of that school year. Disengaged from education and without any alternative activity, these young people are variously described by community members as 'bored', 'roaming around', 'doing nothing', 'doing silly things', 'going bad', 'smoking', 'long-grassing', 'just here', 'self-

harming', 'cruising', 'grieving' 'married up'.

The capacity of the local school to re-engage these young people is minimal.

- In 2019, 58 school-aged young people were resident in community and not attending boarding school. The local school received recurrent government funding for 11 students.

For members of the research cohort who discontinued secondary school, no alternative program is available until they turn age 17. At that point, young people become eligible to participate in training programs run as part of the Commonwealth Government's Community Development Program (CDP). Service providers noted the adaptability of their programs to suit younger adolescents, but reported that they were precluded from engaging this cohort by the limitations of current public liability insurance cover.

Post-school pathways outside community include programs run by the [NT Cattlemen's Association \(NTCA\)](#) and [ILSC traineeships](#). While some young adults were employed in CDP funded programs or in training outside community, most were unemployed. Post-school pathways were not markedly different for Year 12 graduates. **No member of the research cohort had progressed to higher education.**

Qualitative data provide insight into why so many young people fail to engage with secondary education or drop out of school prematurely, and the challenges they face in eventually re-engaging in employment and training programs. Findings reveal that families and young people encounter a range of structural and individual barriers to secondary engagement and attainment:

- The target community is one of 78 remote NT communities where secondary education is no longer available and young people are required to board 'off country'.
- Families report experiencing difficulty identifying schools and securing boarding places for their children.
- Less than one-third of families had received assistance from the NT Government's Transition Support Unit.
- Families described making important education decisions with little knowledge or understanding.
- In many instances, researchers saw no evidence of free, prior or informed consent. Many interviewees had not visited the school they attended prior to starting, some could not name the school or even the state where the institution was located. Parents reported that they were just grateful to have found a position and secured funding for their child.

PROBLEMS IN BOARDING SCHOOL

Once a boarding place had been secured, participants in this study reported that they found boarding school 'too hard' both educationally and in terms of their social and emotional wellbeing. This is consistent with existing literature. Research participants confirmed that poor self-concept as a learner was often a disincentive to engagement. Local and boarding school staff confirm that most members of the research cohort had an academic proficiency 3–4 years below their chronological age at the start of secondary school. While those who attended schools in the NT were able to access targeted academic programs to meet their learning needs within a class group, interstate schools were more likely to provide individual learning support to supplement a standardised academic program – where students leave the 'mainstream' class and attend a specialised learning support unit.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE COHORT:

- Students often complained of feeling 'dumb' when they were required to leave class to receive targeted support. Some families felt that their child had discontinued schooling to avoid the shame of not keeping pace with classmates.
- Parents report that children often 'act out' in the hope of being sent home when things became difficult at school.
- Elders stressed that their children are raised to be bi-cultural and therefore bring different skillsets to education. They expressed frustration that their strengths often go unrecognised in school systems where the onus is continually on the student to fit in, with little

recognition of the prior knowledge or aptitudes a young person brings with them to school.

- Both families in community and staff in boarding schools expressed frustration at the difficulties they encounter building meaningful relationships. Indigenous program managers in participant schools reported that their student population is geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse, and that they have neither the time nor the economic resources to visit to every community. They acknowledge that when students present with complex needs, these often reflect the complex reality of community life which would be helpful to understand.
- Challenges identified by school staff include language barriers, geography, health, families' lack of internet access and/or digital literacy, overcrowded housing, and generational exclusion from education systems. These factors diminish both community capacity to engage and school capacity to build relationships integral to providing holistic support for young people.

SUCCESS IN BOARDING SCHOOL

For the minority of the research cohort who persisted in boarding school, a range of advantages were identified by community. Family members expressed pride in them, and reported them to be healthier, happier, more fluent in standard English, 'more open minded' and more optimistic than their peers who discontinued education prematurely. Their testimony is corroborated by teachers and Indigenous Liaison Officers in well-resourced boarding schools who report that they understand their duty of care as extending to the holistic wellbeing of their students. A number of interstate staff reported organising extensive physical and mental health and dental interventions for their remote students. By contrast

where their child had attended a less well-resourced school, parents reported that poor health or wellbeing was likely to result in their child being sent home.

Three examples of best practice stand out:

1. Of members of the research cohort who progressed successfully from one academic year to the next at the same school, the largest cohort participated in an applied learning program delivered at a boarding school situated in a Homeland centre within commuting distance from community. Parents described the school's extensive 'life skills' program, and hands-on approach to learning as important, and their children as happy and engaged while they attended that school. They felt the closure of that school was a great loss for their children, all of whom discontinued schooling altogether when the school shut in 2017. The youngest of these children were in Year 7.
2. One interstate boarding school has committed to long-term partnership with the target community; the only First Australian boarders in that school come from this community and live together in a homestay situation on campus. Despite physical distance and to minimise the cultural divide, the school has had staff visit the community every year for over a decade. When a number of students dropped out in response to high levels of bereavement amongst family members, the school sent a teacher to live in community and teach in the local school for a year. Over time these actions are described as having built a strong foundation for meaningful relationships; both teachers and house parents liaise closely and on an on-going basis with students' families. Teachers are better equipped to see students in the context of their wider life experience, including appreciating the strong base of cultural and linguistic capital which underpin their identity and sustain their self-

esteem. Conversely, the increasing cultural competence of staff is described as making this school a safer place for students to invest their energies. Quantitative data confirm that students attending this school were more likely to remain consistently enrolled than those attending other interstate boarding schools

3. A Homestay arrangement negotiated directly by a community family with friends residing interstate. Homestay parents report that the two young people in their care have, over a 10-year period, become integral to their own family even while they are supported to maintain their own identity. The grandmother of the two is in almost daily contact, and the connection with home, language and culture is carefully maintained. Her encouragement means their identity as strong Aboriginal young women is strengthened, not compromised, by their investment in education off country. Neither of these young people fall within the research cohort investigated here, but their experience is important. The older of the two is the only community member currently engaged in higher education.

In 2019, four young people graduated Year 12. In each case students were supported by dedicated staff members who described 'working really hard' to help them achieve their goals.

Against the five principles identified as underpinning the NT Government approach to education, current policy can only be described as comprehensively failing this remote community. When, in response to the findings of the Wilson Review, government unilaterally decided to phase out secondary education provision in remote communities, demand for places in boarding schools rose. The target community is one of 78 communities with no access to a local secondary pathway. Research participants in this study report that the supply of boarding places

does not equal demand and that finding a boarding place is an exasperating and difficult exercise.

Where education is presumed to provide social and economic advantages, high levels of school dropout and limited post-school pathways mean that most community members currently reap little benefit from the education system. For learners to be respected, they first need to be known. For community to be engaged and culture respected, schools must understand the full context of a young person's life and build relationships with extended families. But the young people in this study had been dispersed across Australia and spread amongst 38 different schools. School staff and parents alike report that it is impossible to form meaningful connections with numerous communities or institutions. Those few schools that have invested in meaningful relationships are those which stand out as exemplars of best practice.

Evidence suggests that resource decisions are neither evidence based nor effective. Young people who elect to remain in this community during their secondary years are at an extreme disadvantage. Although in 2019, 58 of a possible 80 (or 72.5%) 12-18 year olds in the research cohort remained in community, the local school received funding for only 11 Senior Years students. For the remaining 47 young people, the government was making no investment in education, training, wellbeing or engagement programs for those under the age of 17. This study was commissioned by elders as a last resort effort to draw attention to declining levels of engagement and achievement.

It is hard to see how current education policy contributes to community autonomy. No new house has been constructed for 20 years, crime rates are rising, unemployment is widespread and community wellbeing is described as being at an all-time low. Poor education outcomes are one piece in a larger puzzle.

This study reveals a significant disconnect between the promise of education opportunity through boarding schools, and the lived reality for young people and the community at large. Further study is required as a matter of priority to determine whether the findings produced here are consistent across remote Australia, and if not, why not.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The data and outcomes presented in this small-scale study suggest a desperate need to understand the current status of secondary education and boarding provision to remote First Nations students. A first order priority of government should be to commission scalable research into the status quo of secondary education provision in remote Australia.
2. The educational determinants of remote contexts (such as the community in this study) including housing, health, justice and employment need to be explicitly understood and quantified in policy discussions concerning educational effectiveness and secondary provision cost.
3. This study has shown a large disconnect between local educational aspirations and system-level provision. Policy decisions should seek to identify models which are shown to increase the likelihood of education engagement and attainment in place. The community involved in this study are adamant 'place based approaches' to educational development must be paramount. This is likely to be generalised to other remote settings.
4. This study has demonstrated that success is most likely through deep school/ community partnerships and personal relationships. Best practice school/community partnership models need to be explored allowing schools 'off country' to be linked with specific communities. This would minimise the diaspora described here and create the potential for families and schools to work together in the joint enterprise of educating their young people.
5. Early school disengagement has left a significant proportion of young people in the target community functionally illiterate and innumerate. There is a desperate need to reinvigorate adult education programs and alternative on-country pathways to ensure that the opportunity to learn is not foreclosed altogether when a young person drops out of school.
6. It is clear that current educational arrangements are untenable in this community if the goal is to produce an educated and happy bicultural cohort of young people. Community members were unanimous that what they want in terms of secondary education is a school 'on country'. The research herein supports the development of an action research, collective impact project to establish such a school. The school, its built environment, its pedagogic approach and curriculum materials would be co-designed by community in partnership with a range of professionals, including a high-performing interstate school, and local service providers. Further discussions with community and funding bodies are in progress regarding this proposal.



LITERATURE REVIEW

EDUCATION OUTCOMES FOR SECONDARY-AGED FIRST AUSTRALIAN YOUNG PEOPLE ARE A CAUSE OF PERSISTENT AND ONGOING CONCERN FOR GOVERNMENTS IN EVERY JURISDICTION (GUENTHER ET AL., 2019).

The Prime Minister's 2020 *Closing the gap* report reveals that during the period 2014–2019, school attendance in the NT had fallen by seven percentage points to 61% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). Five years into the NT Government's IES 2015–2024, this is an inauspicious finding and belies its stated commitment to focusing the effort of schools 'on delivering clear and effective programs that are proven to make a difference for Indigenous students' (NT Education, 2015, p. 3).

BOARDING SCHOOLS: WHAT WE KNOW

In 2017, the Australian Government's *Study Away Review* reported that 5,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students received ABSTUDY support to attend a boarding school away from home (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). In 2019, 1,900 of these were resident in the NT and came from 128 different locations. The majority (1,100) attended boarding schools in the NT, 800 others travelled to schools interstate (Thornton, 2019, p. 52). In some parts of the NT, children as young as five are sent away to board (private communication, Aminjarrinja Enterprises Aboriginal Corporation), although more typically, young people leave home to commence boarding at the time they transition to secondary school, in the early years of their adolescence. This is recognised as a critical stage of human development:

a period of identity, including cultural identity, formation, and time in which young people lay down the foundations for their future life course (Azzopardi et al., 2018). Investment in health during adolescence is recognised as bringing a 'triple dividend of reduced death and disability during these years, healthier trajectories across the life-course, and the best possible start for the next generation' (p. 767). For First Nations youth, adolescence also coincides with increasing inequity across the social determinants of health, including exposure to racism and other factors known to impact positive health outcomes (p. 777). For young people from the remote NT, this includes reduced access to education. Social determinants of health have also been identified as determinant of education engagement and attainment for First Australian boarders (O'Bryan, 2017).

GOVERNMENT REVIEWS OF BOARDING POLICY

Evidence supporting governments' ongoing reliance on the boarding school sector to provide secondary education to First Australian youth from remote Australia is not encouraging. In its review of education opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017), the Australian Government's House of Representatives Standing Committee expressed

‘surprise and concern’ at the lack of data available to inform policy development and recommended that ‘the Federal Government invest in the comprehensive collection and analysis of data regarding attendance and educational achievement’. In relation to boarding, the committee concluded:

The overwhelming evidence heard by the committee was that boarding, particularly mainstream boarding, is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students. A significant proportion of students who attend schools away from home drop out, and, return to community shortly after commencing. This can have devastating impacts on the student’s motivation to study and their self-esteem. It can also discourage others within the community and places financial and administrative strain on both boarding facilities and schools within the local community. This ‘revolving door’ within Indigenous boarding must be addressed if educational attainment is to be improved (p. xix).

Following the 2017 inquiry, the Australian Government invested in two separate pieces of research: *Study Away Review: Review of Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Secondary Students Studying Away From Home* (the ‘Study Away Review’) and Grant Thornton’s 2019 *Boarding: investing in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* (‘the Thornton Report’). Collectively these works aim to improve understanding of the benefits and impacts of investment in boarding provision, and promote the development of sustainable and effective models of service delivery (Thornton, 2019, p. 6).

The *Study Away Review* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) examines issues facing First Australian boarders. It acknowledges a wide range of gaps in knowledge and ‘areas that need addressing’. It also identifies a range of factors known to make transition

to boarding school difficult for these students, including that:

- many are sent to boarding with little preparation
- ABSTUDY administration is experienced as being overly complex
- travel support varies from student to student and for many students it is inadequate
- many families and communities are unsure of how to prepare and support their children in boarding school
- there are a lack of alternative education options for students not suited to mainstream boarding
- there are gaps in funding and policy responsibility in a range of areas such as health management, family and community engagement, travel support and staff development (e.g. in cultural awareness and trauma informed practices) (p. 6).

The Thornton Report (Thornton, 2019) analysed 27 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding providers relative to 23 ‘mainstream’ boarding providers. Consistent with other research (see Heyeres et al., 2017), the report finds that the investment required to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in boarding increases with the level of disadvantage of the students. Despite this, the report confirms that the boarding revenue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding providers is insufficient to meet the full costs of boarding for the students in their care (p. 8). Indeed, across the three-year average of 1,918 students boarding with these providers, the shortfall per boarder represented a total annual revenue shortfall of \$11 983 664. By contrast, the majority of the high-cost boarding providers receive support from donors or underpinning funding

from the Commonwealth or state and territory governments (p. 9). These findings indicate that the most geographically isolated and educationally vulnerable students in the nation are receiving less targeted financial support than those chosen to access 'mainstream' education opportunities in higher performing boarding schools.

The Prime Minister's 2020 *Closing the gap* report suggests that the decline in education outcomes for remote-living First Australian youth can be explained at least in part by geography: the more remote a community, the poorer the levels of education engagement and attainment (p. 38). This presumption of correlation is at odds with the findings of Biddle and Cameron (2012) who use statistical analysis and modelling of various datasets to determine if First Nations education participation is different from non-Indigenous participation, after taking into account remoteness and other variables. They found that geography, socioeconomic status and remoteness explain less than half the difference in educational participation. Later studies suggest that cultural distance is at least as significant as geographic isolation (Guenther et al. 2019, p. 335).

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH BASE

In addition to government initiated reviews of remote education, a body of independent research into the experiences of First Australian students in boarding has emerged over recent years. In a systematic review of factors contributing to educational outcomes for remote-living First Australians, Guenther et al. (2019) concluded that 10 papers examining boarding as an issue, provide a 'disturbing picture compared to the positive images presented in the media', which offer a 'romanticised views of a student 'walking in two worlds' (p. 329).

Collectively, the papers reviewed identify a range of issues known to alternatively enable or constrain positive education outcomes for First Australian boarders. School based issues, including levels of support available; the cultural competence of staff; the strength of connection between schools, families and communities; effective and pro-active responses to racism; strengths-based approaches and the active avoidance of deficit logics, are all identified as contributing to success (Benveniste et al., 2015; Mander, 2012; O'Bryan, 2017; Rogers, 2016). Individual factors, including a young person's proficiency in literacy and numeracy; their exposure to antecedent trauma; homesickness; physical health and social and emotional wellbeing, are also known factors impacting school engagement and academic attainment (O'Bryan, 2017; Rogers, 2016). These students also recount being confronted with institutional discrimination and racism (Rogers 2016, O'Bryan, 2017). Impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous students include an increased risk of depression and other upstream factors that can increase risk of self-harm (Mander, 2015b; Redmond-MacLaren et al., 2017; Roeser et al., 2000).

The transition to boarding school is a time of adjustment for all students, and is known to provoke feelings of stress and anxiety. For First Australian students, transitions are more complex than for their non Indigenous peers, as students are required to adjust to a different language environment, different social norms and unfamiliar cultural frames of reference (Mander & Fieldhouse, 2009). Many have acute awareness of, and an internalised sense of deficit due to low levels of literacy and numeracy (Heyeres et al., 2017). In a systematic review of international and Australian literature, Heyeres et al. (2017) found that despite education and boarding staff facing additional challenges in meeting the needs of First Australian students, little attention has



been given to how teachers are trained and equipped to understand issues and adequately support the students in their care.

In relation to homesickness, international literature describes the condition as a complex psychological condition which is characterised by grieving, preoccupation with home, missing friends, family and attachment objects (Thurber, 1999). Symptoms of homesickness are similar to those of depression and may include apathy, loss of appetite, feelings of insecurity and fatigue, lack of interest in the environment, withdrawal, sleeping disorders and suicidal ideation (Baier & Welch, 1993). O'Bryan's (2017) study of the lived experience of First Australian boarders finds that the term is used to

describe what young people identify as issues of loss of community social connectedness, a diminution of belonging and, in some cases, an assault to their sense of self. She challenges schools' perception of homesickness as a relatively benign affliction, and one likely to be mitigated by 'keeping kids busy' for the first few weeks of term.

In Redman-MacLaren et al.'s (2017) study measuring resilience and risk factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of First Australian boarding school students, base-line quantitative data established that secondary students attending boarding school reported lower scores on resilience and psycho-social wellbeing measures than primary aged respondents. Students who transitioned back to community after

being excluded or expelled from boarding school reported that their family did not know much about them and that they were less likely to feel socially connected to their peers. Their scores on resilience and psycho-social wellbeing measures were lower still. Of these students, 87.5% reported high levels of distress. Only one-third of these students reported trying to finish an activity they started, and more of them had been in contact with police or had legal issues (p. 8). Researchers concluded that these factors combined to point to high levels of psychological distress and upstream risk factors for self-harm.

RESEARCH BASE: GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE

There are a number of limitations to the existing research base. Until now, no study has focused on how current policy prioritising secondary provision through boarding off-country impacts on community life or the transmission of language and cultural knowledge. None has looked at the post-school transition of boarders, or gathered empirical evidence of the trajectory of those who drop out of school early. Much of the existing research is informed by an exclusively qualitative methodology and does not include quantitative findings about school engagement, academic outcomes achieved, and longer term pathways from secondary education. Boarding programs are often justified by reference to improved human and social capital for young people and their communities, but these propositions have not been empirically tested.

A focus on boarding school is a part of a broader ideological and policy framework which normalises mainstream measures of 'success' without reference to culturally inscribed community values or priorities (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018). This is despite the known risk of language loss and social dislocation among remote boarders (O'Bryan, 2017; Oldfield,

2013; Simpson et al., 2009; Yosso, 2005). At no point did either the Study Away Review or the Thornton Report seek to understand how the social and cultural life of communities is impacted by current government policy relying on boarding schools to deliver secondary education to young people from remote Australia, although the former study acknowledged a lack of research on how communities are empowered to ensure their needs are met in boarding and school environments (p. 46).

Until now, no study has taken a community-level approach to research in order to understand the broader societal impact of sending all secondary aged young people away to school. This research project, while small in scale, represents a starting point in addressing that gap in knowledge.





RESEARCH CONTEXT

THIS REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY, SEVERAL HOURS' DRIVE FROM DARWIN, IS SITUATED ON THE BANKS OF ONE OF THE GREAT RIVERS OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA AND HAS A POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY 400.

The 2016 Census of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations reports that 52.8% of residents are speakers of a traditional language. The community has no discrete high school, although there is a composite 'Senior Years' class in one of the two local primary schools. The majority of secondary-aged students leave home to study in boarding schools either in the NT or interstate. Elders report that in recent years they have observed a decline in educational engagement, and in the general wellbeing of their youth, with suicide, suicidal ideation and substance abuse persistent problems. The 2016 Census revealed 36.4% of the population were attending primary school and 8.8% were attending secondary school compared to a national average of 23.5% and 20.1% respectively (NT statistics: 25% and 16.2% respectively) (ABS, 2016).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the 19th Century on, this community has experienced multiple waves of colonisation. Writing in 1933, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner reported that the tribes of the region had 'borne the brunt of perhaps fifty years of acute contact with white settlement' (Stanner, 1933, p. 156). By the early 1930s they had suffered an intense cultural shock. Stanner writes:

The history and the nature of the corrosive culture contact which has taken place in this region make it a laboratory for the study of the characteristic breakdown of Australian aboriginal culture (p. 156).

From first settlement until the present day, the region has been heavily impacted by wave after wave of legislation and government policy, with each iteration impacting social, economic and cultural life of the community. Despite this, until recently, this community enjoyed a reputation as an Indigenous showpiece. Its leadership was strong, the community well maintained, houses regularly refurbished by local tradesmen. Adults were in employment and children mostly at school. Visitors were welcome for fishing and festivals. this was a community with much pride (Martin, 2015).

In recent years, the combined impact of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, also known as 'the Intervention' (2007) and the amalgamation of local councils into the one 'Supershire' (2008) had a 'devastating compounding effect' (Morris, 2019, p. 68). After visiting this community in 2010, the former Chief Minister described the impacts of her own government's policy on ABC Darwin radio:

The Intervention had a devastating impact on [this community]. Local jobs have all but disappeared, especially in housing maintenance. No new houses have been built since 2000. The community's enterprises – the store, the fuel outlet and job services – are being run by outsiders. Welfare dependency has grown. The local council no longer exists. Some of the policies that I championed for while in government have harmed a small Indigenous community formerly seen as a success story ... the introduction of shires, which were intended to strengthen communities had in fact disempowered [this community] ... I reflect that it was the actions and policies of two governments that took the heart out of this once resilient community ... over the years, [this community] had lost meaningful self-control ... and I can't find one good outcome from all the Intervention measures and the hundreds of millions of dollars spent (Martin, 2015).

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

In terms of education and given its proximity to Darwin, this community has always used boarding school as a pathway, although a secondary program also used to be delivered locally. A critical mass of young people typically transitioned to one of two boarding schools in Darwin, and would often commute home on weekends or have parents come to them. One informant aged in her early thirties reported that when she was at school, a whole boarding house was dedicated to young people from the target community but that has now changed. There are now 78 remote communities in the NT with no secondary pathways (private communication, TSU, NT Education) and families vie for a limited number of places in Darwin schools. The principal of one of the main Darwin boarding school reports hosting students from across the Top End and as far south as Alice Springs in the boarding house, but only three from the target community.

COMMUNITY SCHOOL PROFILES – MYSCHOOLS

There are two primary schools which service this community, one Catholic, one operated by the Government. Only the Catholic school offers a post-primary class. Both schools are classed as disadvantaged, falling well below the national median level of community social educational advantage as measured on the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority's (ACARA's) Index of Community Social Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scale (ACARA, 2016).

In 2017, Ernst & Young was engaged by the NT Department of Education to conduct a review of the Global School Budgets Funding Model. The review found that high levels of disadvantage in NT schools suggests a nationally consistent funding

model may not necessarily meet the needs of all NT students (Ernst & Young, 2017, p. 12). Their report acknowledges that schools and students in the NT face a range of challenges due to high levels of disadvantage and complex student needs. High levels of budget variability were consistently raised as a key issue for stakeholders surveyed. Whilst funding based on student needs is inherently variable as enrolments and individual student needs change from year to year, this variability is further impacted in the NT through the additional application of effective enrolment. NT Education's Attendance and Participation Policy (NT Government, 2018) stipulates that attendance data provide the foundation for resource allocation: for a student who attends school 100% of the time, the school receives

100% of their funding entitlement. When a student attends less, the school receives less. The review concluded that at this time, with a finite funding pool, effective attendance is the most appropriate measure to distribute funds on the basis that it best distributes finite funding to schools with children attending and in front of a teacher (p. 38). People working on the front line do not agree. They argue that funding students at a percentage of their attendance, means the students who need the most help, get the least. They claim this is both counterintuitive and out of line with other states which apply extra loadings for these at-risk students (NT Coalition for Remote Schools, 2019).

	SCHOOL 1 (NT EDUCATION)	SCHOOL 2: (NT CATHOLIC EDUCATION)
School ICSEA value (Where average = 1000)	704	558
Total Enrolment 2018	39 [Boys 25, Girls 14]	58 [Boys 25, Girls 33]
Finances (Total Net Recurrent Entitlement per student)	\$25 121.00	\$43 540.00



RESEARCH TEAM

THE RESEARCH TEAM WAS MADE UP OF PEOPLE IN AND OUT OF COMMUNITY, WITH EXPERTISE IN CONDUCTING EDUCATION RESEARCH AND USING DIVERSE APPROACHES TO EMPOWERING COMMUNITY VOICE.

Dr William Fogarty

is a Senior Research Fellow and Deputy Director at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), ANU. He has lived and worked in remote communities for over 20 years and has conducted research on Indigenous policy development, employment, education, land and sea management, equitable service provision, deficit discourse and health. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from the CAEPR, and also has qualifications in communications, social research methods, education and applied development

Dr Marnie O'Bryan

is an Honorary Research Fellow at CAEPR. She has six years' experience conducting ethnographic research investigating the experience of First Australian students in boarding schools around the nation. Since 2004 she has worked closely with Indigenous students living and studying in Melbourne boarding schools. From 2012-2019 she coordinated the Victorian Indigenous Education Network, working with staff from schools in the Independent school sector. She is Chairman of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation Board and holds a PhD in Education from the University of Melbourne.

Associate Professor Wayne Quilliam

is one of Australia's leading Aboriginal photographers. He is a visual storyteller. A recipient of the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee Artist of the Year Award, Walkley Award, Human Rights award, and nominated as a master photographer by National Geographic. He has worked with Indigenous groups throughout Australia, Cuba, Mexico, Bolivia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Guam. He has been published in more than 1000 books, newspapers and magazines and has created and curated over 170 exhibitions in Australia and overseas. Prof Quilliam's involvement was funded by a local not-for-profit organisation.

Ms Leslie Gordon (RA1)

is a Larrakia Traditional Owner. She has a deep connection to Larrakia land and works as a cultural educator to share her encyclopaedic knowledge of the bush and bush tucker with schools, community groups and tourists to Darwin. Ms Gordon has had a long association with the target community and is well connected to all family groups. She is employed by a community based non-government organisation (NGO), funded by a Australian Government Department of Social Services grant. Her role includes assisting families to complete school and scholarship applications for secondary-aged students, to run after-school and holiday activities and to work to re-engage young people not currently in education, training or employment. Ms Gordon acted as a cultural and community ambassador for the rest of the research team. She ensured that community members were fully informed about the nature and purposes of the research project and that local protocols were respected at all times. She arranged interviews, liaised with elders, including the local advisory group, confirmed the accuracy of empirical data and shared insights which assisted in qualitative data analysis. Ms Gordon's role was funded by a local not-for-profit organisation.

Ms Georgia Pryce (RA2)

has a background in communications, digital technologies and marketing. She has previously worked for the University of Melbourne in its communications team. Ms Pryce was resident in community for the length of the study. She maintained the research database, transcribed interviews, focus group discussions and audio files attached to video data. She managed quantitative data, ensuring that data was consistent across the research cohort, and prepared charts and tables for the presentation of research findings. Ms Pryce's position was funded by a local not-for-profit organisation.

METHODOLOGY

THIS STUDY WAS COMMISSIONED BY ELDERS IN A REMOTE COMMUNITY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ANXIOUS ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRENDS THEY OBSERVE AMONGST THEIR SECONDARY-AGED YOUNG PEOPLE.

Their motivation was twofold: first, they recognise that local parents need help in supporting the education of their children, and want to know how best to provide that assistance. To this end, findings will be used to inform a digital 'Toolkit' to encourage young people and parents as they engage with schools out of community². Secondly, elders recognise the benefit of establishing an empirical evidence base to inform future initiatives to engage their young people.

Research methods were designed in close consultation with elders from the community over the course of three scoping trips conducted in 2018 and 2019. In early 2019, the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment agreed to provide funding. Ethics Approval 2019/531 for the study was granted by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee on August 26, 2019.

Given the small scale of the project, researchers had limited access to systems-level data. The NT Department of Education granted provisional approval of an application to conduct research in the government primary school in the community, stipulating that attendance and academic performance data would be made available only when cohort size was greater than five students. On the same basis, NT Catholic Education agreed to support the research in the local Catholic school, including research into attendance, performance and transitions for students in the composite Senior

Years class. These limitations meant that quantitative data were gathered manually, working directly with families or members of the research cohort.

Life trajectory data are supplemented with interviews and focus group discussions, most of which were audio or video recorded and transcribed, or the subject of extensive field notes, to build understanding of the factors which enabled members of the research cohort to succeed in education, or constrained their engagement and/or academic attainment.

This mixed methods study establishes base-line data on the secondary education opportunities available to, and outcomes achieved by, young people from this community. It tracks the education histories of 100 young people aged 12–21 years, with findings de-identified to protect all research participants and members of the research cohort.

² The 'Toolkit project' is being developed by a local not-for-profit organisation, funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Research assistants for the current study were employed under that project.

ESTABLISHING THE QUANTITATIVE DATABASE

Identifying the research cohort and tracking individual education histories

Initially, researchers worked with the two primary schools in community to establish the size of the potential research cohort. Numbers were calculated based on the number of primary school enrolments from 2009–2018. While systems-level data gave an initial indication of the size of the research cohort, and provided cohort-level data on attendance, quantitative and qualitative data collected at local-level inform more detailed research findings.

The research team obtained informed consent pursuant with ethics approvals, before working with families to identify every young person within the target cohort, with findings cross-checked against the number of Grade 6 enrolments at the local schools in each year in the period 2009–2018.

Researchers worked with young people, parents and extended family (siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles) to identify every family member aged 12–21. Taken together, the individuals named constitute the research cohort. Young people from other communities who were resident from time to time for visits, to attend ceremonies or sorry business were not included in the research cohort. The children of school teachers or other non-community members employed locally were also excluded. In all, 57 potential members of the research cohort were identified but excluded. The number of eligible cohort members is 100.

This process required extensive community consultation. The work was undertaken by Dr O'Bryan over a five-week period, including two field trips from August–October 2019 and followed up by RA1 and RA2 where initial information needed

to be verified or further details were required to ensure consistency of data. In early Term 1, RA1 collected data on 2020 school year enrolments.

On the basis of raw data, RA2 established an Excel spreadsheet, recording names, school enrolments, education status and current activity for each member of the research cohort on a year by year basis. Once the data set was complete, all names were removed and entries de-identified. Identified data has been retained in a password-protected document accessible only to researchers O'Bryan and Fogarty and RA2.

PROCESSING QUANTITATIVE DATA

Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet with codes assigned to:

- name
- gender
- year of birth
- current domicile (in or out of community)
- school year level
- individual schools
- residential status for students studying away from home (boarding, homestay, living with parents out of community, living with extended family)
- activity in any given year (including range of primary and secondary school pathways in and out of community, training or employment programs in or out of community, tertiary studies, disengaged from school, unemployed, parental duties, unknown)

- education outcomes, where enrolment is taken as evidence of school engagement (academic year completed, partial year attendance),
- events taken to affect involvement with education. These include:
 - death in family, sorry business
 - cyber-bullying, social media issues
 - closure of school
 - married up
 - expulsion/suspension from school
 - family group issues at school
 - health issues in family
 - issues with teachers (lack of cultural knowledge etc.)
 - community unrest, issues within community
 - becoming a parent
 - removed by Child Protection Authorities
 - mental health issues.

Once the Excel spreadsheet was complete, it was shared with a staff member at ANU's Statistical Support Unit who translated the dataset to statistical analysis program 'R' and verified statistical computations, produced graphs, charts and justification of statistical findings.

LIMITATIONS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA

1. Research Cohort

The small scale of this study meant that researchers had limited access to systems-level data. This made it difficult to ascertain the completeness of the

data set for older members of the research cohort. Primary school records for the 19-21 year age group were not made available and it was therefore impossible to cross check findings for post-school aged community members. For this reason, findings relate to this cohort of 100 young people; claims are not made for the whole population of community members aged 12-21 years.

2. Partial year attendance

In many instances, informants reported that a student had dropped out of school during a given academic year, but were unable to give a reliable estimate of the time of year when the young person had discontinued at school. Some students attended boarding school for as little as two weeks whereas others returned home in the latter stages of the school year. The difficulty of obtaining fine-grained data means that both cases appear as (P) (partial) in the database.

3. Covid-19 outbreak

In 2020, the academic year was disrupted for all Australian students by the Covid-19 outbreak. In the target community, five of a total 22 boarders had already dropped out before being sent home for quarantine. The remaining 17 boarders were sent home before the end of Term 1 as a precautionary measure. In some cases (not all), a boarding school had made arrangements with the local school to supervise their students, with work provided by the school off-country. This had implications for the local school: they needed to ensure adequate staffing and provide food (the local school provides breakfast and lunch to all students) for the returning students, despite receiving no financial assistance, ABStudy and other government payments having already been made to boarding schools. At the time this report was written the Covid-19 situation was changing

on a daily basis, but it was clear that schools across Australia would open at different points in time, but all would open before remote communities did. This study does not track the impact of the virus on school engagement for the research cohort, or how they were affected by the disruption to learning.

4. Academic attainment

While aggregate National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results were available for cohorts larger than five, school staff cautioned against the reliability of that data. They reported that many young people actively avoid participating in NAPLAN testing and for those who do, results do not always accurately reflect student ability. School-level testing, while more representative, is not consistent across schools and could not be accessed for privacy reasons.

Qualitative data indicates that a student's level of schooling should not be presumed to reflect their level of academic competence. In working with the Senior Years class in community through the digital storytelling workshops, it became clear that a number of the students were many years below standard. In the most extreme case, a young man aged 14 was unable to sound out the word 'm-a-n'. The principal of one participating school advised that the median level of achievement for students at Grade 6 level in her school is 3–4 years below National Standard. A Grade 6 teacher reported that every student, bar one new arrival, was on a reading intervention designed to help children in junior primary attain Grade 2 level proficiency in reading.

5. Events taken to affect involvement with education

While the events listed under this head have been reported (typically by a third party, a parent

or grandparent) to have impacted a student's engagement at school, this is not to suggest a causal link between the event and any given education outcome. Returning home for Sorry Business may have coincided with a student feeling that they could not continue living away from home any longer. A girl may have 'married up' as a way of ensuring that she did not have to return to school. Equally she may have fallen in love and put a higher priority on the relationship than on her education.

Not included in given reasons is the prevalence of trauma. It is well established that trauma has a negative effect on an individual's capacity to learn (Perry et al., 1995), and that early trauma impacts neural pathways in the developing brain. Trauma-affected individuals develop heightened fight or flight reflexes, which detrimentally impact the capacity to concentrate or deal with any real or perceived adversity.

The target community is described by its adult members as being 'in crisis'. Over the course of fieldwork, schools and businesses were shut down on two separate occasions due to fighting. A teacher described a previous incident, where a large-scale fight broke out during school hours and children had to be kept in locked classrooms. No new house has been erected in community since 2008 and participants report that houses are chronically overcrowded. A number of teenagers reported that they spend nights walking around community because there is no bed available and days sleeping or watching movies at home. One mother described still sharing a bed with her 15-year-old daughter to keep her safe. All of these point to the prevalence of trauma inducing events in the target community and are likely to impact the resilience of members of the research cohort.

6. Social and emotional wellbeing

Further to the discussion above, in designing this

research, it had been anticipated that research participants would be invited to complete a survey measuring social and emotional wellbeing. Adapted from a survey instrument employed by researchers working on an National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) funded study to measure the resilience of First Australian students attending boarding schools in Queensland (Langham et al., 2018), the data generated would have been comparable to findings from that study. It became clear, almost at the start of fieldwork, that it would be impossible to recruit a sufficient number of young people in the target community to make the exercise worthwhile.

Qualitative interview data reveal a range of social, emotional and other health issues likely to impact educational engagement and attainment, but it has been impossible to quantify the prevalence of these, or to interrogate their impact on the research cohort.

7. Finance

Qualitative data indicate no systematised process to match students with appropriate secondary schools out of community. Although NT Education's Transition Support Unit (TSU) has some involvement with the community, participants report that school selection and access to funding over and beyond Abstudy entitlements is ad hoc. Calculating the cost of any given pathway is difficult: while scholarship providers were generous in sharing information about their spending on students from this community, a number of schools reported that they absorb many costs associated with running their Indigenous programs and are unable to provide accurate details of the actual financial contribution made by the school or wider school community to the education of any individual student.

8. Health/justice and the nexus with education

The limited scope of this study precluded researchers from obtaining data through the NT Departments of Attorney General and Justice or Health. They were therefore unable to investigate the correlation between health issues and education engagement, or school dropout and involvement with the criminal justice system.

QUALITATIVE DATA

In addition to quantitative data, the research team worked with community members to record their stories, insights and perspectives on secondary education. In all, four focus group discussions were held, in which participants were asked to reflect on the education histories of their children and grandchildren and the factors which supported or inhibited their engagement at school. In addition, 15 semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, 10 semi-structured interviews were video recorded by A/Prof Quilliam. The dialogue from the 25 recorded interviews was transcribed by RA2. These were subjected to line by line analysis. In this way, recurring themes and issues were identified.

Qualitative data collection continued until saturation was achieved: the same stories/reflections/insights were being repeated time and time again by participants.

In addition to interviews with 12-21 year olds, their parents or extended family members, over a two-week period in early September 2019, Dr O'Bryan and A/Prof Quilliam conducted 'Digital Storytelling' workshops with members of the composite senior class at the local primary school. The object was to engage young people who had elected not to pursue secondary education outside

of community and give them the opportunity to tell their stories on their own terms.

Although 18 students were enrolled in the class, the maximum attendance on any given day was seven, and of those students, only four remained consistent throughout. The oldest attendees were in Year 8 and we were told that those students were 'trying to get their attendance record up' in order to qualify for a place in 'another' boarding school out of community. Each of these students had been suspended or had voluntarily discontinued from their previous boarding school. Of the younger students in the composite class, a number reported that they had never left community for secondary education, and did not ever want to go away.

In late September, A/Prof Quilliam also undertook a field trip to document the role of the local football team in bringing community together. In addition to being used in this report, his videos and photographs will form the basis of the Digital Toolkit being produced by the local NGO.

In addition to community research, researchers also met or conducted phone interviews with:

- Transition Support Unit (Darwin)
- staff from NT Education and NT Catholic Education
- staff from five NT boarding schools
- principal and staff from five interstate boarding schools
- Managing Director of national scholarship provider
- director of local ranger organisation
- representative from NTCA

- service providers including Director of local CDP provider, Director of the Art Centre, General Manager of the local Aboriginal Corporation
- staff at the local medical clinic.

These interviews were not audio recorded, but detailed field notes were made, which were also subjected to close analysis.

GENERALISABILITY OF FINDINGS

A clear limitation of this research is scale. Because the sample size was small, and access to systems-level data limited, results are not generalisable. Findings are, however, consistent with anecdotal evidence and other small-scale qualitative research conducted in remote Australia. On that basis, findings presented here are relateable, and underscore the importance of future large-scale investigation into the secondary education opportunities currently available to remote-living young people.

Such a study would provide solid evidence of those programs which are producing the best outcomes and explain why.



QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE & FINDINGS

THIS MIXED METHODS RESEARCH PROJECT SET OUT TO IDENTIFY ALL THE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE – ON AND OFF COUNTRY – TO YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 12–21 YEARS FROM THE TARGET COMMUNITY (THE RESEARCH COHORT), AND WHAT OUTCOMES THEY ACHIEVED.

Researchers sought to understand the outcomes the research cohort achieved in terms of:

- academic attainment
- health, wellness and social and emotional wellbeing
- the impact of attending boarding school on language and cultural maintenance
- the relative economic cost of any given secondary pathway

Community members committed to establishing a database of their entire youth population, working with researchers to record the education status of each member of the research cohort on a year-by-year basis for every calendar year since they turned 12. By inviting and assisting with the research, elders highlight the importance of building future education policy on a solid empirical base.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Identifying the research cohort

Researchers set out to identify every 12–21 year old person identified by informants as a community member. The completeness of the dataset was cross checked by reference to Grade 6 enrolment data for 2013–2019. Systems-level data were made available from NT Education and Catholic Education NT on a de-identified basis for cohorts larger than five individuals, but school enrolment records prior to 2014 were not accessible.

In all, 100 community members were identified within the age range of 12–21 years. Researchers presume gaps in data for the 19–21 year group: while the research cohort includes 34 members aged 12–14, only 18 members aged 19–21 were identified. Of cohort members aged 19 or above, nine out of 34 are recorded as having completed Year 12 (26% of the cohort). This seems disproportionately high, given patterns evident in the younger cohort.

The difficulty of identifying the full cohort of 19–21 year olds may reflect a number of factors including:

- Increased inter-community mobility.
- A bias to social desirability, where potential research candidates were more likely to agree to participate if they had had a positive experience of education. This is supported by qualitative data identifying ‘shame’ as a significant factor for young people who discontinue their education.
- Diurnal rhythms of young adults in community made it difficult to communicate directly with this demographic, and older people were less inclined to speak for them. Community members report that a large number of young adults live essentially nocturnal lives and are functionally invisible during daylight hours.

This was explained by reference to overcrowded living conditions, limited education or employment opportunities in community.

Fifty-seven names were removed from the list on the basis that individuals were too old or too young to be considered³, were non-Indigenous or were not deemed to be community members although they had spent some time attending primary school in community. The research cohort was evenly balanced by gender.

Domicile

A significant number (29%) of young people identified as community members were not currently living in community. Of these, five families with school-age children⁴ were described as having moved away so their children could attend secondary school as day students. Other respondents had ‘married up’ away from community, and a number of younger members of the research cohort were described as having moved away to avoid family pressure to return to school.

SECONDARY EDUCATION PATHWAYS

All schools

Since 2009, members of the research cohort (n=100) have attended a wide range of schools (n=38) across Australia. Thirty are boarding schools, a further eight are day schools. Of the current school-aged cohort, three young people are attending day schools in Darwin and one lives with a non-community parent and attends day school in Queensland.

Five members of the research cohort dropped out of school before the end of primary school. These young people have never engaged with secondary education

FIG. 1

NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN RESEARCH COHORT BY AGE (N=100)

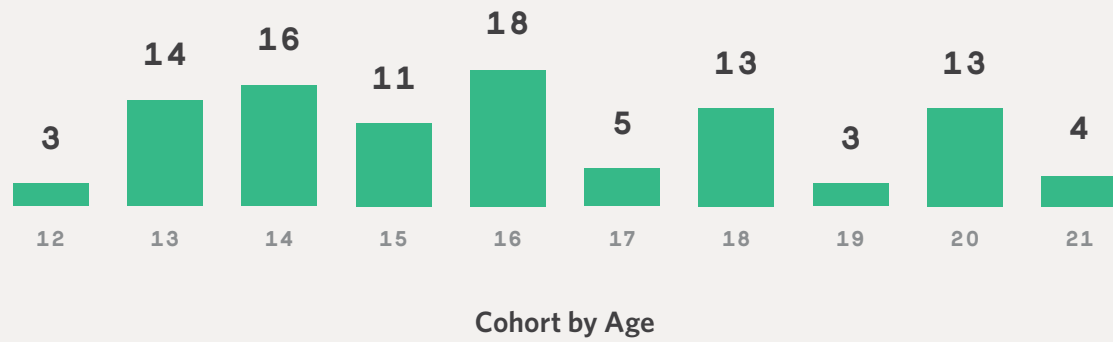


FIG. 2

NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN RESEARCH COHORT BY GENDER

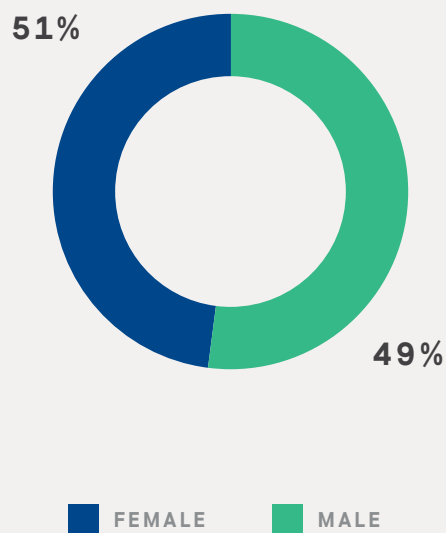


FIG. 3

NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN COHORT BY CURRENT RESIDENCE

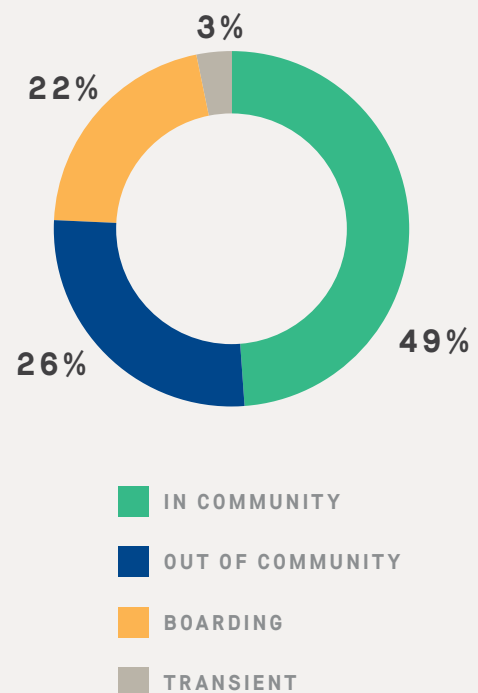


FIG. 4

NUMBER OF BOARDING SCHOOLS
VS DAY SCHOOLS EVER ATTENDED

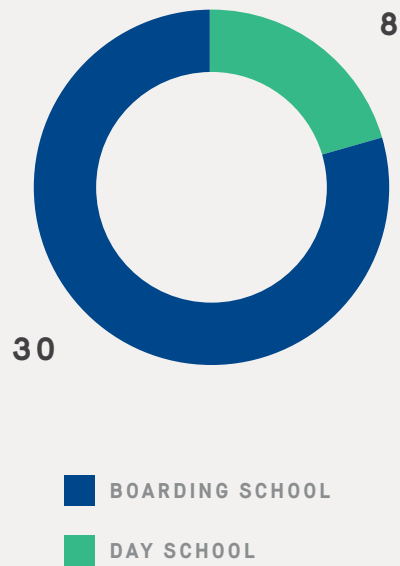


FIG. 5

NUMBER OF BOARDING SCHOOLS
ATTENDED 2009-2019

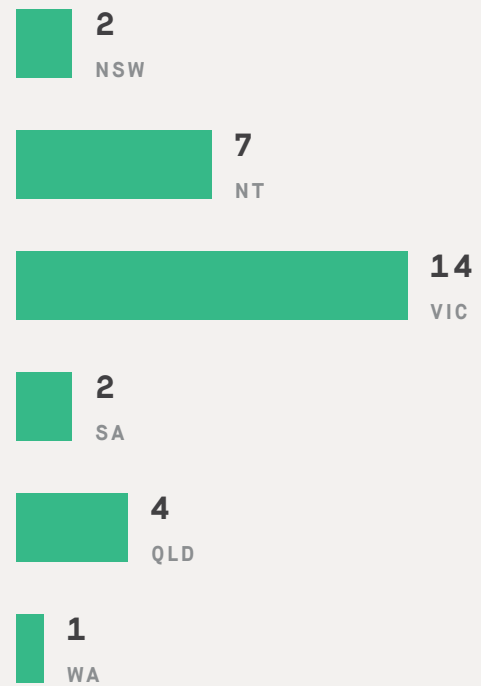


FIG. 6

BOARDERS BY SCHOOL LOCATION 2019

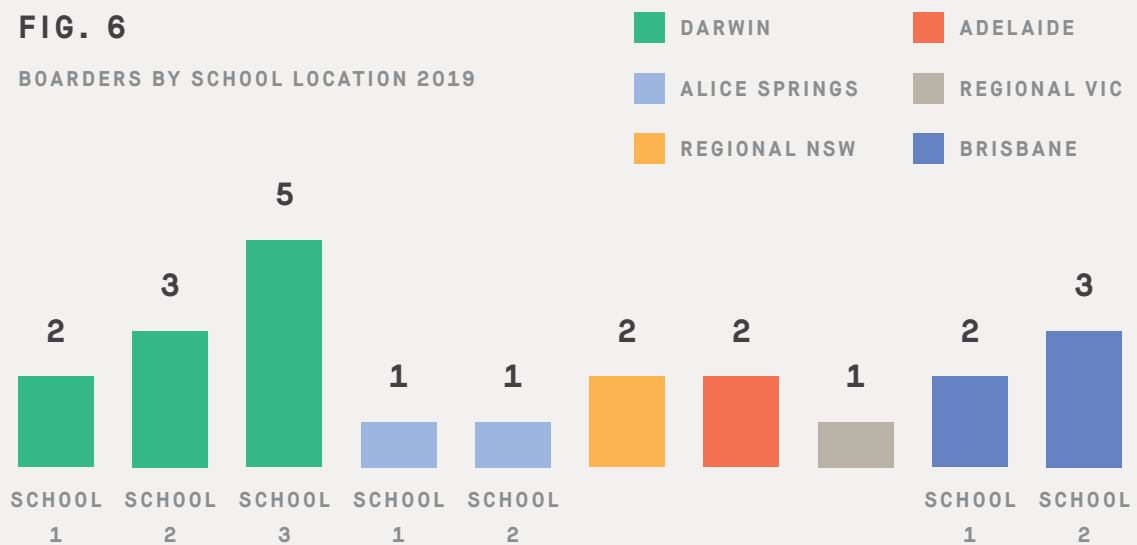
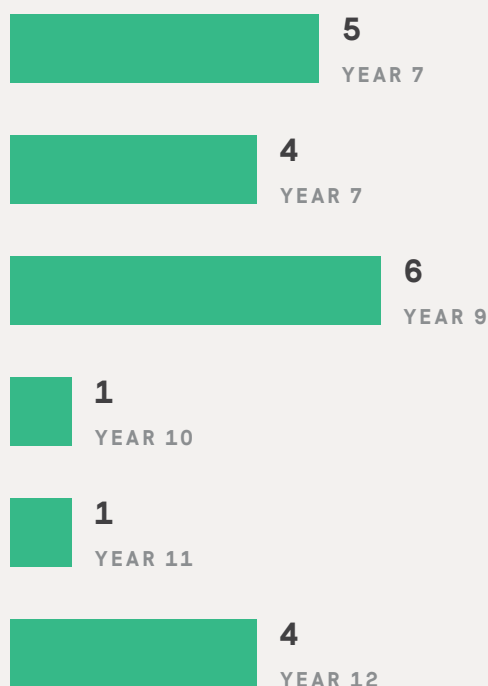


FIG. 7

2019 BOARDERS BY YEAR LEVEL



and are currently not in employment, education or training. A further three individuals were enrolled briefly in Year 7 at the local school, but dropped out and since then have not engaged in any formal activity or education pathway.

These members of the research cohort have been counted as having no secondary education engagement. **There are currently no government or NGO service providers working to re-engage these young people, apart from the YWCA which runs a Youth Justice Diversion Program administered by NT Police.**

Boarding schools

The majority [67%] of the research cohort had transitioned at one time to boarding schools in the NT or interstate. These 67 young people attended 30 different boarding schools, located in six different states or territories, across 16 different cities or regional centres ⁵.

In 2019, 22 members of the cohort were enrolled in 10 different boarding schools.

In terms of the distribution of boarders by year level in 2019, the majority of boarders (68%) were attending at Years 7–9 level ⁶.

³ One 10-year-old community member was in her second year of boarding interstate. Her grandmother described this choice as ‘a huge social experiment’ and spoke about the risks of sending a child away at ‘such a tender age’. She hoped the girl might be better equipped to thrive in secondary school as a result of her time away.

⁴ For the purposes of this report, school age is taken to be 12–18 years.

⁵ In Perth, Independent Schools WA runs its Future Footprints program as a partnership between students and staff from 17 different boarding schools, parents, communities and sponsors, with the broad aim of improving outcomes for First Australian students and facilitating transitions to higher education or training. No such body links schools in other jurisdictions. This means that even where students attend boarding schools in the same location, there is no formal relationships between schools.

⁶ By the beginning of 2020, the education engagement of this group of 22 boarders was very different. Four had graduated Year 12. Of these, one was employed, three were not employed or in education or training. All four were living in community. Of the school-aged members of the group, nine of 22, or 41%, were continuing in the same school as in 2019. Two of 22, or 9%, had enrolled in a different boarding school (in both cases closer to home). Six of 22, or 27%, had dropped out of school. Of those six, four were enrolled in Year 9 in 2019, one was in Year 8 and one in Year 7. The education situation of the final student was unknown.



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Rirratjingu
Aboriginal
Corporation

EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT AND ATTAINMENT

Education opportunities available to members of the research cohort included pathways on and off country, through day and boarding schools, as well as a range of alternative programs for those over the age of 17. As data were analysed, concerning patterns emerged.

SCHOOL-AGED COHORT (12–18 YEAR OLDS)

Current occupation and education pathways

In 2019, school-aged members of the research cohort numbered 80. These young people were engaged in the following pathways for education or training:

- a 'post primary' program delivered in a composite class at the local Catholic primary school (current enrolment n=13)
- boarding school in the NT (n=12)
- boarding school interstate (n=10)
- young people aged 17 and above are able to access programs delivered as part of the Australian Government's CDP. This remote employment and community development service 'supports job seekers in remote Australia to build skills, address barriers and contribute to their communities through a range of flexible activities' (www.niaa.gov.au). CDP programs include certificate level courses delivered

by Charles Darwin University as well as local employment in a range of unskilled positions. One member of the cohort was in training through CDP (n=1)

- young people over the age of 18 are able to access training programs delivered by industry bodies outside of community. Two members of this cohort were involved in certificate courses outside community (n=2)
- local ranger programs (17 years and older). One member of this cohort was working with the rangers (n=1)

In 2019, 35 of the 80 school-aged cohort, or 44%, had dropped out of school and were not engaged in any form of education or training.

Of the school-aged cohort who remained resident in community, over half (53%) were not in education, training or employment. Further, while one-third (n=13) of this cohort were enrolled at the local school, attendance rates in 2019 were low (see Figure 10, below), particularly amongst older students.

A significant number of school-aged young people had moved away from community. Of them, 76% were not attending school, training or employment.

Eight members of the 12–18 years cohort were described as having 'married-up', and one was reported as being a parent. Of these, half were living in community, half had moved away.

FIG. 8

SCHOOL AGED COHORT LIVING IN COMMUNITY BY CURRENT ACTIVITY *

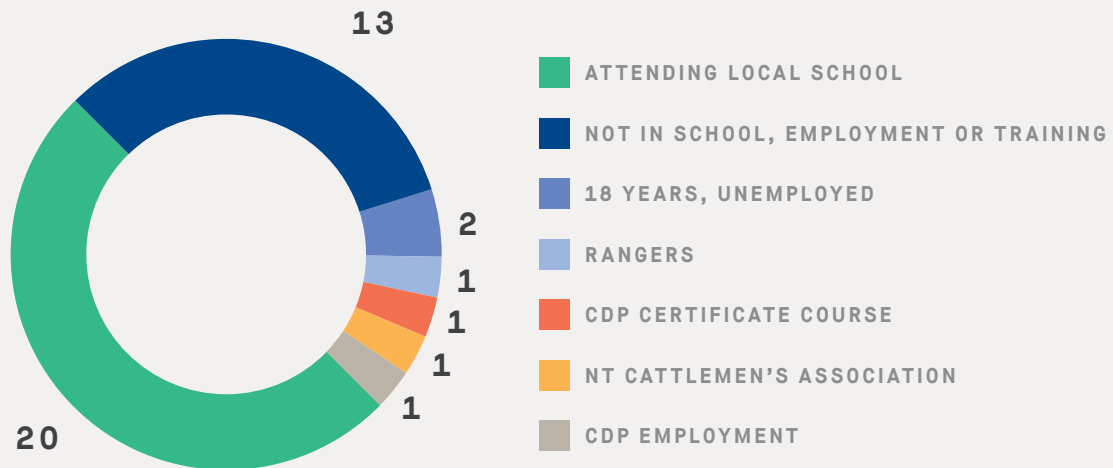
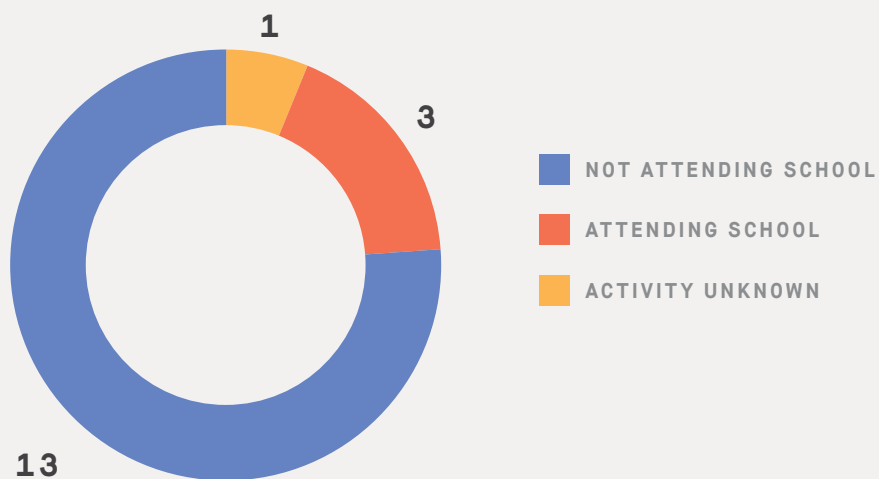


FIG. 9

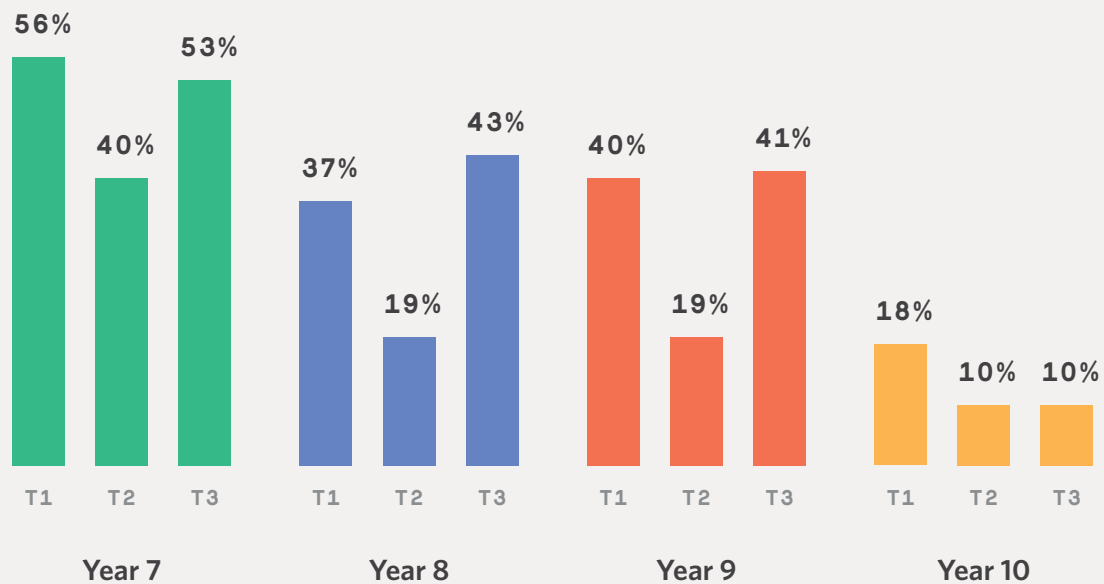
SCHOOL AGED COHORT LIVING AWAY FROM COMMUNITY BY CURRENT ACTIVITY *



*Figures 8 & 9 exclude 22 current boarders and two transient youth who did not attend school: combined total = 80 (12-18 year olds)

FIG. 10

AVERAGE ATTENDANCE RATES BY YEAR GROUP, BY TERM IN COMMUNITY SCHOOL, 2019



Academic engagement/attainment

Given the small scale of this study, the research team were unable to access systems-level data to identify the academic level attained by members of the research cohort, although qualitative data sheds some light on attainment levels. Attendance levels for the composite secondary class in the local school for Terms 1-3 of the 2019 school year were made available to the research team. To the extent that a young person's presence in a classroom can be taken to represent engagement, school attendance records provide some quantitative evidence of engagement levels amongst the school-aged cohort.

Of the 13 young people enrolled in the composite secondary class in community in 2019, attendance was low. Staff advised that fluctuations in attendance across the three terms reflected issues including

Sorry Business and significant social unrest in community which on one occasion forced the closure of the local school.

For the same period, ACARA reports that the average attendance for Year 7 students across all schools in the NT was 78.8%; for Year 8 it was 76.5%; for Year 9 74.6%; and for Year 10 students it was 73.5%. Australia-wide, attendance rates ranged between 91.9% for Year 7 students, to 88.4% for Year 10 (ACARA, 2020).

The 12% average attendance for Year 10 students in the community school was 76.4% lower than the national average in 2019.

⁷ By March 2020 that number had risen to 42, or 52.5% of young people aged 12-18 in 2019.



POST-SCHOOL AGED COHORT (19–21 YEAR OLDS)

Current occupation and education pathways

Notwithstanding the 19–21 year old dataset (n=20) is presumed to be incomplete, it is interesting to understand the education levels attained by this group and their post-school pathways. Of the 20 young people identified in this age bracket, almost half had remained in school until at least Year 11.

Compared to the levels of education attained by a wider cohort of young people at or above Year 10 in 2019 (Figure 12, below), the education level achieved by the older cohort seems disproportionately high. Amongst this larger group, 48% had dropped out by Year 9, and only 26% remained in education by the

end of Year 10. In terms of post-school occupations, the majority of 19–21 year olds were unemployed and not in any education or training.

This was true whether or not that had completed Year 12. Of seven Year 12 graduates, three were employed, four were unemployed. Of 13 non-Year 12 graduates, three were employed, seven were unemployed and two were in CDP funded training programs.

Of the Year 12 graduates, none had progressed to higher education. Indeed, across all community members (n= ~400), only one was in higher education in 2019, although a significant number of older people were fully qualified teachers, having participated in the now defunct Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) programs operated through Bachelor Institute from 1988.

FIG. 11

POST-SCHOOL AGED COHORT BY HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION (N=20)

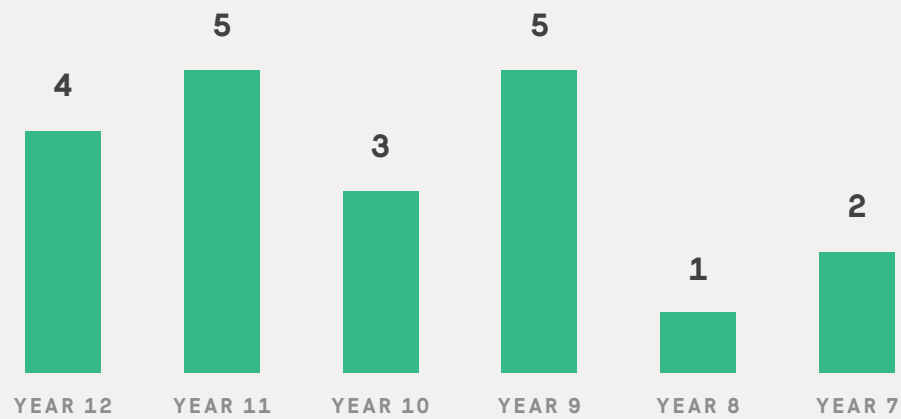


FIG. 12

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS AT OR ABOVE YEAR 10 IN 2019 WHO PARTICIPATED IN YEAR 6-10

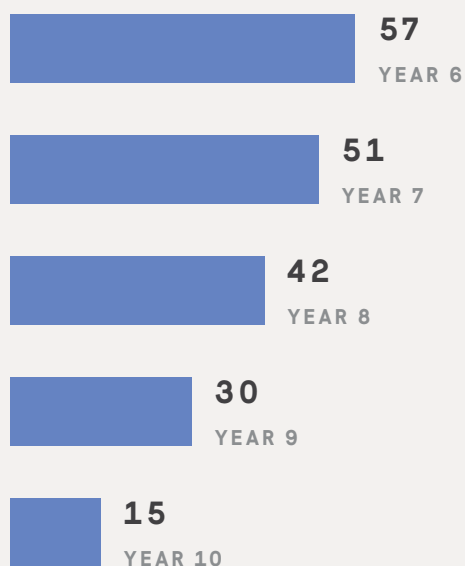
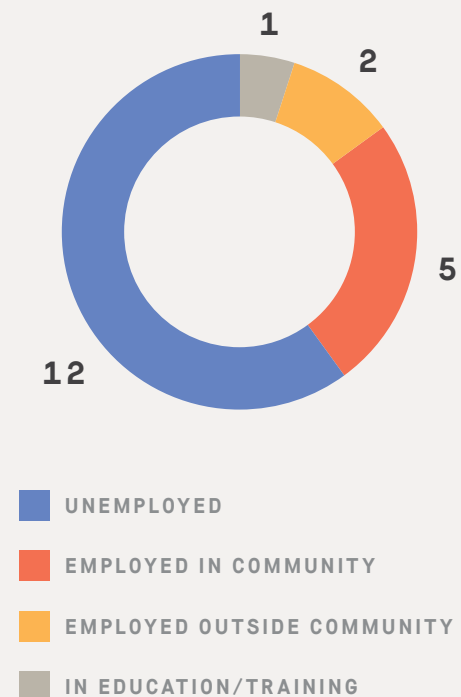


FIG. 13

POST-SCHOOL AGE COHORT BY OCCUPATION



Education engagement and attrition

In terms of the highest level of education attained by members of the research cohort, findings reveal a steady decline in engagement: attrition began in the transition from Year 5 to Year 6, and the highest dropout rates were amongst students in Years 7 and 8 from boarding school. Quantifying school

attendance and attrition rates was complex, as rates could only be calculated for members of the cohort who had had the opportunity to complete any given year level.

Table 1 (below) records the number of school attenders in the cohort by High School Year Level. School dropout percentage was calculated as the

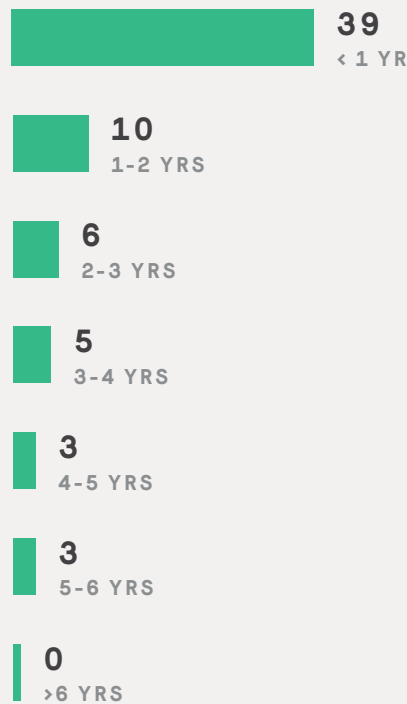
TABLE 1:
SCHOOL ATTENDERS BY HIGH SCHOOL YEAR LEVEL

	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
Local school starters	57	24	16	5	0	0
Local school partial attenders	1	1	1	1	0	0
% Local school partial attenders	1.75	4.17	6.25	20	—	—
Boarding school starters	37	51	34	24	15	9
Boarding school partial attenders	8	17	5	6	1	0
% Boarding school partial attenders	21.62	33.33	14.71	25.00	6.67	—
Moved away	7	3	2	1	0	0
Total starters	94	75	50	29	15	9
Dropout non-starters	0	1	1	2	0	0
Total dropout *	9	19	7	9	1	0
% Total dropout	9.57	25.33	14.00	31.03	6.67	—

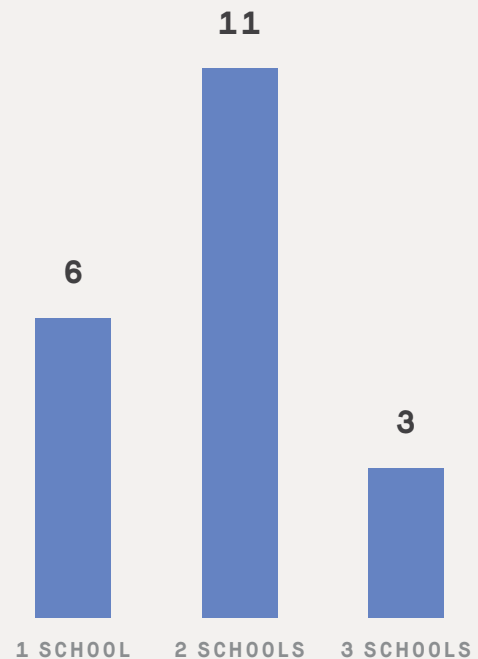
* Total dropout includes complete dropouts (no school assigned for that year) and partial attenders.

FIG. 14

LENGTH OF COMPLETED
ENGAGEMENTS AT BOARDING SCHOOL

**FIG. 15**

NUMBER OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS
ATTENDED BY INDIVIDUALS IN THE
POST-SCHOOL COHORT



proportion of young people who did not advance from the previous Year Level, or who dropped out at any point during the year, over the total starters for any given Year Level. Students who moved away from the community are not included in this total. Qualitative data confirms that in 2019, five families were identified as having moved away to access a day school out of community.

Data was analysed to determine the length of completed engagements at boarding school by members of the research cohort. This included young people who had completed Year 12, those who had discontinued from one school and re-enrolled in another school, and those who discontinued from a school and were no longer enrolled anywhere.

A number of young people had been enrolled in more than one boarding school. Where this is the case, the length of each completed stay in a boarding school is included.

Findings reveal that amongst this group (n=49 students), 59.09% of engagements lasted for one year or less at any given boarding school. In this group 83.33% had completed three years or less at a given school, and 90.91%, four years or less.

Of the post-school aged cohort, 70% of young people had attended more than one boarding school (see Figure 15).

The same general pattern holds true for young people in the current school-age cohort (n=80).

Of these 80, 56 students had attended boarding school at some point. Of them, 32 students had attended more than one school.

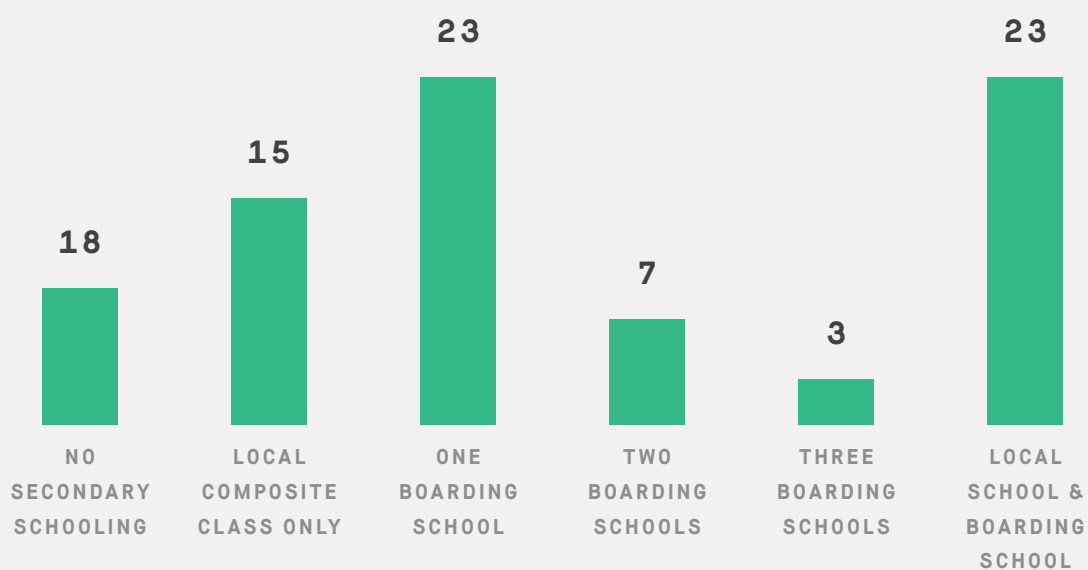
Of the young people represented in Figure 16, nine young people, or 11% of the cohort, had dropped out of education altogether before the end of primary school. A further 15 (18.75% of the cohort) had never left community. These young people had engaged with the NT Government's 'Employment Pathways' program which is mapped to ACARA's 'General Capabilities'. Ten students had attended more than one boarding school.

Where a student discontinued boarding at one school, they were unlikely to successfully transition to another boarding school and remain engaged there. Of the current school-aged cohort, 31 individuals who had dropped out of boarding school (55% of those who ever attended boarding school) were

recorded as not being engaged in any formal activity, training or employment. While a number of these had returned briefly to the local composite class, all were recorded as discontinuing some time later in the same year. Of those who had attended a second or third boarding school, only one remained in the subsequent school at the end of 2019. That student was marked as having discontinued education at the start of 2020. This pattern is consistent with anecdotal accounts of remote-living Indigenous young people dropping out of boarding and not re-engaging with any further education or training (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018).

FIG. 16

NUMBER OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS ATTENDED BY INDIVIDUALS IN THE CURRENT SCHOOL-AGED COHORT





QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE & FINDINGS

QUANTITATIVE DATA ESTABLISH WHAT IS HAPPENING, IN TERMS OF SECONDARY EDUCATION, FOR THE TARGET COMMUNITY. QUALITATIVE DATA BUILD UNDERSTANDING AROUND WHY THINGS HAPPEN.

There is robust international literature which supports the notion that disparities in education reflect a complex set of factors and processes within society at large. Taken together, these can be described as the social determinants of education. Coupled with the subjectivities of personal circumstance and disposition, social determinants play an important role in influencing outcomes at individual level. Repeated across a community, such outcomes form predictable patterns.

Understanding the social determinants of education allows us to address issues occurring outside the domain of education, which nonetheless impact education outcomes. Indigenous education inequality cannot be taken as independent from the health, housing, economic status, intergenerational experiences of marginalisation, the wellbeing of individuals as well as within their wider community of origin (Sheperd et al., 2012). Data presented here, combined with the qualitative evidence base reviewed above, enable us to engage with the social determinants of education and understand why the patterns described in this study have emerged. Where policy engages with these issues, it has real potential to reduce education inequality.

Qualitative data in this study were analysed to understand:

- The practicalities of secondary education engagement:
 - What range of opportunity exists for young people in this community?
 - How do families identify and access particular education pathways?
 - How are transitions into and out of school supported?
- Other than accessibility of opportunity, what social factors do community members identify as impacting education outcomes?
- What factors enabled or constrained young people from achieving positive education outcomes?
- What patterns emerge in relation to post-school outcomes?
- How is community at large impacted by current policy approaches to secondary education and post-school pathways?

1. PRACTICALITIES: IDENTIFYING EDUCATION PATHWAYS

1.1. NT boarding school pathways

There are 78 remote or very remote communities in the NT without any secondary pathway. For families in these locations, securing a boarding place for a child relatively close to home is far from straightforward. There are six Catholic or Independent schools in the NT which provide boarding places for First Australian students. These include:

- Marrara Christian College, Darwin (in 2020, 77 Indigenous students, with students from 26 communities across the Top End, including Western Australia, and Queensland)
- St Philip's College, Alice Springs (31 students from 14 communities)
- Haileybury Rendall School, Darwin (80+ students from 31 communities)
- Tiwi College, Pickertaramoor, Melville Island (100 students, all Tiwi)
- Yirara College of the Finke River Mission, Alice Springs (potential for 259 students but numbers not confirmed by the school)
- St John's Catholic College (60 Boarders, almost all Indigenous, from 25 communities).

In addition to these institutions, there are a number of residential facilities operating in the NT where students reside and attend local day-schools or access alternative pathways. At the time this research was conducted, no members of the target community were residing in such institutions. Community leaders advise that 10 years ago, a 'whole generation' of young people from the target community continued education to Year 12, but that

is now 'very rare'. When asked what has changed in that time, there was consensus that previously secondary-aged young people all attended one of two boarding schools in Darwin:

There people understood them and worked with community. They were close to home. Kids supported each other. We could support the kids (Focus group discussion, community leaders).

It is well recognised that strong relationships between home and school, and the capacity for young people to remain firmly anchored in their home community even while they are away at school, are foundational both to education engagement and to social and emotional wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Gee, 2016; O'Bryan, 2017). For these reasons, there is an obvious imperative to supporting young people from remote communities to remain as close as possible to home. This is not achievable for every student seeking a place at boarding school, given the limited number of boarding places available in the NT.

1.2. Identifying interstate pathways

Over the last decade, schools in the non-government sector have increasingly made places available for First Australian students. In theory, these have expanded the spectrum of opportunity available to remote-living young people, but questions abound as to whether parents and young people are positioned to give free, prior and informed consent before embarking on these pathways (Mander et al., 2015). In the target community, families whose children had been sent interstate, reported that they found the process of securing a position in a boarding school for their children difficult, and that important decisions are often made with a minimum of prior knowledge. In the words of one grandmother:

The kids talk amongst themselves and their older brother might have gone there, or sister

or relative of some kind, and that's how they get to know that they want to go to those schools. But really not understanding what the makeup of that place is... (Community elder, grandmother).

A number described finding a place in a boarding school as a 'catch as catch can' exercise and were frustrated that there are too few reliable and well-trodden pathways open to young people from this place. The principal of the local school reflected on the issue of choice, and the motivation of parents in selecting appropriate secondary pathways at interstate schools. She concluded:

There's a plethora of choice of schools out there ... a parent or a secondary age student, [might] come and request an application form for ... a GPS school in Adelaide or Perth.

We had a request couple of years ago for this random boarding school in Perth where I think possibly the student had got on the internet and found this school... The choice is there, whether all parents are aware of that choice, is ... another thing (Local school principal).

This participant recognised that parents' primary concern was not always educational: boarding school for some represented an effort to distance their children from difficult social conditions at home. She questioned the efficacy of this approach:

For some parents ... it is an informed choice but for others, no, I wouldn't say that it is. You know, possibly they feel that boarding school is going to solve the problems of their child by... placing them away from the community. Often, parents will say that they don't want their child involved in the community unrest, so they'll send them away to boarding school. I've heard [parents who think] ... boarding school will fix behaviour. So send them away for that, or because someone else is going to this boarding school

that their cousin or friend would like to go there as well. So really, based on those examples, I don't think that is informed. I feel that that is why there is such a high dropout rate, for students not coping off country (Local school principal).

Parents interviewed in this study showed a vital concern for the holistic wellbeing of their teenage and young adult offspring. Some expressed the view that if young people could be kept away from destructive norms prevalent in community during their early adolescence, they would be more likely to be empowered to make good life decisions. Their concerns affirm research findings in other remote community settings (Senior & Chenhall, 2012).

2. SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS INTO AND OUT OF SCHOOL

In 2015, the NT Department of Education established its TSU to support students in NT Government schools to attend boarding school either in the Territory or interstate. TSU has a small staff who work with families in discussing school choice, completing and lodging paperwork, and arranging travel for students travelling off-country. Students attending Catholic or other non-government schools may access TSU support 'if they (TSU) have capacity', although TSU reports that it is often difficult to access the information and data (attendance, reports, behavioural records) necessary to facilitate school enrolments for students in non-government schools (correspondence with TSU Program Manager).

Of a possible 100 young people from the target community, TSU has worked with 30 since its establishment in 2015. In 2019, TSU recorded five official visits to the government primary school but none to the non-government school in community.

On visits, TSU report that staff identify students who would like to transition to boarding school, talk with families, community members and schools to identify appropriate pathways. Ultimately, students and families determine the boarding school they would like to apply for. At that point, TSU assists families with paperwork and works with ABSTUDY to arrange travel (correspondence with TSU Program Manager).

TSU reports that while their focus is predominantly working with NT Government school students, staff will assist non NT Government students if they are asked, and if the Unit has capacity. TSU staff are unable to readily access student information and data (attendance, reports, behavioural etc.) for non NT Government schools and therefore sometimes struggle to obtain this information when working with students and their families that attend non NT Government schools (Correspondence with Transition Support Manager).

The larger of the two schools in the target community is the non-government primary school which also provides a composite secondary class. The principal of that school reported that for her students, finding secondary pathways was '*a difficult area*'. While one interstate boarding school has an established relationship with community and works with the local school to identify 'suitable students in either Year 6 or Year 7 that [they] feel would have the qualities and the resilience to cope with boarding school', more typically families are required to identify secondary pathways for children themselves.

Beyond identifying appropriate pathways, completing applications, satisfying entrance requirements and accessing funding entitlements are all difficult without targeted support. The principal of the non-government school reflected:

It's a really key position in this community to have someone there supporting parents with their applications because some of these

applications [are] 10, 15 pages long and the time that it takes to complete a form with parents is very ... time consuming (School principal).

In this case, the secondary years' classroom teacher had stepped into the role of assisting with boarding school applications, and a local NGO had secured short term Australian Government funding to also work with families to secure secondary pathways. Despite these supports, it was generally felt by research informants that systems were failing young people and the community at large.

In terms of the efficacy of TSU's role in supporting successful transitions, respondents had a range of different experiences. One interviewee described TSU as 'a travel agency'. By contrast, a staff member from a boarding school based in the NT described TSU staff as 'really good people who genuinely care about the kids' and whose 'support for our boarders is invaluable'. The Indigenous coordinator at a school in Victoria expressed surprise that TSU even existed. She had recently attended an ABSTUDY training session and said she was feeling 'overwhelmed' at the thought of the administrative burden she understood fell exclusively to her. She had not been made aware that TSU staff may be able to assist. Still others acknowledged that the TSU unit employs a small number of staff, and that it is unrealistic to expect them to support pathways for children from 78 different remote communities spread over a large geographic area, with wide range of cultural frames and language backgrounds.

In addition to government transition services, one private transition school has been established in Victoria to prepare young people from remote Australia for life in 'mainstream' boarding schools. Three young people from the target community had attended this school. This institution was established to assist First Australian young people, especially those from remote communities, to move into 'high performing' schools with a strong academic



base and having experienced urban life in a socially and culturally supported environment. The school provides intensive and individualised learning support for each of its students, and an extensive extra-curricular program of personal development. The school reported that at the end of the year, some students had demonstrated improvements in reading of 3–4 academic years.

Beyond the first year, the school takes responsibility to identify an appropriate pathway for each student within a range of partner schools. All students were enrolled in high performing schools at Year 8 level, although the transition school reported that over half its students were reading at Grade 3–5 level. Of students from the target community, one of the three dropped out during the transition year, the other two

transitioned to two different partner schools. Both of them dropped out during the first year and returned home. The following year, the transition school worked to secure a place for one of the two in a third interstate school.

This student was the first ever First Australian student the school had had. She returned home during the year. Speaking of the lack of congruity in his granddaughter's secondary education, her grandfather commented, 'That's not what we signed up for when she went away'. None of the three were in education or training at the time this study was conducted. Two were living away from community.

3. SCHOOL/COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS: IMPLICATIONS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

A strong relationship between a child's school, family and community is a known determinant of educational success for First Nations students. This is evidenced in government efforts to draw Aboriginal parents and communities into what has been described as the 'common task' of supporting school programs that improve school outcomes for Indigenous students (Lowe, 2019; What Works, 2010). The role of parental support for boarding school students is well established (Mander, 2015c; O'Bryan, 2017). The need to invest in school-community relations has implications for parents, but also for schools in their selection of students: when asked what it takes for a school to ensure that a young person from this community can thrive at school, a senior elder replied:

“DON'T TREAT OUR KIDS AS INDIVIDUALS. THEY ARE NOT INDIVIDUALS, THEY ARE PART OF A COLLECTIVE, SO IF YOU ARE GOING TO DEAL WITH THE KIDS, DEAL FIRST WITH THE COLLECTIVE”.

At the time that fieldwork for this study was conducted, 22 boarders were attending 10 different schools: three of those were in Darwin, two were in Alice Springs, and one each was in Adelaide, regional NSW and regional Victoria. Two separate schools were in Brisbane. Over the 10-year span, 100 members of the research cohort had attended 38 different schools across Australia. To expect families and community members to establish meaningful relationships with such a wide range of schools is not realistic. Equally, staff in a number of boarding schools reported that because they host

students from many communities, their capacity to build meaningful relationships with families and community leaders is also diminished.

The broad dispersal of boarders from this community across Australia indicate that by this measure, young people are being set up to fail.

The difficulty of establishing and maintaining relationships with schools was a recurring theme in qualitative data. Some participants were unable to remember the name of a school they or their child had attended, or accurately identify the state or city where it is located. In one case, even when prompted, a participant insisted that the school he attended was in one state, when in fact it is located in another.

For schools, to build and sustain relationships with a remote Aboriginal community takes an investment of time and energy. While some Darwin-based schools are reported as having a presence in the target community, and two interstate schools are described as having a significant, on-going relationship with families, these relationships are the exception not the rule. Both families in community and staff in boarding schools expressed frustration at the difficulties they encounter building meaningful relationships. Even in the NT, Indigenous program managers report that their student population is geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse, and that they have neither the time nor the economic resources to visit to every community. They acknowledge that when students present with complex needs, these often reflect the complex reality of community life which would be helpful to understand. Challenges identified by school staff include language barriers, geography, health, families' lack of internet access and/or digital literacy, overcrowded housing, and intergenerational exclusion from education systems. These factors diminish both community capacity to engage and school capacity to build relationships integral to providing holistic support for young people.

During the course of the research, a recently appointed head of Indigenous programs at a regional independent school from the NT visited community to meet families and discuss possible pathways for older primary-aged children. Parents responded warmly. They felt their children's chances of remaining at that school and succeeding in their secondary years were higher because of the level of cultural competence and understanding of community life displayed by this school leader. The head of boarding at another regional school reported that staff had made a visit to community in 2019, and this had resulted in an 'influx' of students from this location in 2020.

Models of successful engagement:

The benefits of building relationship are illustrated by two programs which are notable contrasts to the situations described above.

The first is an interstate school which has committed to long-term partnership with the target community. The only First Australian boarders who attend the school are members of the target community. Despite physical distance and to minimise the cultural divide, the school conducts staff visits to community every year. Over time these are described as having built a strong foundation of meaningful relationships; both teachers and house parents liaise closely and on an on-going basis with students' families. Teachers are better equipped to see students in the context of their wider life experience, including appreciating the strong base of cultural and linguistic capital which underpin their identity and sustain their self-esteem. Conversely, the increasing cultural competence of staff are described as making this school a safe place for students to invest their energies. Quantitative data confirms that students attending this school were more likely to remain consistently enrolled than those attending other interstate schools. Of 11 students to attend the school

only one had completed Year 12, but only two had discontinued within their first year. The principal of that school reflected:

The enrolment of the students from [the target community] has always been fluid. [We have] had ...challenges, particularly with regard to returning after school holidays, male initiation, and the all-too-frequent 'Sorry Business'. Eleven students from [community] have attended [our school] at various times, (never more than four at once, and frequently less) and this year [one young woman] completed her HSC, graduated from the College and attended the Year 12 Formal. This is a major cause for celebration but is not our only measure of success. From the beginning, we have always acknowledged the transition from [community] to [school] would be difficult, but the semi-rural location of the College makes that transition much easier.

The principal was careful not to overstate the contribution his school had made in community; he described it as the school's commitment to making 'small steps' for a small number of students.

The second pathway which stands out for the continuity of engagement was a secondary boarding college located at a Homelands centre 'on country' approximately three hours from community. Of the boarding schools attended by members of the research cohort, this school was identified as the secondary pathway of choice by many parent participants.

Catering to 60 First Australian youth from across the Top End, this school ran an applied learning program and a well-developed 'life skills' program. The College operated for 15 years and over that time enjoyed what school leadership described as 'a strong partnership' with the local Aboriginal corporation and high levels of Government support. Over time, the relationship

with the local corporation 'weakened', and the NT and Commonwealth Governments delayed decisions regarding 'sustainable financial commitments'. In 2017 the school closed, and this was attributed, at least in part, 'to the clearly identified issue of significant underfunding for indigenous boarding programs' (Aisthorpe, 2016). Parents in the target community expressed deep regret at this decision. Young people who attended that school were described as being significantly more engaged than those travelling to city or interstate boarding schools. This is reflected in the duration of enrolments: of nine young people identified as having been enrolled at this school, all but one had continued until they completed Year 11 or until the school closed. The one student who discontinued had transitioned to a school in Queensland, but dropped out within the first year. At the time the school closed, all staff members were made redundant, and students were required to find new schools. Although some transitioned to schools in Darwin or interstate, none continued in their second school and families identified the school closure as the point where each of those young people effectively dropped out of secondary education. The youngest of these was in Year 7 at the time. At the time this study was conducted, that young person had not re-engaged with education.

In addition to these two programs, two young women live with a host family in South Australia. Although neither of them fall within the age bracket to be counted as members of the research cohort, their experience is important. The older of the two has lived with the family for 10 years: she completed Year 12, transitioned to university and is currently completing a bachelor degree. Of all the factors which enabled this young woman to persevere with education away from home, her house mother emphasises the importance of relationship. She spoke of the investment she had made in working with family and ensuring that family are actively involved in their child's education. Similarly, the

young women's grandmother spoke of almost daily phone calls to support her granddaughters while they are away from home. In the experience of these young women, their family of origin, host family and school staff were genuine partners working together to empower them through education.

4. BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT AND SCHOOL DROPOUT

Where schools fail to establish effective relationships with families, both the process of transition and on-going behaviour management issues become more difficult. In many cases, parents attributed their child's disengagement from education to systems failure. For some young people, the lack of a supported transition resulted in a truncated secondary education. Many parent and grandparent participants echoed this sentiment, and identify the lack of support as a major contributor to early school dropout:

It doesn't matter where you send them, whether if it's in the Territory or interstate. Same thing happens. We've had kids in Alice, we've had kids in Darwin, we've had kids in Katherine. Still not local to the community ... if there are families that are wanting to send their kids away, to whatever boarding school ... Schools that accept our kids and enrol them, they've got to have that understanding that those children need, students need support there... put somebody in place to work with them in the transitions. You know, it might take a year for them to get settled before they get the understanding of what is expected of them when they're there. And I don't think that's happening ... in schools.
[Mother]

Beyond the period of transition, parents voiced frustration that many schools do not maintain adequate lines of communication with families

around managing student behaviour. A lack of connection between home and school is cited by young people and parents as contributing to school dropout.

A recurring theme in parental interviews was the lack of ongoing communication with parents, particularly as schools sought to deal with disruptive or antisocial behaviours. In a focus group interview with a number of community leaders who are trained teachers and mothers of school-aged children, participants recounted that boarding schools expel or suspend students for behaviours which should ring alarm bells for any trauma trained teacher. Rather than contacting parents and seeking to understand, or enlisting their support, kids are 'bundled onto a plane'. At the time fieldwork was conducted, one 13-year-old had recently been sent home for 'back chatting a teacher' [Mother]. Later, a Year 10 student was expelled for going on a 'joy ride' on a four-wheel lawn mower at his school. His grandmother interpreted this as a deliberate strategy to return to community:

Researcher:

Do they understand the cause of his behaviours?

Interviewee:

No, they don't even ask ... before you know it, you get a phone call and [they] say, 'Oh, this kid's been playing up. Can you talk to him on the phone?' And when they say 'Nanna', they start shaking [laughs] 'cause they've got to talk to Nanna now about their issues. You know. But what I'm saying is it's better that we go there and sit down and talk and not just to the kids, but to the teachers, the principal, boarding people, that sort of thing. These are the issues. And kids sometimes find it hard to talk to the teachers, what their issues are, or the boarding people, you know (Senior community elder).

This grandmother contacted the research team in early 2020 to report that her two grandsons had been

expelled from their school interstate. She was informed of the expulsion before she had been warned that the young men had been acting up. A number of other parents reported the same issue. Generally, they could identify why their children were behaving as they were and felt they could have effectively 'sorted them out', but they were never given the chance. Here again, the geographic location of boarding schools was identified as a significant issue. In the words of one parent:

I've sent my kids all around the place, Australia you know. But it hasn't worked. The longest they stayed is what? A month might be. And then come home cause they're homesick or there's other cultural barriers and just nothing there. And I found it hard to go and try and support them, money-wise, financial-wise. Cause I didn't get paid from work and you know I couldn't find the money to go down and spend time with them. Things like that. But my one in Darwin now, I just get in the car and I drive (Mother).

Unfortunately, the quantitative data in this study are not sufficiently fine-grained to record the length of time any student spent at school in a year where partial attendance was recorded, but in many instances, informants reported that school enrolment should be measured in weeks, not months:

I've seen kids that go away, two weeks, not coping in the Western society, because they don't have the strategies to cope there, and the discipline, because they haven't learned it in the home. And they boomerang back. Two weeks, I've seen kids go away for two weeks and come straight back and that is the issue. They don't return to school, they're too shamed, the parents are pulling their hair out... they're back to square one (Community member, service provider).

In terms of why students 'act out' in school, a number of young participants referred to the fact that they



found school too hard. This is unsurprising: the local school principal reported that the majority of her Grade 6 graduates were reading at Grade 2-3 level but were being sent away to join Year 7 or 8 classes at boarding school. In the NT, schools often run special streams offering increased learning support for First Australian students within a cohort, but this is not the case interstate, where a young person may be the first or one of only a few Aboriginal students in the school.

Other participants referred to actively seeking to be suspended or expelled because they were worried about what was happening at home, and felt they needed to remain close to family. Ironically, this is the same reason many parents cited for wanting their children to go away to school in the first place.

Parents report that in most families, school dropout has become normalised: rather than the exception it has become the rule. Because of this, elders say that young ones have learned that acting up becomes a 'get out of gaol free' card: they do not work through issues or even learn from experience. Rather, they reinforce minimalist, self-destructive norms.

At the same time, parents felt that most schools were not doing the hard work to draw young ones back into the fold.

Disengagement from school does not necessarily mean that young people do not value education. Young people who contributed to this study all expressed regret for having dropped out, but felt it was inevitable, given the lack of choice available to them. All indicated that they would like to return

to education, even if they were of post-school age, but were not prepared to leave home to do so. One participant described how her growing awareness of the disparities in life outcomes for community members relative to non Indigenous Australians engendered a rejection of the education system. She explained that as she progressed in her secondary education, she came to see Year 12 completion as a Western priority, which she felt did not align with her life goals:

I'm sitting there thinking, 'Why am I going through this?' Finish year 12, do this. That's a Western system of education. And so that played up a lot. Why did I need to finish? Have a qualification, have a role, be financially stable and then have family and then die when my kids are only in their 20s. I didn't like that. So I decided, no, I'm having my kids first. So I started a family. I was, um, I was 18, I became a mum two months before my 19th birthday (Community member, mother and teacher).

This woman had gone on to complete a teaching degree, initially through a Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathway. Another young woman explained the circumstances in which she, too, disengaged from school, despite understanding the life changing benefits of education:

I used to love being at school every day of my life... That changed last year I think. school stopped 'cause I needed some time off because my grandmother was a bit sick. And when I used to go to school I couldn't think straight. And then coming home after school and hearing the bad news about my grandmother, coming home for a few weeks and then, she's gonna leave us... that was pretty hard for me... She grewed me up, she taught me the things that I didn't know about bush tucker, how to weave baskets, how to fish. And now without her, everything has changed. And I kinda find it hard to focus without my nanna being here. She used to be there for me,

cheering me up to go to school and knowing that she's not here anymore is difficult for me to get over the fact that she's not here... This year wasn't my year. 2019 is not my year... Well, for 2020 I want to have a better future. A better present. Go back to school, get an education. So, when my grandmother can look down on me, she can be proud for me for going to school and learning and probably when I grow up, I can have a better job (Community member, aged 15 years).

Shortly after being interviewed, this 15 year old 'married up'. To date she has not re-engaged in education and there are no alternative programs available to her in community.

5. LOCAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES AND PATHWAYS

5.1. Local school engagement, curriculum and teacher capacity

For young people aged 12–16 years who remain in or return to community, the only available option for education or training is to attend the composite class at the local primary school. Students follow an 'Employment Pathways' curriculum, which teachers report is still under development.

Under its IES 2015–2024, the NT Government committed to developing and implementing an Employment Pathways curriculum 'to engage young people in learning relevant to their career pathways' (NT Education, 2015b). This is the curriculum used in the senior years' program in community. One of the teachers responsible for delivering the curriculum, describes this as 'a new program which seems severely underfunded'. Curriculum documents are described as 'very complex and confusing'. Further, because the local school is governed under the Catholic school system, training opportunities

for staff are limited. This new graduate was given minimal assistance in laying out the program. He had attended one professional learning seminar, whereas had he been working in an NT Government school, trainers would have been available for on-going professional learning and support. Instead, as a first-year teacher, he found himself working with a cohort of high needs secondary students in a primary school setting, feeling isolated and unsupported.

Teacher quality and continuity in remote Australia are acknowledged as pressing issues (Halsey, 2017). The Halsey Review proposes a range of targeted salary and conditions packages to attract and retain experienced teachers to rural and remote Australia. By their own admission, teachers in the community school describe their capacity to deliver a program to meet the needs of their students as limited both by the lack of resourcing, and also by their own inexperience: half the teachers in this school were new graduates in 2019.

Some of the young people enrolled in the Senior Years' class at the local school in 2019 informed the research team that they had not enrolled in a secondary boarding school because they never wanted to leave home. Others were on youth diversion programs through the NT justice system and were required to attend school or face the prospect of alternative correctional measures. Still others had voluntarily discontinued or had been expelled from one boarding school and their parents were now trying to find a second boarding place for them.

In addition to delivering the curriculum, the Senior Years' teacher in this school was required to assist families to find secondary pathways for students in boarding schools. He reflected on his limited capacity to help:

If the goal is to send kids to education in another state, it shouldn't be on the school to facilitate

that transition. I was a grad teacher, I didn't have connections to schools interstate. How could I help these kids find places interstate? I couldn't (Teacher, Senior Years' class, local school).

Other things being equal, this young man reported that he would have seriously considered returning to the target community for at least a second year, but the lack of professional mentoring and development available to him led him to return to his state of origin. There, he continues to work with high-needs students in a complex school environment. In recognition of the challenging work he does, he now receives a 'retention payment': a supplementary amount paid to reward him and incentivise him to remain in his current school. No such incentive was offered in the NT. Had such a scheme been on offer, this teacher admitted that his decision to leave would have been 'much harder'.

5.2. School re-engagement following boarding school dropout

A precondition to enrolment in any boarding school is written evidence of current engagement in education. Many families saw schools' administrative requirements as a structural barrier to their child's re-engagement. Parents described a pattern, whereby their child disengages (by choice or expulsion) from school. They return home, where they refuse to go to school at all. Eventually they might agree to go to a different boarding school. Parents seek out another pathway, but need evidence of current school engagement. The young person is re-enrolled locally in order to obtain the attendance record required, but feels 'shamed' at going to a 'school for little kids'. At best, a young person may lose several months of schooling while efforts are made to secure an appropriate pathway for them, at worst they drop out altogether.



The principal of the local school spoke at some length about how disruptive it is to have parents and students use the composite secondary class as a 'turnstile' for entry into boarding school:

That secondary class has always been a concern because ... it's a little bit like a turnstile ... A lot of the students come in through the turnstile and then they stay for a while and then they go out. Some come in because they've disengaged with school. Then they think, 'Ah, okay, we'll go to boarding school'. Boarding school says, 'well, what school have you been attending?' 'Oh, I haven't been attending a school for a few months or six months'. 'Well, you know, you've gotta be at school for a term before we'll look at you'. And then we'll get those students who drop

in for a term to get their attendance up and then are able to access a boarding school. So, you know, it can be very inconsistent... [There have been] a couple of instances where ... boarding school didn't work out ... so then they came back again. I can think of one student who possibly was up to her fourth boarding school experience and then after it didn't work out the fourth time (Local School Principal).

Data suggest that the experience of this young woman is not unusual: of the research cohort, almost all students who dropped out of boarding school failed to meaningfully re-engage with education. As reported above, several had enrolled in a second or third boarding school, but none had completed more than one academic year in their new school.

6. ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS AND PATHWAYS

6.1. Post-school pathways and outcomes:

12-17 year olds

Adult participants in this research agree that education and training pathways currently available to young people in community are inadequate. They describe their youth as being disempowered and lacking hope. They express little optimism for the future and share a deep concern for the social and emotional wellbeing of the next generation.

One mother reflected:

If these are our leaders of the future we should be worried. Where will they lead us? Into the dark I reckon, they can't even lead themselves.

Their concerns are ratified by quantitative data: amongst members of the target cohort aged 15 or older, 48% had discontinued secondary education altogether by Year 9. A year later, 74% had dropped out. Despite the high number of young people resident in community and not attending school, alternative programs and pathways available to them are almost non-existent.

In lieu of participating in education or training, teenagers in the target community report spending their days 'watching movies'. Over the school holiday period, when current boarding school students return home, a local NGO organises a range of music and dance activities. When invited to participate, younger secondary aged youth respond enthusiastically.

Older teenagers are functionally invisible, and parents report that they are 'doing nothing' or becoming involved in 'silly things'.

There is a high rate of petty crime in community, with buildings being damaged, homes broken into, and fights breaking out. Parents report high levels of marijuana (gunja) use among this demographic.

The then General Manager of the local Aboriginal corporation reported that his house had been broken into eight times in the last few months:

In the last break-in, kids trashed my house and stole my computer. When the police returned it, I turned it on and found a video the perpetrator had made of herself. She's a sweet kid – about 16 – singing and flouncing around. Nothing sexualised, just a kid who was bored finding something to do (Community-based service provider).

Despite the damage he had sustained and which ultimately led to his resignation, this man stressed that the young offenders are 'not bad kids, they are bored kids'. Elders agree, they reiterate that the pattern when a student drops out of school is predictable:

They are bored, lacking in any direction, no hope for the future. Lost! That's what they are, lost (Parent, focus group discussion).

When interviewed, young people of school age were adamant that they understood why education matters, but they felt unable or unwilling to leave home. When questioned about the senior years' program offered locally, they dismissed that option as not being 'real school'.

6.2. Training and employment opportunities:

17-21 year olds

Once a young person turns 17, they are able to access a range of traineeships and employment programs through the Commonwealth-funded CDP. CDP is described by the government as supporting job seekers in remote Australia to 'build skills, address barriers and contribute to their communities through a range of flexible activities. It is designed around the unique social and labour market conditions in remote

Australia and is part of the Australian Government's agenda for increasing employment and breaking the cycle of welfare dependency' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). The CDP program in the local community is delivered by an Aboriginal not-for-profit organisation based in Darwin, with some certificate courses run in conjunction with Charles Darwin University.

Staff running CDP programs report that attendance and participation in certificate courses is 'good' and that attendees are 'totally' good learners, quick to engage and 'onto it straight away' (CDP instructor). Instructors agree that the hands-on nature of the certificate courses being run suit the learning style of attendees. Each course includes a theory component which teachers take as an opportunity to increase levels of literacy and numeracy for the class.

Trainers expressed frustration that they are prohibited from offering courses to community members aged under 17, when there is an obvious need in the community. One manager spoke of his aspiration to adapt programs to meet the needs of children as young as 13, a number of whom have dropped out of school altogether. The teacher of the composite senior years' class in the local school agreed that this would be an obvious and appropriate pathway to keep the students in his care engaged. He had investigated the possibility of a modified program run by the CDP provider for his students, but found public liability insurance cover did not extend to people under 17 years of age. For this reason, he was unable to work with CDP providers to re-engage young people recognised to be at risk.

At the age of 17, several young men had completed a traineeship with the NTCA. Participants undertook a two-week induction course and progressed to stock work under the guidance of a mentor. Most dropped out within weeks of completing their basic training.

The course coordinator blamed attrition on 'a passive welfare mind-set'. Rather than investigating the circumstances of participants in his program, he jumped to generalised and racist conclusions:

Their culture is not to work, so most of them don't work... They have their families sitting behind them telling them they don't need to work. They will get paid by the government.... It's difficult for the employers. It's mostly unfulfilling. I don't know why we do it really (NTCA manager).

By contrast, a young man who had participated in the program provided an alternative perspective. He spoke about the challenge of having going from a life where there was nothing to do and sleeping during daylight hours, to long days of hard physical work with little time to acclimatise. He had discontinued school for two years prior to taking up the NTCA traineeship. For him, the transition from community life to full time employment was a shock to his system which he ultimately found too hard to sustain:

Yeah, [NTCA] were good to work for, we used to do a lot of mustering, we used to do a lot of pre-testing and branding them and tagging them, and you know, that sort of stuff. And it was good fun. I really enjoyed it. Being out, away for three months. Being away from home, working. And I found it pretty much action, fun. And I left that job 'cause it was too much for me... Days long and hard, getting up at five o'clock in the morning, knocking off at six o'clock at night. (Laughs, sighs) ... used to do that every day (Community member).

Far from having a 'passive welfare mind-set', at the time he was interviewed, this young man was working with family to develop a program to 'bring our culture back to community... and keep the young

people occupied for culture ways'. He saw himself as an emerging leader, and was determined to be proactive in addressing community problems. He described setting up art classes and had arranged a group of dancers to travel to Sydney and perform in 'Dance Rites'. He regretted his low level of literacy, and described 'doing paper stuff' as a major challenge.

At the time of completing fieldwork, several community members, one of school age, were employed with the local ranger organisation. The recently appointed director of that program explained his approach:

You've got to build up a rapport within the community first before you can achieve anything really. And they, the people in the community, need to know that they can trust that person (Head Ranger).

A senior community leader agreed, explaining:

Any project that they get going, a lot of the time. It's top down. It got to be bottom up and some of the top down things, sure... people have gotta be ... like let them to sort out what has gone wrong, you know, and fix it and not just say, 'Oh, this thing's not working so we shut it down' you know. That's been happening one too many times and even if it's an excellent program, you know, they just come and take the cover from under your feet and they just leave you gasping for air, and what next? [Senior elder]

Her observations are consistent with national and international research reiterating the importance of empowering communities to find solutions to problems in their own context (Empowered Communities, 2018).

6.3. Post-school pathways and outcomes:

Year 12 graduates

Of the whole community (n=400), at the time of conducting fieldwork, only one young adult was involved in tertiary education, although a number of Year 11 and 12 participants had aspirations to higher education. Of Year 12 graduates in the cohort, four were unemployed, two were employed in community, one was enrolled in a traineeship out of community, and one was apprenticed.

Consistent with other research on the experiences of First Australian boarding school students (O'Bryan, 2017; Redmond-MacLaren et al., 2017; Rogers, 2016), for members of the research cohort who complete Year 12, and do not move into tertiary study, reintegrating into community life was described as a major challenge. In the words of one community member:

Those kids that have been educated, when they come back they struggle, because they really don't fit in back in with the community, because they have that education, and they know that, really 'I don't want to sit under a tree and smoke dope, I want to be something'. They have their goals then, and they want to become something.

A lot of them struggle ... There's no jobs in community for them. So we sort of set the kids up to fail, because we tell them [to] go away, get an education, but then we bring them back to community but there's no jobs for them here. We need to create pathways, and create jobs for them. We need to value what education that they've gotten out whilst away from community, and we need to be providing them with jobs when they come back, so that there's continuity in their learning (Community based service provider).

A number of participants indicated that the lack of differential of outcomes between those who completed Year 12 and those who did not, was a disincentive to continue at boarding school when things became difficult. This finding is consistent with research into the post-school experience of Year 12 graduates from very remote Australia (Guenther, 2020).

7. FACTORS IMPACTING EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT AND ATTAINMENT

7.1. Prior learning and strengths-based approach

A very clear and consistent issue raised by research participants was that young people were academically ill-equipped to transition to boarding school. Many reported that boarding school was 'too hard'. Staff at the local primary school reported low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst their student population, but elders stressed that their children are raised to be bi-cultural and therefore bring different skillsets to education. They expressed frustration that these often go unrecognised in school systems where the onus is continually on the student to fit in, with little recognition of the prior knowledge or aptitudes a young person brings with them to school. The grandmother of the only tertiary student in community (aged 23 in 2019) reflected on the strength and resilience of her granddaughter. In particular, she stressed that the young woman's identity and self-concept remained consistent as she moved between cultural frames:

Young people look out today ... and understand Western ways in our way. And we fast forward all of our education to them when they're very young ... I've always wondered whether if when they go into the city and live there for that length of time ... what's their identities like? ... And it's amazing, they come back with stories and

say, 'Nanna, we've done this'. I'll give you an example. You know, I talk on Dadirri and that silent, still awareness and deep listening, [My granddaughter], she comes and goes, through her uni break, and she jumps in a cab, getting off the airport in the city, jumps in the cab and goes back to where she's living. And one day she said to the taxi driver, 'pull over'. And then the taxi driver says, 'what for?' And she continues to say 'pull over' and he's probably thinking that she is going to jump out of the car and run away and not pay him for the fare, you know. And then she keeps saying 'pull over, please' and eventually he pulls over on the service road and she jumps out, folds her arms and in sarcastic way she says to him 'thought so!' You know, and they had a flat tyre and he didn't even realise that. And guess who had to change the tyre? She did. He just knew how to drive the car and drive around the city, but not being able to fix the car. But anyway, that's awareness. Listening deeply to the different sounds, landmarks, you know, in, in wherever you are. And in the cities, in the busyness of the city life. But that's a sign for me. And then when they come back here, she says 'Nanna, let's go bush', camp or go hunting or whatever and gather bush tucker (Grandmother and community leader).

She acknowledged the need for all parties – parents, community members and schools – to work together to support young people:

There's a mixture of things happening in our community. There's Aboriginal way of living and then there's gadiya way of living. So those people I believe should be there to support the families and get the families to understand that it's important for that mother, that Nanna, that carer should be strong to support a child that's away. But then again, what's happening up at the other end, you know? In, in the boarding



school that that family had chosen to send their kids to, off country (Grandmother and community leader).

Participants reaffirmed the importance of receiving targeted support at school, but also the damage done if schools do not frame support in a strength-based narrative. One house mother recounted the experience of a young person in her care:

She'd get frustrated sometimes and she'd say, 'I'm just dumb, I'm just dumb'. And of course, you go, 'no, you're not dumb. Stop it'. 'No, I'm dumb'. 'Stop saying dumb'. 'This is how I do it,' I say, 'you're not dumb, you're just learning it.'... 'Oh no, no, no, no'. And then you work it through and you say, 'Okay, you can approach it like this,

this and this. Let me spend time with you'... this takes work (Homestay guardian).

The importance of strong school/community/family relationships is again made evident in finding strengths for young people to build on as they transition to schools away from home. In this regard, the wide range of schools attended by the research cohorts once again militates against education engagement and success. For young people who are not understood within their own cultural and community frame, the personal cost of engagement in a foreign school environment is high. By contrast, the few schools which had heavily invested in building relationships and becoming a recognised pathway for families from this community, also recorded the highest rates of retention and academic attainment.

7.2. Parental Support and the social gradient

The higher the level of education a person has, the longer that person can expect to live and the better their quality of life will be. The educational/economic level of a person and their family is sometimes described as the 'social gradient' (Marmot & Allen, 2014). It is necessary to understand how the social gradient impacts educational engagement and attainment for young people.

To the extent that engaging with education positions a person higher on the social gradient relative to those who have not, data presents some evidence to suggest that the social standing of parents impacts on the opportunities available to their children. An NT Department of Education employee who assisted with this study, observed that TSU staff 'prefer to work with families who approach them directly, not with schools or external organisations that act as 'middle men' because they presume that engaged families are more likely to support kids effectively' (Field notes of conversation with NT Education employee, formerly based in community). This informant felt the upshot of NT Education's assumption is that families able to advocate effectively for their children, are more likely to be supported to find secondary pathways than other families. Intergenerational disadvantage is therefore perpetuated and poor levels of education engagement compounded across family groups.

This phenomenon was described by community members from across the generations. Older members of the community had all attended a mission school locally and many had progressed to higher education through pathways programs. This is consistent with research finding that the timing of key life events including education attendance, occur on average at different ages for the Indigenous compared to the non-Indigenous population (Biddle & Yap, 2010). Highly educated parents or grandparents were most likely to describe

implementing strategies to effectively support their children at boarding school, although even they were not always successful. One grandmother spoke to this issue:

A lot of the kids that drop out do come from families that are very supportive of their children and very proud for them to be chosen to go to school off country. But that's just one half of the story. And then the other half of the story is when they leave here and go away. This other side with this, there's gotta be more support for them, as in the transitioning of them in boarding school. [Grandmother]

When parents expressed frustration that their children had not persevered in education, a number also rued their own early disengagement. One mother observed that if a parent had dropped out of school in Year 8, their child was likely to drop out in Year 6. Several parents expressed a desire to complete their secondary education, even though they now had teenage children of their own. One mother described this ambition by reference to her own pride and self-concept:

Most adults here didn't go to Year 12 or never started Year 6 or 7. Back in those days they only went to the boarding, a little dormitory, you know the missionary times? Big mob people here want to go back to school... They know how to count money, but some of them, they don't speak English, they don't understand English, they don't spell, write, some don't count. If they build school back here, I'll be applying to go back to school. Yeah, just to tell you the truth, I want to finish my Year 11 and 12 and be happy for myself. [Mother of teenage children]

For young people from families with little experience of secondary education, a pattern has emerged whereby peer group support supplants parental support, often with negative consequences.

One mother described it in these terms:

So, what happens with the kids then, because their parents are dealing with their own needs, and the kids are safe within their little peer groups ... They're too old to go back to school, because they become men and women, what they call Litiga. They become adults. You know, girls, they become women, and boys become men. So it's a shame job to go back into school, so they just disengage, they don't go to school... All their peer group has taken up drugs or alcohol. Then they need the money to support their habits, whether it be the alcohol or the drugs. They start to do whatever if they get money, they go gambling, so they're underage gambling, so that they can support their drug habits or buy their toiletries, or whatever they need to do (Mother).

Researchers did not record the highest level of education of parents or grandparents of young people counted in the research cohort. Precise findings can therefore not be made correlating a parent and a child's educational experience, but evidence suggests that this is a relevant consideration. Findings suggest that current policy approaches and complex administrative requirements compound the intergenerational disadvantage of families historically alienated from education systems.

7.3. Housing, employment, community infrastructure

Education cannot be seen in isolation from the realities of a young person's social background. Social context is a known determinant of education engagement and attainment, just as it is a social determinant of health (Carson et al., 2007; Dudgeon et al., 2016). For that reason, ACARA developed an ICSEA rating to measure the level of intergenerational educational advantage a student in any given school

in Australia enjoys. ICSEA values are reported on the Australian Government's MySchool website. In calculating ICSEA values, remoteness and Indigeneity are treated as deficits (ACARA, 2012). The two primary schools in the target community are ranked as the amongst the most educationally disadvantaged in Australia by ICSEA rating. Difficult social conditions in remote Australia are sometimes used as a justification for investment in boarding programs, but come what may, community social connectedness is recognised as germane to a young person's wellbeing (Gee et al., 2014) and critical to their engagement at school (O'Bryan, 2017).

In remote Australia, a chronic shortage of housing means that overcrowding is endemic. In the community described here, there has been no new housing constructed since 2008 and existing houses are poorly maintained. Whereas in the past, local people built and took responsibility for the upkeep of homes under government funded CDEP programs, the cessation of CDEP is described by community members as leading to 'mass unemployment' (Former CDEP Co-ordinator, community member). Passive welfare replaced employment programs and participants uniformly describe community spirit as being crushed. No longer properly maintained, existing community housing is of a poor standard, with most buildings containing asbestos.

People of all ages refer to their home as overcrowded, with multiple generations sharing small spaces. A number of teenagers describe walking around community all night and sleeping during the day when adults are out of the house. One mother remarked dryly that if people were serious about engaging kids in secondary education, 'they would run night school'.

In a focus group discussion with a group of women, all trained as teachers, or working as Assistant Teachers in one of the two primary schools in community, the issue of overcrowding was cited as



one reason that young people drop out of boarding:

A child might be weaned, but has to stay in its parent's bed because there's nowhere else for it to sleep. Fifteen years later, that child is still in its parent's room- maybe sharing a mattress or a bit of floor with siblings. They never cut the umbilical cord, so it's any wonder they don't cope in boarding school. A bed of their own is novel, much less a room of their own [Field notes of focus group discussion].

The issue of overcrowding, and the lack of amenity in community housing assumed a new relevance during the Covid-19 outbreak. Not only were community members at increased risk of transmission of the

virus, for young people who were sent home from boarding, internet access was unavailable, and students were unable to continue their studies.

The principal of one large boarding provider in Darwin explained that students' concerns about the impact of Covid on their family members was justification enough to send First Australian boarders home. Later in the same bulletin, the junior school principal outlined the iPad Program put in place to enable junior school students to continue learning from home, but only after parents had returned an iPad Program Agreement form. No details were provided about how students from remote communities would be supported to stay abreast of class work during the quarantine period, whether

they too had been issued with computers or iPads, or the extent to which the school had any real capacity to support their involvement in classes over the quarantine period, given the lack of local infrastructure.

7.4. Adolescent health and wellbeing

Just as education is a known social determinant of health, the opposite is also true: health and wellbeing have a known reciprocal impact on educational engagement and attainment (Carson et al., 2007; Dudgeon et al., 2016). Due to the small scale of this study, systems-level health data were not accessible. No cohort-specific observations can be made about the burden of disease in the target population, but the health profile of Indigenous adolescents is known to differ markedly from that of non Indigenous Australian adolescents, with high rates of communicable, nutritional, and reproductive diseases; non-communicable diseases; and injuries (Azzopardi et al., 2018).

Participants in this study described a range of life stressors known to impact physical and emotional health and wellbeing, as well as creating barriers to educational engagement. These included overcrowded housing, domestic and community violence, high levels of unemployment, early sexual debut and risky sexual behaviours, teenage pregnancy, the prevalence of early school dropout, and engagement with the criminal justice system. At the time of conducting fieldwork, seven young people aged 11–16 years were involved in pre-court youth diversion programs. A number of elders referred to a spate of suicides which occurred in community several years ago. They expressed concern that over the course of 2019, three completed suicides had occurred in the region, in addition to two known attempts in community. The profile of community life means that adolescent experience of trauma is ubiquitous.

One of the benefits of attending boarding school for some community members was improved access to quality medical and dental care. Adults reported that boarders who completed an academic year returned home healthier and happier than those who dropped out of school, or who did not enrol at school at all. The liaison officer at one school reported that although the young man boarding with them was ‘acutely homesick’ and suffering serious mental health problems, he had been able to access \$3500.00 worth of dental care, dietitians had devised a special nutrition plan to address issues of malnourishment and the school had arranged specialist counselling. She reported that he was not engaged in classroom learning, but this did not surprise her given the complexity of his life as, ‘There’s too much going on to engage with basic literacy and numeracy’. In 2020, he returned to school, this time with his cousin. The liaison officer reported that she wanted to recruit more students from this community and deepen relationships for the benefit of young people in her charge. She felt this would have a direct impact on their capacity to engage.

By contrast, particularly in schools with large numbers of Indigenous students, young people were likely to be sent home rather than receive extensive medical care: one mother described being contacted by a house mistress to say her daughter was self-harming and would therefore need to leave the school. The mother responded by telling her daughter to ‘pull herself together’. She felt that the school had made very little attempt to understand the cause of the young woman’s distress, and was frustrated that no attempt had been made earlier to involve parents in managing the issue.

For young people who stay at home, poor mental health outcomes are a major issue. Community members ascribe this in large part to boredom. There are currently no programs to re-engage young people who have dropped out of school until they

turn 17. One 15-year-old young woman was asked by the researcher to describe a typical day:

R: What do you do during the day?

P: I stay at home during the day.

R: And what do you do at home?

P: Watch movies, that's all I do. Watch movies.
Or I go fishing sometimes, down the river. Or out shooting for goose.

R: Who do you see during the day?

P: No-one.

R: Tell me about the arts centre. Do you ever do anything at the arts centre?

P: No.

R: If you want to tell government something, give them a message, can you think what your message is?

P: To put a high school up here. Um, what else? And like, for the government to pay parents more, you know? Like, to afford school things and that.

R: What kind of school things?

P: Like boots, socks, bag, lunchbox, clothing, yeah.

R: Was that a problem when you were [at boarding school]?

P: Nah. Well it was a problem for my other cousins, yeah. They dropped out, they came home before me. [Secondary age participant]

Community members and service providers who live locally, consistently describe the aimlessness of

youth and the risk of falling into addiction when there is nothing else to do.

When asked what would improve life for young people in community, the unanimous response was a request for a local secondary school. This was consistent across young people, parents, service providers and staff at the local school.

This was as much about investing in the long-term wellbeing of society, as it was about the short-term wellbeing of youth.

7.5 Lateral violence, social media and the impact of boarding on community cohesion

An issue that has been described more generally as a disincentive to education attainment, is that young people returning home often face 'lateral violence' from those who have disengaged prematurely from education (Gooda, 2011; O'Bryan, 2017).

This paradigm was succinctly described by one research participant:

Those kids that I've observed that go away to boarding school, they're exposed to the Western world and exposed to other things outside of the community, so they become more educated, become more confident. When those kids... come back to the community, they are different and they actually don't, they can't communicate and get along with the kids who are here, because the kids who haven't been exposed to that education and Western society, discipline, time-tabling, ... They have a more open mind-set, where children in the community have a very, very, very closed mind-set. That's the difference between the two kids. They actually don't get along. ... [It's] a really bad time and the community knows it, when those educated kids come back to community. Those kids just

fight, fight, fight, fight, fight. And it's a jealousy thing, because ... the kids who have gone away, they've learned to be more sociable, to have discipline, and they have things. They have possessions. They have toiletry things that other children in the community may not have. Where community kids, materialism and possession of things is something that children in community don't have. [Community member and service provider]

Other adult participants reiterated this issue, and a number reflected on the damaging impact of social media on community cohesion. Whereas young people described using social media platforms as tools to maintain connections to family at home, parents had a different perspective:

That's where all the trouble comes from, that stupid thing called social media. I don't know much about social media- the kids teach me. But I don't like it. Our children turn into robots- their galaxy and boss is social media. 'Oh, I can't do this because I want to look on Facebook, you know, I want to look on Instagram' and then they see things. And that's the breakdown with community too, when something's happening in community and they don't know about it, they soon learn about it and then they want to contribute to whatever's going on, you know. They have their little thing, then before you know it, it's a big thing. But you can't cut that out. You've just gotta educate your kids. [Mother]

Her comments were ratified by an incident which occurred during the time fieldwork was being conducted. A young girl returned from boarding school and was set upon by a number of her peers as she disembarked from the charter flight. She was seriously assaulted. Later it transpired that she had been cyber bullying the younger brother of one of the

assailants. This incident highlighted the importance of schools understanding the context of each student, and tailoring learning to their needs: clearly appropriate use of social media is important, but so too are the tools for alternative dispute resolution.



DISCUSSION

THIS MIXED METHODS STUDY HAS TESTED THE ADEQUACY OF SECONDARY AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY AVAILABLE TO YOUTH FROM ONE REMOTE NT COMMUNITY.

It represents the first empirical evidence of the impact on community of contemporary policy approaches to remote education, particularly insofar as they preference boarding school off-country over local secondary provision. Findings reveal deep flaws in policy built on a rhetoric of opportunity through boarding school, but where supply of boarding school places is not equal to demand and where local education or post-school training opportunities are limited and unresponsive to community need. High rates of early school dropout challenge the assumption that when remote-living young people are educated in urban centres, they return home with increased educational capital and expertise which will ultimately benefit the whole community. In this context, young people return home to a dearth of opportunity. Nature abhors a vacuum, and young people become susceptible to a range of anti-social vices which undermine the social cohesion of community and threaten the health and wellbeing of individuals.

Secondary education opportunity and access

As throughout remote Australia, secondary-aged members the target community who wish to engage with a full secondary program are required to leave home and attend boarding school. They are spread far and wide: over the last 10 years, the 100 young people who make up the research cohort in this study have attended 38 different schools, across 16 towns or cities in mainland Australia. Dispersed across the

continent, they have very little shared experience of secondary school. Typically, they are sent away from home in groups of two or three, the largest groups attend schools in Darwin, but even there, in 2019, the largest was a cohort of five. For young people who attend boarding schools (n=80), quantitative data confirm that there is a steady attrition, with dropout rates highest for students in Year 7 (21.62%) and Year 8 (33.33%). Amongst members of the research cohort who had had the opportunity to complete Year 10 (n=57), 74% had dropped out by before the end of that school year.

For some young people, the decision to leave home is too hard and they never go away. This cohort transitions to a Senior Years composite class in the local primary school, which is designed to cater for Year 7-10 students. In 2019, there were 39 people aged 12-18 living in community. Of them, 22 were not engaged in any education or training program. Thirteen students were enrolled in the local composite class. Local school attendance rates for all senior students was low and especially those above Year 8. For Year 10 students, attendance across the first three terms of 2019 averaged 12%.

Students studying locally follow NT Education's Employment Pathways curriculum developed under the NT Government's IES 2015-2024. This curriculum is described by staff as 'confusing', 'apparently underfunded' and 'poorly supported' for people working in non-government schools. Despite the

majority of secondary-aged young people returning prematurely to community, no alternative vocational or applied learning pathway is available.

Apart from the lack of local opportunity, data reveal structural and subjective barriers to education attainment. For families, even identifying a secondary pathway is a stressful and unpredictable science. Little evidence emerges to indicate that parents make decisions for their children based on free, prior and informed consent. Rather, school 'choice' is described by parents in this community as a 'catch as catch can' exercise; often costly in human and educational terms. This is consistent with the findings of the Australian Government's *Study Away Review* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), which concluded that there is limited access to appropriate resources for families and communities to help build their understanding of boarding options, the boarding experience for their children or the important role of family and community in supporting young people at school and as they prepare to go away (p. 24).

In 2015, the TSU was established to assist in placing young people in schools in the NT and interstate. The TSU has a staff of 15 people to work with 78 remote and very remote communities, and demand for their services inevitably outstrips supply. In the target community, TSU reports having conducted five visits to the government primary school in 2019, and having worked with 30 young people out of the possible 100 who could have transitioned to boarding school since 2015. How those 30 came to access TSU support varies: in some cases, families made a direct approach to TSU; for others, it was through primary school. The larger of the two primary schools in community is in Catholic system and therefore sits outside the remit of the TSU. If families in that school require assistance to secure pathways for their children, the onus is on them to contact TSU. Data suggest that this system works to the advantage of families higher on the social gradient, who have an intergenerational experience

of education engagement. In terms of how boarding schools experience TSU support, some school-based interviewees recount that TSU support has been 'invaluable'; others have had no contact at all. The Indigenous support officer in one interstate school was surprised to learn that that TSU existed.

The education diaspora and school/community relationships

The need for young people to stay deeply connected to community when they are schooled away from home is well recognised (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), with negative downstream consequences for individuals and at community level where a strong connection between home and school is not established. Data in this study reveal the high social and educational cost to community of sending their young people to schools across the continent.

In 2017, the *Study Away Review* (2017) found no examples of best practice regarding authentic engagement with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities when a boarding school/provider is servicing a significant number of different communities. Data in this study confirm the detrimental impact of members of the research cohort attending schools which cater for students from a wide range of other communities. In one NT school, 22 students came from 12 different communities. While staff were committed to providing holistic care to students in their charge, effective engagement with parents introduced another level of complexity to an already complex workload. The opposite is also true: with youth dispersed across Australia, parents and leaders from the target community found it hard to connect with a wide range of schools. A number of research informants were unable to accurately name the school they or their child had attended and became confused about where given schools were located.

The members of the research cohort who are recorded as having remained engaged in secondary education, had all attended schools which invested in building an authentic relationship with students' families, as well as with the wider community. In each case, staff at the boarding school exhibited high levels of cultural understanding and stressed the importance of investing in interpersonal relationships. Their insights had helped to shape school programs.

An illustration of this, is the approach taken in a New South Wales school attended by six members of the research cohort. In this case, the school/community relationship has been developed over many years, and has proved responsive to changing circumstances. The principal explained that in 2014, the community experienced a spate of suicides which directly impacted students attending his school's program. His students returned home for a protracted period of mourning, following which only one returned to the school. That young person also failed to return for the 2015 school year. In response, the college released one of its teachers to spend a year teaching in community. Subsequently four students re-enrolled in the College and began studies at the start of Term 3, 2015. A long search was undertaken for a suitable house parent, who was prepared to live with the students at the College in the principal's residence which was given over specifically for this purpose.

The residence continued to be used for homestay accommodation, and in 2019 was home to four students and a house parent/supervisor. In addition to the boarding program, each year a group of staff visit the target community. The school principal ascribed the strong lines of communication between home and school as the reason parents from the target community are actively engaged in their children's education. Engagement goes both ways, and in this case the investment the New South Wales school had made in sustaining a meaningful relationship with parents and families had a direct

impact on student engagement. At the end of 2019, one of the four students at this school graduated with an Higher School Certificate (HSC).

These examples show that it is possible for remote-living families and urban boarding schools to develop authentic relationships which affirm young people and support their engagement at school. They also reveal that the effort required by families and schools is significant. They provide potent evidence that it is unrealistic to expect families and community leaders to engage with a wide range of schools across vast cultural, linguistic and geographic distances and vice versa.

Alternative approaches to schooling: on country, applied learning and CDP

Of members of the research cohort who progressed successfully from one academic year to the next at the same school, the largest cohort participated in an applied learning program delivered at a boarding school situated in a Homeland centre within commuting distance from community. Parents describe the closure of that school as a great loss for their children, all of whom discontinued schooling altogether when the school shut in 2017. The youngest of these were in Year 7.

Parents described the extensive 'life skills' program, and hands-on approach to learning as important, and their children as happy and engaged while they attended that school. This is consistent with the findings of Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy final report (the Napthine Review) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019), which found that VET programs delivered in schools can provide an engaging and valuable pathway to tertiary education and employment for many students. The Napthine Review concludes that VET in Schools (VETiS) can help broaden a student's understanding of the choices and options available and creates a link between education and future employment.

The authors cite the experience of VET achievement being linked to positive local labour market outcomes. For example, the heavy machinery and diesel mechanic courses in Albany, Western Australia have waiting lists due to the strong employment outcomes of graduates (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 33).

In the target community, Charles Darwin University delivers a range of Certificate level courses through the CDP program. These are generally well subscribed, and courses which prepare participants for employment on local roads through the NT Government's Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics are popular.

The testimony of research participants underlines the danger of measuring 'success' in rigid, normative terms which treat Year 12 completion as the holy grail of secondary education. In this community, a Year 12 graduate is as likely to return home and fall into unemployment as those who have discontinued education prematurely. This is consistent with research which shows that growing numbers of very remote-living young people completing Year 12 does not translate into higher levels of post-school employment for that demographic (Guenther, 2020). By contrast, evidence points to positive outcomes achieved by young people who have been able to access alternative or applied education programs locally (Fogarty et al., 2015). This belies the conclusion of the Wilson Review (Wilson, 2014) that it is impossible to deliver quality education in remote Australia. If the quality of education is measured by subsequent life outcomes, education which leads to better health, wellbeing and employment in the longer term should rate more highly than standardised measures of 'success' which fail to deliver choice or autonomy in adult life.

School dropout: rates and reasons

Amongst young people who had completed boarding school engagements, 59% had dropped out of their boarding school in their first year. Some had gone on to re-enrol in a second, third or even fourth school, but none had completed more than one year in a subsequent school. By the end of their second year, 74% had dropped out. Poor boarding school retention rates are ascribed to a range of factors, including: social media; low expectations; schools' lack of understanding of students and their cultural and community background; lack of relationship between home and school; failure to support transition to school; low levels of literacy and numeracy; homesickness and loneliness; and the normalisation of school dropout.

Members of the research cohort cite several recurring issues as to why they had discontinued at boarding school. In interviews with young people who had dropped out of boarding, respondents frequently described feeling overwhelmed in class, and that it (school work) was 'too hard'. Whether they began boarding in Year 7 or at a later stage, this is unsurprising: staff at both primary schools in community report that because of low attendance even in the early years, students typically graduate Year 6 with literacy and numeracy levels at Year 2 or Year 3 by national standards. This was corroborated by staff in boarding schools, who reported that every student from this community required targeted and intensive literacy and numeracy support. While some boarding schools had systems in place to meet the needs of this demographic, others were not well placed to deliver the level of care required.

Consistent with a broad body of research, many explained their disengagement from school by saying that they had been homesick (Rogers, 2016; O'Bryan, 2017). When pressed on what they were homesick for, the most common descriptor was

'worried for my family'. Given high levels of social disruption and poor living conditions endured by families in this community, their concerns might be presumed to be well founded. Other interviewees spoke about missing country and bush tucker. Still others recounted how they had encountered racism or prejudice at boarding school and took the path of least resistance, which was to return home. Some had responded to racism with violence, and had been expelled. Adult interviewees described this as an essentially racist response by schools: the child had been expelled, but the perpetrator of the original offence had not received an equivalent punishment. Whereas some young people reported receiving targeted and holistic care, both in learning and for their health and wellbeing, others families felt that their children were poorly understood.

Community leaders ascribed some behaviours to the outworking of a young person's antecedent trauma which was not recognised at school. Parents described having little agency in advocating for their children: a number of parents and grandparents reported children being suspended or expelled from school before families had been made aware that the young person had been acting up.

Long term consequences of disengagement

For individual members of the research cohort, and for the community at large, the prevailing trend to early disengagement had negative implications. Other than the 'Employment Pathways' program run in the local primary school, there are currently no alternative education or training opportunities available until a young person turns 17.

For the many young people who drop out of school between 12 and 16 years of age, there is literally nothing to do. By the time vocational or applied learning pathways become available at age 17, young people describe the enormity of the challenge they

face re-engaging in full-time activities. Parents and grandparents express grave concern at the lack of continuity in education and the lack of alternative programs to re-engage those who drop out. In field notes, these young people are variously described as 'roaming around', 'doing nothing', 'going bad', 'smoking', 'long-grassing', 'just here', 'self-harming', 'cruising', 'grieving' 'married up'.

Disengaged, disenfranchised and lacking in hope, young people fall prey to addictions and become involved in petty crime. These patterns are evident across all families in community, but are especially marked in families where parents' own education was truncated.

Covid-19

The Covid-19 outbreak occurred after fieldwork in this study was complete, but as events unfolded, community-based informants reported on consequences of the pandemic for members of the research cohort still attending boarding school in 2020.

Although the pandemic represents an unprecedented and unpredictable occurrence, it highlights the real cost of successive governments' failure to invest in secondary education in the target community. Public health research teaches us that policy 'solutions' which focus on one piece of the puzzle but fail to engage with larger realities, rarely prove effective in the long run (Marmot & Allen, 2014). The same is evident here. Poor education outcomes in this remote community are one manifestation of a complex set of social disadvantages which members of the research cohort experience. Education is part of a greater whole. It is cause and effect. Poor health, overcrowded housing and limited investment in community infrastructure, high levels of engagement with the youth justice system, ready accessibility of drugs and alcohol, under-resourced local schools, intergenerational disengagement with education

systems and high levels of unemployment are constants in the contemporary education equation.

They are factors which combine to create barriers to engagement for school-aged young people, and poor outcomes even for those who complete Year 12. However fine the education opportunities offered to members of the research cohort through high-performing schools off-country, evidence suggests that if those opportunities do not correspond to the lived realities of life in community, that they are unlikely to make a meaningful difference to the quality of life enjoyed by individuals or the community at large.

By the start of the 2020 school year, the current boarding cohort (n=22) in this study was already significantly diminished. Four members completed Year 12 in 2019, of whom one was employed locally, the other three were not in education or training and were unemployed. A further seven failed to re-enrol in boarding school. This left 11 members of the original school-aged cohort (n=80) still engaged in secondary education off-country, as well as a new group of younger students who are not covered in this study. In light of the vulnerability of remote communities to Covid-19, boarding schools sent their First Australian students home mid-way through Term 1, slightly before schools were closed altogether. This was true for every boarder in the research cohort.

The first challenge presented by the pandemic was the safe repatriation of boarders. Here, once again the education diaspora worked against community interests: in 2020, the 11 members of the research cohort are enrolled in six different schools, spread across the NT, Queensland and Victoria. The General Manager of the local council reports that in getting them home, there was no co-ordinated approach to transport or quarantine for boarders. In his words, 'no one seemed to take control'.

Some returned directly to their families from schools interstate with no apparent effort to self-isolate.

Some families understood the importance of social distancing laws, but found it hard to comply given the living conditions at home. In other cases, informants reported that young people were flown to Darwin and spent time 'hanging out in shopping malls' in the city before returning to community.

Having returned, these young people's capacity to remain engaged in education was compromised by conditions at home and the lack of coordinated support available. With 86% of their peers at home, and most of them not in any form of education or training, the education prospects of the remnant population of boarding school students can only be described as fragile. Non-engagement in secondary education is normative amongst the teenage population in community and peer group pressure is likely to have a compounding negative effect on students' efforts to stay focused.

In purely practical terms, it was difficult for these young people to stay in step with classmates from more advantaged backgrounds. During the crisis, teachers around Australia transitioned to delivering curriculum on-line, and education authorities worked to ensure a continuity of learning for students, social distancing requirements notwithstanding (NESA, 2020). Consistent with research which indicates that the delivery of on-line education to remote communities is neither practical nor achievable (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019), conditions in the target community present a number of obstacles to engagement in on-line learning. Internet access is limited, and houses are chronically overcrowded. While some students were issued with laptop computers by their schools, others received worksheets or nothing at all (Fogarty, 2020).

Some boarding schools worked with the local primary school to enlist the help of teachers there to support student learning, but that was not uniform across boarding schools attended by members of the group. At the time of writing, six students were attending the local school and following classes at their boarding school remotely. The principal reports that each of these students has received ABSTUDY funding to attend their boarding school, but none of those funds had been redirected to the local school to support student learning on the grounds that those young people are being 'supervised', not 'taught' at the community-based school.

The school runs a nutrition program which includes providing breakfast and lunch to all students, including boarders now returned home. No additional funds were made available to support the school in providing that service.

In the medium term, the disruption to the academic year may weaken students' resolve to return to school. The heightened threat the virus poses to Australia's First Peoples, means that anxiety for the wellbeing of people living in remote communities is high (Markham et al., 2020). It is fair to assume that young people will be critically aware of their community's vulnerability at this time (Fogarty, 2020). A number of research participants who had already discontinued boarding explained their actions by reference to concerns for family: in particular, 'homesickness' was described as being 'worried' about what might be happening to family members. In the current climate of fear, it would be understandable if current boarders are reluctant to leave home when schools re-open. This is even more likely when schools re-open before remote communities do.

The scale of this study precluded researchers from accessing systems level health data, but boarding school staff interviewed in this study confirm that many of their students have complex health profiles likely to increase their vulnerability to the Covid-19 virus. This may be an added disincentive to these young people, and to their schools, of resuming their position in boarding houses, even once social distancing laws are relaxed.

TO RETURN TO THE NT GOVERNMENT'S INDIGENOUS EDUCATION STRATEGY, THIS STUDY HAS INTERROGATED THE FIVE KEY PRINCIPLES ON WHICH THE STRATEGY IS PREMISED. ON ALL GROUNDS, IT HAS BEEN FOUND WANTING.

1. EDUCATION PROVIDES SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES AND ALL LEARNERS ARE RESPECTED

The education opportunities available to secondary aged members of the target community are limited and do not appear to provide significant economic or social advantage. Data reveal that for members of the research cohort, Year 12 graduation resulted in marginally higher rates of post-school employment or transition into higher education or training. In the 19–21 year old age group (n=20), of seven Year 12 graduates, 42% were employed, in education or training; and of 13 early school leavers, 38.5% were employed, in education or training. The remaining 55% were unemployed. All but one person was employed locally, in most cases under the NT Government's CDP program.

In terms of learners being respected, parents felt that in many situations their children were poorly understood. The 22 members of the research cohort who attended boarding school in 2019 were dispersed amongst 10 schools, situated in four states and the NT. Amongst them, the largest single cohort was a group of five students who attended a school in Darwin, where they formed part of a larger cohort of 81 Indigenous students from more than 30 communities. The head of Indigenous programs in that school was the only local educator to have visited community, and parents held out hopes that young people under his care would be more likely to succeed than students where schools showed less commitment to understanding community context.

2. STUDENT WELLBEING AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES WILL NOT BE COMPROMISED

Community social connectedness is widely recognised as foundational to both wellbeing and engagement for First Australian youth. Elders report that their children are set up to thrive when educators see them not as individuals, but as part of the collective. But parents and schools struggle when they are required to engage with multiple collectives.

Parents expressed dismay at many schools' failure to communicate. A common complaint was that their child had been suspended or expelled before parents had even been informed of a problem. Several felt punishments had been disproportionately severe: one mother recounted that her child had been sent home from a school in Queensland for 'back-chatting a teacher'. In some cases, young people had been punished for behaviours indicative of trauma. On the other side of the equation, some teachers or Indigenous liaison officers expressed frustration that they did not have capacity to engage with all of the communities represented in their boarding houses.

Of the boarding schools attended by members of the research cohort, one was situated on country, local to the community, with a well-developed life skills curriculum and a pedagogy of hands-on learning. Young people who attended this school were most likely to remain engaged from one year to the next. Participants described the school's closure as a great loss to community, especially as young people have no other access to applied learning pathways.



3. COMMUNITY IS ENGAGED, HAS CHOICE AND CULTURE IS RESPECTED.

Evidence presented here indicates that far from education opportunities being ‘tailored’ to meet the needs of individuals, securing boarding placements is a challenging and frustrating exercise. There is a long history of families from this community sending their children to board in Darwin, but in 2020 supply is not equal to demand for boarding places. There are 78 communities in the NT with no secondary pathway, and boarding schools in Darwin and Alice Springs cater for students from a vast geographic and linguistic range. As a result, the youth from this community are dispersed across mainland Australia,

typically in groups of two or three, sometimes alone. The complaints of parents are corroborated by education professionals: a local teacher responsible for assisting families to find secondary places for their children rued the fact that, as a new graduate, he did not have professional networks he could leverage to secure appropriate pathways for the young people in his charge.

Research participants described feeling frustrated by the government’s education strategy. Far from exercising choice or giving free prior and informed consent, parents describe the system as deeply disempowering. Less than one-third of families had been supported by the NT Government’s TSU, although those who had appreciated the help they

received. Respondents felt that parents who had a history of educational engagement themselves, were better positioned to access support. Several respondents reflected that systems which rely on direct approach by families create barriers to engagement and compound intergenerational disadvantage.

Community engagement and respect for culture was described as being undermined by the wide dispersal of young people. Of the 23 interstate boarding schools attended by members of the research cohort, only three were described as having any sustained relationship with community. In one school attended by a young person under the age of the research cohort, elders conduct an annual cultural immersion camp for 'mainstream' staff and students. They hoped that increased cultural awareness, and a solid base of staff/community relationships would increase the probability of that child succeeding at school.

By contrast, most interstate schools were described as showing no understanding of cultural values. One respondent reflected on the school having 'preconceived ideas and existing assumptions, which really was not a good experience by the end of the day' (Host parent). Respondents consistently reported that the school saw them, and they saw themselves, through a deficit lens. Many parent respondents expressed frustration that they felt unable to advocate for their child.

4. RESOURCE DECISIONS ARE BASED ON EFFECTIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES DRIVING IMPROVED OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS.

In terms of resource allocation, young people who elect to remain in this community during their secondary years are at an extreme disadvantage. Although in 2019, 58 of a possible 80 (or 72.5%) members of the 12-18 year old research cohort remained in community, the local school received funding for only 11 Senior Years students. For the remaining 47 young people, the government was making no investment in education, training, wellbeing or engagement programs for young people under the age of 17.

The local service providers are not well positioned to take up the slack. The community-based school operates under the auspices of NT Catholic Education. Of recurrent funding, 85% comes direct from the Australian Government and 15% is administered by the NT Government. Of the NT Government portion, only 11.19% of the total entitlement is forwarded to the school. Finance experts at NT Catholic Education were unable to explain why 3.81% of Commonwealth entitlements are withheld by the NT Government.

In this community, the Australian Government's remote employment and CDP is run by a local Aboriginal corporation. This organisation runs certificate-level courses delivered in collaboration with Charles Darwin University. Youth are able to engage with CDP programs from the age of 17. Younger people are precluded from accessing this

pathway, despite trainers offering to adapt courses for those as young as 13, because public liability insurance does not extend to minors.

Whether or not young people leave home to attend secondary school, the level of financial and in-kind investment made in any one of them is largely a question of luck of the draw. Different boarding schools have different fee structures. Some schools struggle to meet the basic needs of their student population, relying entirely on Abstudy and supplementary loading formulae. Others use government funding as a base and provide additional monies or pro bono services as an expression of the school community's commitment to social justice.

Although young people described difficulties attending a 'mainstream' school far from home on their own, there were also evident advantages. Of these, the greatest was arguably that students in well-resourced schools were able to access significant health, dental and wellbeing services not available in community or in schools with larger numbers of First Australian students. One Indigenous liaison officer described how the single member of the research cohort to attend her school had received \$3500 worth of dental work, was accessing mental health services and had a nutrition program implemented to support his wellbeing. He was one of the lucky ones.

Most members of the research cohort of 100 young people discontinued education altogether by age 15. A proportion dropped out before they became teenagers. There are no alternative programs available to them until they turn 17. These findings indicate that the youth of this community are likely to experience poor long-term outcomes across a

range of measures, including health and through engagement with the criminal justice system. These outcomes will create a range of fiscal and social costs which significantly outweigh the expense of developing alternative, community based and community empowering secondary pathways (Lamb & Huo, 2017).

5. AUTONOMY IS BALANCED WITH CONSISTENT AND SYSTEM-WIDE EFFORT, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ALIGNMENT WITH NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT POLICIES ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY.

This is a small-scale study of a single community. Limited access to system-level data meant that evidence was painstakingly gathered by the research team working with families, young people, schools and service providers. Findings reflect local realities, local subjectivities. They are not generalisable. They do not reveal correlations or the intersection between health, housing, justice and employment, although they do speak to the interconnectedness of outcomes across all these systems.

Despite these limitations, this study provides in-depth, empirical evidence of the individual and community-level implications of contemporary education policy in one remote Aboriginal community. Data reveal a range of structural and social barriers to secondary school engagement, academic attainment and transition to further education, training or employment. High levels



of disengagement from education contribute to community unrest and amplify personal and social disadvantage.

In all, findings reveal a plethora of short periods of engagement at boarding school, concerning patterns of early school dropout, poor academic and life outcomes, with significant downstream consequences for individual wellbeing and community cohesion. Young people from this community are dispersed across mainland Australia. They have little if any shared experience of secondary education. School attrition starts early, with the largest dropout rates for boarding school students in Years 7 and 8. Other than the composite program at the local primary school, there are no programs in

community to re-engage these young people other than through the justice system. Almost all drop out of school altogether. The next formal activity they become eligible for is through CDP when they turn 17. For those who persevere with education, school completion does not translate into job security or transition into training or higher education. In this community of approximately 400 people, only one young person is involved in tertiary studies, and she falls outside the age bracket of the research cohort.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IN RESPONSE TO FINDINGS, THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS ARE MADE:

1. The data and outcomes presented in this small-scale study suggest a desperate need to understand the current status of secondary education to remote First Nations students. A first order priority of government should be to commission scalable research into the status quo of secondary education in remote Australia.

2. The educational determinants of remote contexts (such as the community in this study) including housing, health, justice and employment need to be explicitly understood and quantified in policy discussions concerning educational effectiveness and secondary provision cost.

3. This study has shown a large disconnect between local educational aspirations and system-level provision. Policy decisions should seek to identify models which are shown to increase the likelihood of education engagement and attainment in place. The community involved in this study are adamant that 'place based approaches' to educational development must be paramount. This is likely to be generalised to other remote settings.

4. This study has demonstrated that success is most likely through deep school/community partnerships and personal relationships. Best practice school/community partnership models need to be explored allowing schools 'off country' to be linked with specific communities.

This would minimise the diaspora described here and create the potential for families and schools to work together in the joint enterprise of educating their young people.

5. Early school disengagement has left a significant proportion of young people in the target community functionally illiterate and innumerate. There is a desperate need to reinvigorate adult education programs and alternative on country pathways to ensure that the opportunity to learn is not foreclosed altogether when a young person drops out of school.

6. It is clear that current educational arrangements are untenable in this community if the goal is to produce an educated and bicultural cohort of young people. Community members were unanimous that what they want in terms of secondary education is a school 'on country'. The research herein supports the development of an action research, collective impact project to establish such a school. The school, its built environment, its pedagogic approach and curriculum materials would be co-designed by community in partnership with a range of professionals, including a high-performing interstate school, and local service providers. Further discussions with community and funding bodies are in progress regarding this proposal.



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CONCLUSION

THE AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF EDUCATION WHICH PREPARES A CHILD FOR A RESPONSIBLE ADULT LIFE IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT, ENSHRINED IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (UNITED NATIONS, 1990, ARTICLE 28)

Education is a foundational human capability. It improves a person's employment prospects and earning capacity, and the evidence points to a relationship between education and better health and raised civic and social engagement (McLachlan et al., 2013, p. 2). The responsibility to create opportunity and remove barriers to education lies heavy on any government. This is especially true in relation to society's most disadvantaged young people.

In Australia, creating opportunity for remote First Nations families to access quality secondary education has proved a persistent challenge. This population continues to experience deep and persistent disadvantage across a range of measures which, taken together, have a compounding effect. These result in poor life outcomes for individuals and less safe and less liveable communities. Despite all evidence that development cannot be imposed in a technical and managerial manner from above, but should be built through partnership and informed by local circumstance, current policy approaches show little attempt to engage with cultural and contextual differences in remote Australia (Altman & Fogarty, 2010). With a strong focus on statistical parity with 'mainstream' Australia, the road out of educational disadvantage is consistently charted by reference to standardised outcomes and with no regard to community or cultural context.

The education and social problems research participants describe in this study are diverse and interconnected. They include a lack of investment in housing and economic development, limited education and training opportunity, poor health and increasing community dysfunction. Standard approaches to development indicate that policy responses to any one of these factors will only prove effective when policy makers engage with them as a whole, and with 'the cause of the causes' that lie behind any given outcome (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Marmot, 2005).

Only then will persistent inequalities in education and in life be reversed. By contrast, policy settings across governments have championed the role of boarding schools to ensure remote-living First Australian young people are set up to succeed in education. Although a substantial body of research points to complex and interrelated barriers to engagement for First Australian students in boarding schools, boarding continues to be promulgated as an unequivocal good; a fitting and effective discharge of governments' responsibility to its First Peoples.

Findings presented here challenge those claims.

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BACK COVER ART

Minimindi (The Lotus Lilies), by Miriam Rose Ungunmerr

Minimindi are blue water lilies which come up at Easter time. They have a beautiful scent. When the petals fall off, the lily remains attached to the pad and a bulb forms under water. We search in the billabong and collect the bulbs so that we can eat the seeds inside. They replenish us. Like the minimindi, our kids need to remain connected to country, to family, to culture. It replenishes them and feeds their souls. You can take a child off country, but you cannot take country out of the child. Our kids learn by seeing, touching, watching. Schools need to understand that, so that our kids can learn well. When kids come home from school, they are hungry for country. We need them to feel that connection all the time. It is what makes them strong.

'Minimindi' is a part of the Merrepen Collection, donated by the artist and used with permission.